

THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL AND CONGRESS



THE CONGRESS

The United States Congress is composed of two legislative bodies, the Senate and the House of Representatives, which meet in separate chambers in the two wings of the Capitol. Here members introduce legislation; speak out on the issues; and cast votes on bills, resolutions, nominations, and treaties. A series of buzzers and lights throughout the Capitol and office buildings summons members to vote.

The House of Representatives has met in its chamber in the south wing since December 1857. Legislative activities in the House begin and end in this room. Every bill is introduced here, and those reported out of committee return here to be debated and voted on.

The three-tiered rostrum dominates the chamber. The Speaker, or a designee, presides from the rostrum, with the assistance of the parliamentarian. Lower tiers provide space for clerks who assist with chamber operations, including reading bills, tallying votes, and recording debates. The chamber's present theater-style seating was installed in 1913, replacing individual desks that had served as Members' only office space. From its inception in 1789, the House has opened its galleries to the public and the press. Live televised proceedings of debate began in 1979.

The Senate moved into its current chamber when the new north wing of the Capitol was completed in 1859. A presiding officer presides from the central dais. The tiers below are assigned to Senate officers and clerks. One hundred desks are arranged in a semicircular pattern and are assigned according to party affiliation. Except on rare occasions, chamber proceedings are open to the public, and Senate galleries are provided for the press, staff, family, diplomats, and visitors. Since 1986, the Senate's daily proceedings have been televised.



The Senate Chamber.

The Senate

The Senate has 100 members, with each state equally represented by two senators. A senator must be thirty years of age, a resident of the state, and a citizen of the United States for at least nine years. Senators are elected for six-year, overlapping terms, with one-third of the Senate being elected every two years.

Originally senators were chosen by state legislators, but in 1913 the Seventeenth Amendment provided for direct election of senators by the people. If a vacancy occurs, the governor of most states may appoint a replacement. The vice president is the "president of the Senate," but on a daily basis the presiding officer's chair is usually held by the president pro tempore (the senior member of the majority party) or a designee. The vice president votes only to break a tie.

The House of Representatives

Since the early 20th century, the House’s membership has been set at 435 voting representatives. Every 10 years, after the census, states are assigned a number of representatives based on their population and may be redistricted. Each state is entitled to at least one representative.

If a representative dies or leaves office in midterm, a special election is held to choose a replacement. In addition, non-voting delegates represent American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Guam, the Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands; Puerto Rico is represented by a resident commissioner.

A representative must be twenty-five years of age, a resident of the state, and a citizen of the United States for at least seven years. Members of the House of Representatives serve two-year terms. The presiding officer of the House is the Speaker. The Speaker is next in line after the vice president to succeed to the presidency.

Special Powers

Under the constitutional system of checks and balances, federal powers are both shared and divided among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, as well as between the two houses of Congress.

The Constitution gives both the Senate and House responsibility for declaring war, maintaining the armed forces, assessing taxes, borrowing money, minting currency, regulating commerce, and making all laws necessary for the operation of the government.

The Senate alone offers advice and consent on treaties and nominations. In the event of an indecisive Electoral College vote, the House determines the winner of a presidential election—as it did in the elections of 1800 and 1824. The House has the sole power to initiate impeachment proceedings (an indictment of the president or other federal officer), and the Senate has sole power to try an impeached officer and decides whether or not to remove the individual from office.

Members’ Offices

Offices of representatives are located in the three buildings on the south side of the Capitol along Independence Avenue: the Cannon, Longworth, and Rayburn Buildings. Senators have offices in the three buildings on the north side of the Capitol along Constitution Avenue: the Russell, Dirksen, and Hart Buildings.



The Chamber of the House of Representatives.

Visitor Information

A visit to the Capitol begins as you enter the Capitol Visitor Center entrance near First Street at East Capitol Street, where all visitors must go through security screening.

Guided tours of the Capitol start at one of two Orientation Theaters on the lower level of the Capitol Visitor Center. “Out of Many, One,” a 13-minute film, describes how the U.S. Congress established a new form of government, highlights the vital role that Congress plays in the daily lives of Americans, and introduces visitors to the building that houses the U.S. Congress.



The Rotunda is a highlight of a visit to the Capitol.

Tours are free, but tour passes are required. Tours may be booked in advance online at www.visitthecapitol.gov, through the offices of your senators or representative, or through the Office of Visitor Services by calling (202) 226-8000. During your visit to the Capitol, you may also want to visit the offices of your senators and representative or watch the House or Senate in session. When in session, gallery passes are necessary for admission to the chambers and may be obtained from your senators or representative. International visitors should inquire about gallery passes at the House and Senate Appointment Desks on the upper and lower levels of the Capitol Visitor Center.

The Capitol Visitor Center is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday, except Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, New Year’s Day, and Inauguration Day.

Visitors may request wheelchairs from Capitol Visitor Center staff or at one of the Information Desks in Emancipation Hall. Sign-language interpreting for tours is available when booked in advance. Listening devices with audio description of the films and exhibition are available at the Information Desks. All films have open captioning.

Additional information on the Capitol, House, and Senate is available at www.aoc.gov, www.house.gov, and www.senate.gov. Citizens of the United States who have specific questions about the Capitol or Congress are encouraged to write to their senators and their representative.

THE CAPITOL

The United States Capitol is the most widely recognized symbol of democratic government in the world. It has housed Congress since 1800. The Capitol is where Congress meets to write the laws of this nation, and where presidents are inaugurated and deliver their State of the Union messages. For more than two centuries, the Capitol has grown along with the nation, adding new wings to accommodate the increasing number of senators and representatives as new states entered the Union. Its ceilings are decorated with historic images, and its halls are lined with statues and paintings representing great events and people from the nation's history.

The Early Capitol

The original Capitol was designed by Dr. William Thornton, and the cornerstone was laid by President George Washington on September 18, 1793. Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Charles Bulfinch, among other architects, directed its early construction. In 1800, when the government moved from temporary quarters in Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., the Capitol that awaited them was an unfinished brick and sandstone building. The Congress moved into the small, cramped north wing. At first, the House met in a large room on the second floor intended for the Library of Congress, and the Senate met in a chamber on the ground floor. Between 1810 and 1859, the Senate used a chamber on the second floor, now known as the Old Senate Chamber.

In 1807, the south wing of the Capitol was completed for the House of Representatives. A wooden walkway across the vacant yard intended for the domed center building linked the House and Senate wings. This was how the Capitol appeared in August 1814, during America's second war with Great Britain, when British troops burned the Capitol and other public buildings in Washington. The exterior walls survived, but much of the interior was gutted.

In 1819, the reconstructed wings of the Capitol were reopened. The center building, completed in 1826, joined the two wings. A low wood and copper dome covered the Rotunda.



Senator Henry Clay speaks on behalf of the Compromise of 1850 in the Old Senate Chamber.



The Old Hall of the House of Representatives, as painted by Samuel F.B. Morse, in the collection of The Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Capitol Extension and Dome

By 1850, so many new states had been admitted to the Union that the House and Senate had outgrown their chambers. It was decided to enlarge the Capitol by adding grand wings to the ends of the original building. In 1851, Daniel Webster, who had served in both houses of Congress, delivered one of his famous orations at the ceremony to lay the cornerstone for the new wings. The House occupied its current chamber in 1857, and the Senate moved into its chamber in 1859.

The Old Hall of the House was later dedicated as National Statuary Hall. Congress invited each state to contribute two statues of its most notable citizens. Today, these statues are displayed in National Statuary Hall, the Rotunda, the Capitol Visitor Center and in corridors throughout the building.

During the Civil War, work continued on the new cast-iron dome, designed by Thomas U. Walter. On December 2, 1863, the Statue of Freedom, sculpted by American artist Thomas Crawford, was placed at the top of the dome, 287 feet above the East Plaza.

In the 1870s, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted designed the terraces that run across the north, south, and west elevations of the Capitol. These terraces provided extra rooms as well as a grand pedestal for the building perched on the brow of Capitol Hill.

Changes in the Last Century

By the opening of the 20th century, the need for more space again became acute. The first of the House and Senate office buildings were finished in 1908 and 1909, respectively.

Severe deterioration of the Capitol's original exterior sandstone walls prompted major renovations. Between 1958 and 1962 the East Front was extended thirty-two feet and its original façade was replicated in marble. Portions of the old outside walls can still be viewed inside the East Front corridors, and remain as a lasting legacy of the enslaved African Americans who worked to quarry the stone to be used in the Capitol's construction.

In the 1980s, the West Front was carefully repaired and restored; it is the only portion of the original exterior not covered by marble additions.

The newest addition to the Capitol is the three-story Capitol Visitor Center, constructed beneath the East Plaza and completed in 2008. The facility includes an exhibition hall, orientation theaters, a restaurant, gift shops, a connection to the Library of Congress and many other visitor amenities, and functional improvements for the Capitol.



The Old Hall of the House now serves as National Statuary Hall.

The Rotunda

The Rotunda is the heart and center of the Capitol. Although it serves no legislative function, it is a ceremonial space where state funerals have been held since the time of Abraham Lincoln, for presidents, members of Congress, military heroes, and eminent citizens. Visiting heads of state and special guests are often received in the Rotunda, and many historic events have been celebrated there.

Hanging in the Rotunda are four giant canvases painted by John Trumbull, an aide-de-camp to General Washington, who painted scenes of the American Revolution. Paintings by four other artists depict events associated with the exploration and settlement of the United States. On the canopy, suspended 180 feet above the Rotunda floor, the Italian-American artist Constantino Brumidi painted *The Apotheosis of Washington*. It shows George Washington surrounded by symbols of American democracy and technological progress. Brumidi painted and decorated many of the rooms and corridors of the Capitol, and he was painting the frieze that rings the Rotunda when he died. His work, which illustrates major events in the Nation's history, was completed by other artists.



Constantino Brumidi painted "The Apotheosis of Washington" inside the Capitol dome in 1865.

This view shows the Capitol in 1800 with only the north wing completed (left).



The first known photograph of the Capitol was taken in 1846 (below left).



Construction of the new cast-iron dome was well under way in 1861 (left).



Presidential inaugurations have taken place at the Capitol since 1801. Seen here is Calvin Coolidge's inauguration in 1925.

The Statue of Freedom tops the dome (above).

