



Understanding Capitol Hill Jargon

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Congress is an alphabet soup of obscure abbreviations and terms that make it difficult for anyone other than insiders to follow what happens in the Capitol. This explainer provides a glossary that is intended to help the public unpack some of the most commonly-used terms on Capitol Hill, in the media, and among Hill-watchers. Recognizing these terms is helpful for communicating with Congress effectively and understanding the legislative process. This glossary is *not* exhaustive and does not delve into every facet of every term. It is intended only to provide readers with a basic understanding of the terms' most common uses.

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Topic: Legislation

Amendment: Members offer amendments to legislation in order to change—literally, amend—that legislation. This might happen in a committee or when the legislation is before the full House or Senate. Members using the amendment process to advance their priorities are limited by requirements around the “germaneness” of amendments—that is, how related the amendment is to the underlying legislation. Those requirements vary depending on where the underlying bill sits at the time (i.e., in a committee, the full House, or the Senate) and the type of bill it is (e.g., an appropriations bill). An amendment that is not germane can, in some circumstances, be thrown out before even coming to a vote on its merits. For more details about the chambers’ respective rules and processes around amendments, see [“The Amending Process in the House of Representatives”](#) and [“The Amending Process in the Senate”](#) (Congressional Research Service).

Amendment in the nature of a substitute (ANS): An ANS amends legislation by substituting in entirely new legislative text.

Authorizing legislation vs. appropriations legislation: An authorizing bill *allows* Congress to allocate funding for a specific priority, while appropriations legislation actually *allocates* the funding. This is why appropriations bills are sometimes referred to as spending bills.

Bills vs. resolutions: Members seeking to enact a policy can do so through one of four vehicles: a bill, a joint resolution, a concurrent resolution, or a simple resolution. Which one a member uses depends on that member's objectives and the topic at hand. The following definitions from the [Congressional Research Service](#) indicate the uses for each vehicle:

- **"Bills** are commonly used for lawmaking purposes such as authorizing programs, appropriating funds, raising or lowering revenues, and other major policy enactments."
- **"Joint resolutions** are used chiefly for secondary, symbolic, or declaratory legislation but also for such matters as continuing appropriations, declarations of war, and proposing constitutional amendments."
- **"Concurrent resolutions** are used for matters affecting both chambers, such as recesses, adjournments, and the congressional budget resolution."
- **"Simple resolutions** are used for adopting chamber rules, committee assignments, discipline of Members, expressions of sentiment, and other housekeeping purposes in each chamber."

Congressional Review Act (CRA): The CRA allows Congress to undo certain executive actions. For more information about the rules surrounding the CRA and past uses of the law, see ["The Congressional Review Act \(CRA\): Frequently Asked Questions"](#) (Congressional Research Service).

Cosponsor: This is a member that supports legislation they did not introduce. There is a formal process for members to be added as cosponsors of legislation. An original cosponsor is a member that is added at the point of introduction. Members will often gather cosponsors for bills they have sponsored in order to indicate support for that legislation and, in turn, improve its chances of advancing in the legislative process.

Engrossed vs. enrolled: An *engrossed* version of a bill is the final version that has been approved by a chamber and incorporates all of the changes that chamber has made to the legislation. An *enrolled* version of a bill has been approved by both chambers and is the version that will be presented to the president to sign so that the bill can become law.

Must-pass bill: Must-pass bills are bills that Congress, as the term suggests, *must pass* in order to avoid something undesirable happening. Sometimes, that "undesirable" outcome has practical implications: appropriations bills, for instance,

are considered must-pass bills because they are necessary to keep the government open and avoid a shutdown, which is harmful for federal workers, the operation of government-run programs, and the U.S. economy. Other times, bills are deemed must-pass because failing to pass them would have political ramifications. For example, if the White House and Congressional leaders have deemed a particular bill a high priority and underscored that in the press, failing to pass that bill may result in negative headlines and even gloating from the opposition party.

One-pager: This is a brief summary of a letter or legislation that is typically one page.

Rules Committee: In the House, the Rules Committee acts as a traffic cop, determining which legislation will receive a vote and setting the parameters for debate on that legislation (i.e., how long debate will last, how many amendments—if any—will be considered, etc.). The resolution that sets those parameters is referred to as “the rule.” The rule governing debate for a specific piece of legislation must be voted on before that legislation can receive a vote. It is typical for the majority party to vote for the rule and for the minority party to oppose it.

Rules Committee Print: Legislation typically changes as it moves through the legislative process. To identify the version of a bill that will be considered in the Rules Committee—and, in turn, advance to the House floor for a vote—look to the Rules Committee website for the “Rules Committee Print.” This is also the version of the legislation that amendments should be drafted to. Rules Committee Prints can be found on the Rules Committee’s website, [here](#).

Section-by-section: This is a bill summary that describes each section of the bill.

Sponsor: A bill’s sponsor is the member that introduced it. There can only be one sponsor for a bill in each chamber—i.e., one House member and one senator could introduce the same bill, but two House members cannot introduce the same bill.

Topic: Process and Rules

Byrd rule: The Byrd rule concerns the reconciliation process, which allows senators to pass legislation with a simple majority of votes and avoid a filibuster. Reconciliation is technically meant to be used for matters concerning the budget. Under the Byrd rule, a senator may argue that a specific provision included in a reconciliation bill is not primarily concerned with the budget. To avoid this, reconciliation bills undergo what is known as a “Byrd bath,” wherein the legislation is reviewed to excise provisions that would not pass muster under the Byrd rule.

Caucus: This term has multiple uses. Most commonly, it refers to either 1) the group of members in the House or Senate that affiliate with the Democratic Party (e.g., the House Democratic Caucus), or 2) an organization that members with a common interest form within Congress (e.g., the Congressional Progressive Caucus).

Caucus/conference rules: In addition to the rules governing proceedings in the House and Senate chambers, parties will have their own rules outlining processes for matters like selecting committee chairs. The House Democratic Caucus's rules, for example, are available [here](#).

Cloture: In the Senate, a vote to “invoke” cloture is a vote to end debate. Cloture is specific to the Senate. Read [“Invoking Cloture in the Senate”](#) (Congressional Research Service) to learn more.

Committee: Committees are bodies within the House and Senate that have distinct missions and authorities. A full list of the committees in Congress is available [here](#). Committees are perhaps best known for considering legislation before it can advance to the full House or Senate for a vote, but not all committees perform this function. Below are instructive definitions of the different types of committees from [Senate.gov](#). While they are Senate-focused, these descriptions are useful for understanding both House and Senate committees.

- **“Standing Committees** are permanent committees established under the standing rules of the Senate and specialize in the consideration of particular subject areas. The Senate currently has 16 standing committees.”
- **“Joint Committees** include membership from both houses of Congress. Joint committees are usually established with narrow jurisdictions and normally lack authority to report legislation. The position of chair usually alternates each Congress between members from the House and Senate.”
- **“Special or Select Committees** were originally established by the Senate for a limited time period to perform a particular study or investigation. These committees might be given or denied authority to report legislation to the Senate.”

Committee of the Whole: This is a procedural setting in which the House considers most major legislation; it is *not* a “committee” in the traditional sense of the word. Every House member is part of the Committee of the Whole. When the House is debating and amending legislation that is being considered under a rule, it is likely doing this as the Committee of the Whole. For more information, see [“Committee of the Whole: Stages of Action on Measures”](#) (Congressional Research Service).

Conference committee: The House and Senate will sometimes pass different versions of the same legislation. In these cases, the two chambers will convene a

conference committee, consisting of representatives and senators, to reconcile the differences between the two versions.

En bloc: This refers to the process by which a body—such as a committee—considers several measures at once. For example, a committee may choose to compile numerous amendments into an *en bloc* package on which the committee votes once to approve or reject all amendments within the *en bloc* package.

Exclusive committees: House members sitting on exclusive committees may not serve on additional committees without a special waiver—literally, they can sit on that one committee *exclusively*. Generally, when one refers to “exclusive” committees, they are referring to the Committees on Appropriations, Energy and Commerce, Ways and Means, Rules, and Financial Services. However, these “exclusive” designations can vary depending on when a member began serving on that committee. For more information, see [“Rules Governing House Committee and Subcommittee Assignment Procedures”](#) (Congressional Research Service).

Motion to Recommit (MTR): This is a floor procedure originally intended to allow the minority party to provide additional legislative changes before a final vote on a bill occurs on the House floor. However, minority parties have, in recent years, used this procedural vote as a “gotcha” moment to force majority members to take politically difficult votes, rather than to offer substantive changes. Read more about the MTR and changes to the procedure in the 117th Congress [here](#).

Offer and withdraw: A member may want to amend legislation, but understands that their amendment would not garner sufficient support to pass, or wishes only to indicate their interest in a particular issue. In these cases, that member may offer an amendment to legislation and then withdraw it before it proceeds to a vote. When this happens, a member will typically say they intend to “offer and withdraw.”

PAYGO: “PAYGO” refers to the “pay as you go rule.” Under PAYGO, if legislation increases certain types of federal spending, that spending must be offset by corresponding cuts to spending elsewhere, or by raising revenue. To learn about PAYGO in more detail and understand how it impacts policymaking, check out the Congressional Progressive Caucus Center and Roosevelt Institute’s fact sheet [here](#).

Point of order: A member of Congress raises a point of order when they believe a rule of their body is being violated. Think of this like an attorney raising an objection in a courtroom. In that circumstance, a judge determines whether the objection has merit. In Congress, the person presiding over the proceedings, such as the Speaker of the House, makes that determination. To read about points of order in the House, check out [“Points of Order, Rulings, and Appeals in the House of Representatives”](#)

(Congressional Research Service); for the Senate, review [“Points of Order, Rulings, and Appeals in the Senate”](#) (Congressional Research Service).

Previous question (PQ): This is a procedural vote the House takes before voting on a “rule” setting out the parameters for debate on a bill or bills (see “Rules Committee”). The purpose of the PQ vote is to determine whether the House is ready to consider the item before it. Like the rule itself, it is typical for the majority party to vote for the PQ and for the minority party to oppose it.

Reconciliation: Reconciliation refers to a particular process for passing legislation in Congress. [According to the Congressional Research Service](#), “the purpose of the reconciliation process is to allow Congress to use an expedited procedure when considering legislation that would bring existing spending, revenue, and debt limit laws into compliance with current fiscal priorities established in the annual budget resolution.” In recent years, Congress has used the reconciliation process to avoid the Senate filibuster, as reconciliation bills require only a simple majority vote to pass. Republicans used the reconciliation process to pass the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in 2017, while Democrats used the process to pass the American Rescue Plan in 2021.

Recorded vote vs. voice vote: A recorded vote is a vote that an individual member casts and that is recorded for posterity. This is different from a “voice vote,” in which members in attendance vote on a measure aloud by saying “aye” or “nay” and the member presiding determines which side garnered more votes. Unless a member objects and requests a recorded vote (sometimes referred to as “the yays and nays”), there will be no public record of how individual members voted on the measure.

Regular order: When members refer to “regular order,” they’re typically referring to the process most people know best from [Schoolhouse Rock](#), wherein a single bill is considered in a committee, then voted on in one chamber, then considered in the next chamber, then signed by the president. For example, if a member of the minority party is displeased with the majority party’s leadership for calling a vote on a bill that hasn’t received a committee hearing, the disgruntled member might say the bill should have been considered “under regular order.”

Steering committees: These are committees that recommend committee assignments for their party’s members in their chamber. These committees have different names; for example, House Democrats have their Steering and Policy Committee, while House Republicans have their Steering Committee.

Suspensions: In the House, legislation is often considered under “suspension of the rules.” These bills—referred to as “suspensions”—require a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority vote to pass, receive a maximum of 40 minutes of debate, and cannot be amended.

Unanimous consent (UC): When a member asks for unanimous consent, they are asking for the body to allow them to do something. For example, a member in a committee hearing might ask for “unanimous consent” to enter an article related to that hearing into the committee’s record. Their request will be granted unless another member objects. Unanimous consent is particularly important in the Senate; to learn more about its use, check out [“The Rise of Senate Unanimous Consent Agreements”](#) (Congressional Research Service).

Topic: Key Figures and Institutions

Congressional Budget Office (CBO): CBO is a nonpartisan entity that provides Congress with information about the effects legislation will have, especially with regards to the deficit. That information is sometimes called a CBO “score.”

Chair: A committee chair (sometimes chairman, chairwoman or chairperson) is the member of the majority party that presides over that committee’s proceedings and sets its agenda. The chair is often the majority member with the most seniority, but not necessarily. Democrats and Republicans have district rules regarding the selection and tenure of chairs.

Cloakroom: Once literally the [place where members would leave their cloaks](#), the cloakrooms—one for Democrats and one for Republicans—off the House and Senate floors are rooms members use to await votes, grab a snack, talk on the phone, and, yes, leave their coats and belongings while voting. For staffers, the cloakroom is a great source of information about their members’ whereabouts or upcoming floor proceedings. A staffer may call the cloakroom to learn whether their member has voted on a measure currently being considered or when votes might be called.

Congressional Research Service (CRS): [CRS’s mission](#) is to “serve Congress with the highest quality of research, analysis, information and confidential consultation to support the exercise of its legislative, representational and oversight duties in its role as a coequal branch of government.” CRS employs experts that members and staff can call as they draft and consider legislation for nonpartisan analysis regarding virtually any issue.

Dais: There is a dais in each committee room and on the House and Senate floors. In committees, members are seated on the dais in order of seniority, with the most senior members seated at the top.

Dear Colleague: This is a letter that a member sends to other members, typically to ask their colleagues to do something (e.g., sign a letter or cosponsor a bill). The Dear Colleague makes a case for why the sender’s priority is worthwhile and includes key

details, like the deadline by which a member must sign the sender's letter. While the letter will be written as though it is going from member-to-member, Dear Colleagues are read and used primarily by staff.

Leave-behinds: These are materials that people meeting with a member or staff might "leave behind," such as summaries of bills they've asked the member to cosponsor, letters of support for those bills, and other items of that nature.

Legislative Counsel: Often abbreviated to "Leg Counsel" or "LegCo," this is an office of attorneys that provides legislative drafting services to members and staff.

Parliamentarian: The House and Senate each have a parliamentarian that advises the chamber on its rules, procedures, and precedents.

Ranking member: The ranking member is the minority party member that leads their fellow minority members on a committee. While the ranking member does not preside over the committee or set its agenda—privileges reserved for the committee chair—the ranking member often organizes the minority members around a message, amendment strategy, and vote recommendations.

Speaker of the House: The Speaker is the House's presiding officer and the leader of the majority party in the House. For more information on the Speaker's duties and selection, see ["The Speaker of the House: House Officer, Party Leader, and Representative"](#) (Congressional Research Service).

Speaker pro tempore: Often abbreviated to "speaker pro temp," this is a member of the majority party that presides over the House in the real Speaker's absence.

Whip: This is the member of a party's leadership responsible for counting votes on a measure that will be put before the body and ensuring, to the extent possible, that the party is united in support for or opposition to a measure. This is sometimes used as a verb (i.e., the member is "whipping" votes).

Topic: Appropriations

Appropriations letter: This is a letter that members send to the Appropriations Committee indicating their spending priorities. Often, a member or members will organize their colleagues to sign a single letter if they share a priority in order to demonstrate strong support for that issue. For a more detailed explanation of the appropriations process, check out the Congressional Progressive Caucus Center's [FY22 Appropriations Explainer](#).

Appropriations season (a.k.a. March madness): Early in a calendar year, before the Appropriations Committee begins drafting spending bills, constituents, advocacy organizations, and lobbyists will request meetings with members and their staffers to seek support for spending priorities. Because these meetings tend to occur in March and make the month busy for offices, this time of year is sometimes called “March madness.”

Continuing resolution (CR): Appropriations bills do not fund the government in perpetuity; after a date designated in the appropriations bill in question, a new appropriations bill must be passed for funding to continue. Typically, appropriations bills expire at the end of the fiscal year. In the event a new appropriations bill has not been signed into law by that expiration date, Congress must pass a CR to fund the government at current levels. Without this stopgap measure, there is a lapse in appropriations—i.e., a shutdown. Sometimes, Congress will pass appropriations bills to fund certain departments and agencies, but not others; in these cases, Congress might pass a CR specific to those entities that have not been funded. A CR does not need to last an entire fiscal year; often, Congress will pass a CR to buy more time to negotiate full-year appropriations bills.

Earmarks: Now called “congressionally-directed spending” or “community project funding,” earmarks are line items in appropriations bills for specific projects. Members might seek an earmark to ensure a priority project in their district, such as lead service line replacement, is funded. Earmarks have come to have a negative connotation because of [high-profile scandals](#). Republicans banned earmarks when they won control of the House in 2010. In 2021, Democratic leaders in the House and Senate reinstated earmarks with new safeguards to ensure members could not enrich themselves and that projects have robust community support.

Minibus vs. omnibus: The Appropriations Committee is composed of 12 subcommittees, each of which passes its own spending bill specific to certain agencies. Congress sometimes packages these 12 bills together into a single measure known as an omnibus appropriations bill. Congress may also package the 12 bills into numerous vehicles containing multiple bills (e.g., three packages of four bills). These smaller packages are called “minibuses.”

Rider: A rider is a policy that “rides” into law as part of an appropriations bill. Members might seek to attach a rider to an appropriations bill because these bills are considered “must-pass,” as the government shuts down if they are not approved.

Topic: Key Moments

Committee work week: This is a designation that exists in the House only and was established during the COVID-19 pandemic. During these weeks, votes are not scheduled in the full House, but committees can hold hearings and markups. These committee meetings are often virtual. As such, members may participate in committee meetings from their home districts.

District work period/recess: During these days or weeks, no votes or committee business is scheduled and members are typically in their home districts.

Fiscal Year (FY): Unlike the calendar year, the fiscal year runs from October 1 to September 30. FY 2022 starts on October 1, 2021 and ends on September 30, 2022.

Fly-in/fly-out: A fly-in day is the day members arrive in Washington for that week's votes. A fly-out day is the day members leave Washington for their districts.

Hearing: This is a committee meeting during which members hear from witnesses about a specific topic and ask questions of those witnesses.

Legislative day/session day: This is a day on which members are in Washington and voting, unless they are proxy voting due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Magic minute: In the House, each party's leaders may speak during debate on legislation for as long as they like, but only one minute will be deducted from the time allocated to each party for debate.

Markup: This is a committee meeting during which members consider legislation and vote on whether to send it to the full House for a vote. This gives members an opportunity to offer amendments modifying—i.e., “marking up”—the legislation.

Motion to adjourn: This is, literally, a motion to adjourn the body and must be considered before all other business—meaning, if a member makes a motion to adjourn, a vote on that motion is called immediately. [In 2021, the motion to adjourn was used frequently](#) by the House minority as a protest and delaying tactic.

One-minute and five-minute speeches: Each week the House is in session, there is time set aside for members to deliver one-minute or five-minute speeches on the topic of their choice. Sometimes, members refer to these speeches by these time limits—e.g., “I’m going to do a one-minute commemorating this anniversary.”

Recess subject to the call of the chair: This refers to a period when the House or Senate has completed the business before the body but intends to reconvene. Rather than adjourn, then, the body will stand in “recess subject to the call of the chair.” Members and staffers sometimes take such a recess as an indication that the day’s proceedings are not going according to plan for the majority party’s leadership. Chad Pergram, who covers Congress for FOX News, explains, “That’s never a good sign when a big vote looms...If you have the votes, you call the vote on the floor. If you don’t, the House takes a recess of undetermined length until they sort things out.”

Special order: In the House, there are hours set aside after legislative business has concluded for each party to offer its members time for longer speeches that can last up to one hour. Members will sometimes reserve a “special order hour” to allow a group of members to speak on the same topic (e.g., to commemorate an event or highlight an important issue).

Votes: When votes are called in the full House or Senate, every member of that body is responsible for casting a vote on the measure at hand. A member must be present in the House or Senate chamber to cast a vote, with the exception of House members voting by proxy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Votes are only called when the chamber in question is in session. A vote is “open” for a specified time period; if a member does not arrive before a vote “closes,” they forfeit their opportunity to vote. As such, members may cut engagements short to avoid missing a vote.