

# AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

## ADDITIONAL ROLES OF CONGRESS

Name : \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_

### PERFORMING OVERSIGHT

Congress oversees the bureaucracy and ensures that laws go into effect properly through a process known as **oversight**. Committees regularly hold hearings and launch investigations to check for abuse and waste.

*Example: Some of the most memorable moments in political history have come as a result of oversight. In the early and mid-1970s, both houses had committees investigating the Watergate scandal, which eventually pushed President Richard Nixon out of office. Americans closely followed similar hearings about the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s.*

### Political Uses of Oversight

Sometimes members of Congress will use oversight for political gain. In the 1990s, for example, Congress held hearings about IRS abuse of taxpayers. Although the stories told there were true, they accounted for a minuscule percentage of cases. Nevertheless, members were happy to publicize the hearings in order to look like they were cracking down on the IRS, a federal agency citizens love to hate. Sometimes fear of oversight is used as a political tool. Leading up to the 2006 elections, for example, Republicans charged that a Democratic takeover of either house of Congress would lead to punitive oversight investigations.

### THE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

The **Government Accountability Office (GAO)** is the main investigative agency of Congress. The GAO regularly examines federal expenditures and activities on request from Congress. GAO reports are usually nonpartisan and well researched. These reports often form the basis of new legislation and at times spark public outcry.

### HELPING CONSTITUENTS

Members do a variety of things to please and aid their constituents. Sometimes they support legislation that will help the district. Members also have their staff engage in **casework**, which helps constituents with individual problems from recommendations for military academies to signing up for Medicare. Part of casework involves acting as an **ombudsperson**, a person who investigates complaints against government agencies or employees. To stay in touch with their constituents, members spend as much time in their districts as possible, performing community service, attending the openings of new businesses, and meeting with local

leaders to discuss key issues. The way members of Congress behave at home is known collectively as their **home style**.

### PORK

Members of Congress help their constituents by getting money for their districts through legislation. The federal government, for example, may fund a highway project or a research project at a local university. The term **pork** refers to federal money that is funneled into a specific legislative district. A member of Congress will often insert pork into a bill in order to gain another member's support or to win votes back home.

*Example: An infamous example of pork in 2006 was the so-called bridge to nowhere, a bridge in a remote part of Alaska (to be built with federal money) that would be used by very few people. The bridge was inserted into the budget by Alaska senator Ted Stevens.*

### Defining Pork

To some degree, one's person's pork is another person's worthy way to spend money. People often label money as "pork" when the money goes to someone else's district.

### EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

Congress also engages in **public education**, informing the public about issues and what Congress intends to do or has done about them. Members of Congress keep in touch with their constituents and educate them on the issues through mailings and websites. Congresspeople present various opinions on such issues as gun control and abortion, which allows the public to become better informed.

Congress picks the issues about which to debate and act on through a process known as **agenda setting**. Agenda setting informs people about which issues are most pressing to members of Congress and lets them know what Congress wants to do about those issues.

# THE TERM LIMIT DEBATE

## Pros and Cons of Term Limits

By Tom Murse

The idea of term limits, or a mandatory restriction on how long members of Congress can serve in office, has been debated by the public for centuries. There are strong opinions on both sides of the issue, perhaps a surprise given the electorate's less-than-flattering opinion of their representatives in modern history.

Here are some questions and answers about term limits and the ongoing debate surrounding the idea:

### **Q: Are there term limits for Congress now?**

A. No. Members of the House of Representatives are elected for two years at a time and can serve an unlimited number of terms. Members of the Senate are elected for six years and also can serve an unlimited number of terms.

### **Q: What's the longest anyone has served?**

A. The longest anyone ever served in the Senate was 51 years, 5 months and 26 days, a record held by the late Robert C. Byrd. The Democrat from West Virginia was in office from Jan. 3, 1959, through June 28, 2010.

The longest anyone ever served in the House was more than 53 years, a record held by U.S. Rep. John Dingell Jr. The Democrat from Michigan has been in office since 1955.

### **Q: Are there term limits for the president?**

A: Yes. Presidents are restricted to only two four-year terms in the White House under the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, which reads in part: "No person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice."

Some conspiracy theorists claim that President Barack Obama was secretly plotting to repeal the 22nd Amendment and run for a third term in the White House.

### **Q: Have there been attempts to impose term limits on Congress?**

A: Yes. There have been numerous attempts by some lawmakers to pass statutory term limits, but all of those proposals have been unsuccessful. Perhaps the most famous attempt at passing term limits came during the so-called Republican revolution, when the GOP took control of congress in the 1994 midterm elections.

Term limits were a tenet of the Republican Contract With America. The contract called for a removal of career politicians through a first-ever vote on term limits as part of the Citizen Legislature Act. Term limits never came to fruition.

### **Q: What are the arguments in favor of term limits?**

A: Proponents of term limits argue that restricting the service of lawmakers prevents politicians from amassing too much power in Washington and becoming too alienated from their constituents.

The thinking is that many lawmakers view the work as a career and not a temporary assignment, and therefore spend much of their time posturing, raising money for their re-election campaigns and running for office instead of focusing on the important issues of the day. Those who favor term limits say they would remove the intense focus on politics and place it back on policy.

### **Q: What are the arguments against term limits?**

A: The most common argument against term limits goes something like this: "We already have term limits. They're called elections." The primary case against term limits is that, indeed, our elected officials in the House and Senate must face their constituents every two years or every six years and get their approval.

Imposing term limits, opponents argue, would remove the power from voters in favor of an arbitrary law. For example, a popular lawmaker seen by her constituents as being effective and influential would want to re-elect her to Congress - but could be barred from doing so by a term-limit law.