

## Congress and its Role

The US federal system is governed by a system of 'separation of powers' and therefore there are a number of checks and balances implemented in this system of government. As well as playing a key role in balancing the power of the executive Congress also has a number of important functions.

For one, the most significant power Congress has is to pass legislation. Most of the creation of legislation is down to congressional committees in particular standing committees whom scrutinize legislation. Although the president actually proposes the legislation, Congress filters it and considers amendment to the constitution, so in theory, the legislation comes directly from the President. In addition, Congress can reject any proposals the President proposes.

Furthermore, Congress also has a key role in the process of a bill becoming law. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have to approve of a bill, and then they're three readings before the bill heads to a conference committee. There both the House of Representatives and Senate agree over the difference in bills both houses have passed. If a bill passes through these stages, the President can veto any of Congress's bills if he feels that they're impractical or unconstitutional. However, the power Congress proposes means they can turn over any of the Presidential vetoes. Although Bill Clinton used the presidential veto 36 times, Congress overturned this 34 times. This is a huge power of Congress as they can basically make laws which are not approved by the President. This also acts like a constraint on the President's power, and thus there is often Gridlock between Congress and President.

Another significant role of Congress, in particular that of the House of Representatives is that they initiate money bills, which the president or the executive office cannot do. This means the House of Representatives have a lot of power regarding financial issues at home or abroad. In addition, Congress also has the power to impeach members of the federal government, the supreme court and even the President. Although many may claim the president is the most 'powerful man in the world', his actions remain accountable to Congress.

Congress also has the power to confirm the President's nominees to executive offices. Although this is usually completed without controversy, sometimes presidential nominees may be rejected.

The Senate also has a few exclusive powers such as the fact that they confirm appointments of presidential nominees. These include the nominees the president has made to the Supreme Court and to the executive branch. For example, Reagan nominated Robert Bork in 1987 but Bork was rejected to radical conservative views. Another powerful function of the Senate is the fact that they have the power to ratify treaties the president negotiates. However, despite the Senate's power to ratify treaties their power in foreign affairs tends to be limited due to the fact the President has a large say in international affairs. For example,

Furthermore, another significant role of Congress is the purpose of select committees whom are set up periodically to investigate specific issues that arise time to time. For example, if the executive branch has been corrupt or incompetent the select committees investigate this. The

most famous example is Congress's investigation in corruption of the executive branch during the Watergate hearings.

To truly analyze the strength of Congress however, depends on the majority party in Congress. If the majority party in congress is different to the party in Washington, then Congress is relatively strong and dominates the President. This is shown through the example of President Clinton and the hostile Republican congress he faced, whom watered down a number of Clintons

However, in assessing the power of Congress, in certain circumstances their power can be considered relatively weak. For example. Reagan was a strong president whom was able to overcome a weak congress and was able to often get over the two thirds of the vote in each house. The fact that there was Republican control of both houses made it easier for him to get his legislation passed. In such circumstances Congress inevitably loses its power of effective scrutiny.

Although, Congress possesses a significant amount of power in terms of domestic policy, there power in foreign policy is significantly less. For example, although a President needs 2/3 of Congress's approval to ratify treaties, it is important to bear in mind that the President can get around this through executive agreements, where the President enters an agreement with a leader of a foreign country. This agreement has the same status in international law as a treaty, and in his 7 year presidency, Bill Clinton made 209 treaties but over 2000 executive agreements.

In addition, the President possesses a number of powers that Congress has limited say over. For example, as commander in Chief, the president can impose US authority on weaker nations by deploying armed forces to countries (e.g such as Kuwait and Afghanistan). In addition, the President can drop nuclear weapons on enemies using his power in foreign policy, such as Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb in Japan after World War II. However, their power has been limited somewhat after the War Powers Resolution in 1973 which states that the president can only send the US armed forces into action if Congress authorizes it or the US is under severe attack. If there is no authorization of the war, then military force can only be used for 60 days.