United States Congress: The Basics
Article I ~ Legislative Branch

The US Constitution states the following:

• “All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.”

• House of Rep’s = population (435 members)

• Senate = 2 per state (100 members)

• The Great Compromise creates a bicameral system
Bicameral Legislature
House of Representatives

Qualifications:
• Minimum 25 years old
• Citizen for 7 years
• Resident of the district

How is the number of rep’s determined?
• Originally, 1 per 30,000 (smallest ratio)
• 1911 = the number was fixed by Congress at 435

Length of Term = 2 years; can serve as long as the voters will keep re-elect them

*Supposed to be more in-tune with ordinary people
WA – 10th Congressional District
Reapportionment

- *Census* = official population count; takes place every 10 years
- *Reapportionment* = following each census, representatives are re-allocated based upon population growth, stagnation, or loss
- Some states will gain seats, others will lose seats
Politics of Redistricting

- Redistricting = the lines of each district get redrawn to make each congressional district roughly equal in population
- Each state has laws governing this process
- Can become highly political = each side tries to gain an advantage
- Gerrymandering = drawing the lines to favor one party over another
- Instead of following natural geographic features, lines are drawn to include or exclude certain neighborhoods
Origins of Gerrymandering

• Term first used in 1812
• Mass. Gov. Elbridge Gerry signed a bill redistricting his state to give a huge advantage to the Democratic-Republicans
• To accomplish this, district lines were drawn in unusual shapes and cut through & around some neighborhoods
• Criticized by the Federalists
Political Cartoon ~ 1812

- The following cartoon was published
- Federalists claimed that one of the districts looked like a “salamander” created by Gerry
- thus it became known as a “gerrymander”
- Gerrymandering in the news:
Gerrymandering Examples

California

Texas

Redistricting Game

Senate
Qualifications ~ “The Upper House”
• 30 years old
• Citizen for 9 years
• Resident of the state
Term ~ 6 years, no term limits
• Staggered terms
• 1/3 of the senate is up every 2 years
2 per state = 100 senators
WA’s Senators
XVII Amendment

Adopted in 1913 ~ changed the way each state chooses its senators

• Prior to the 17th Amendment ~ senators were chosen by the State Legislatures
• After the 17th Amendment ~ chosen directly by the people

*Senate tends to work at a slower pace; it’s supposed to be a very deliberative body
2019-2020 Congress

Senate:
- 53 Republicans
- 2 Independents (caucus with Dem’s)
- 45 Democrats

House of Rep’s:
- 235 Democrats
- 199 Republicans
- 1 vacancy (disputed 9th district in NC)

*Majority party gets to set the agenda