

Understanding Congress

Week 2

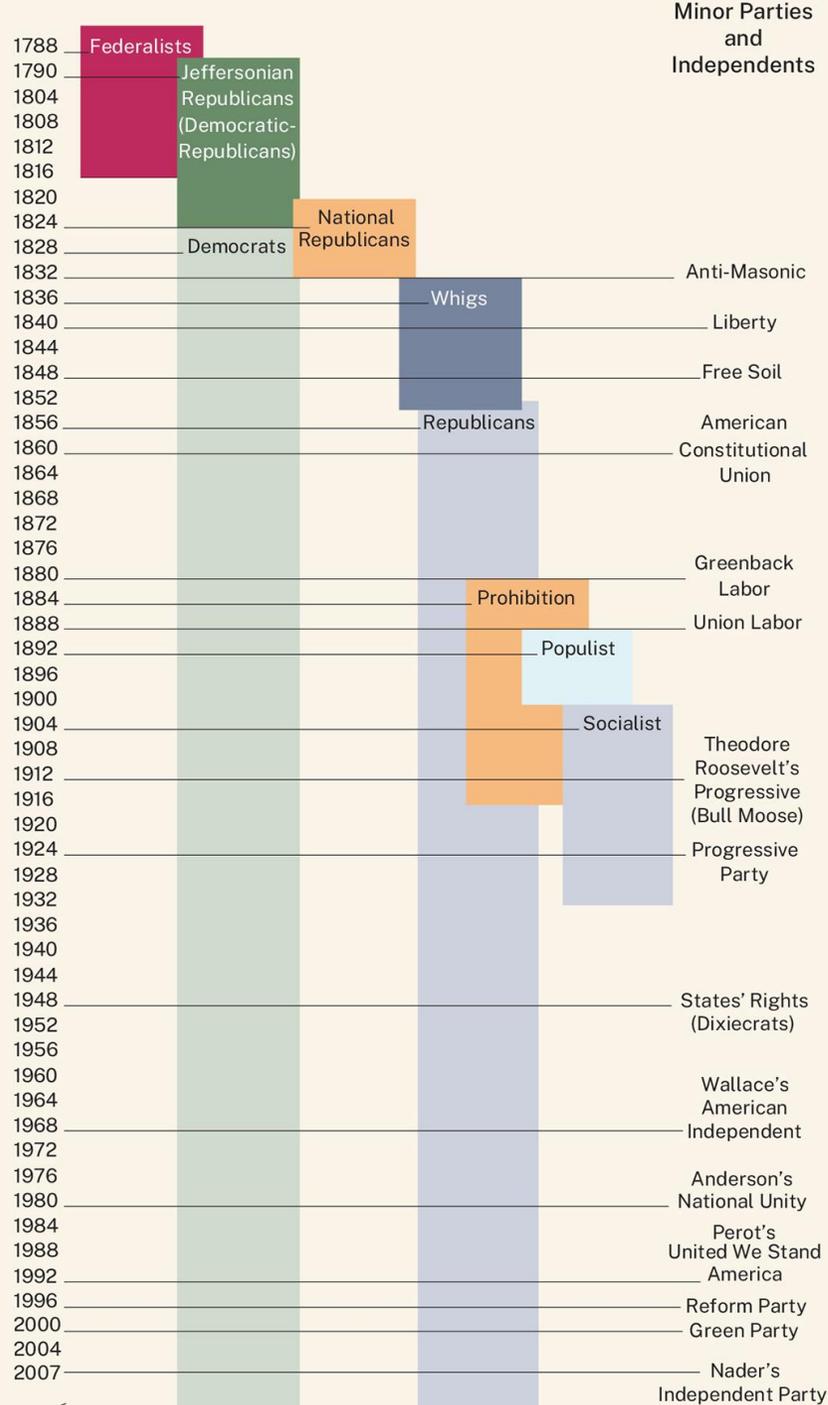
Disclaimer

- Topics over the next 3 weeks may upset you. You have a right to feel and believe whatever you want.
- **It is okay to disagree with someone. It is not okay to be disrespectful.**
- This class focuses on what power is, who is supposed to have it in our system and examples of where the goals of that system are failing to match reality.

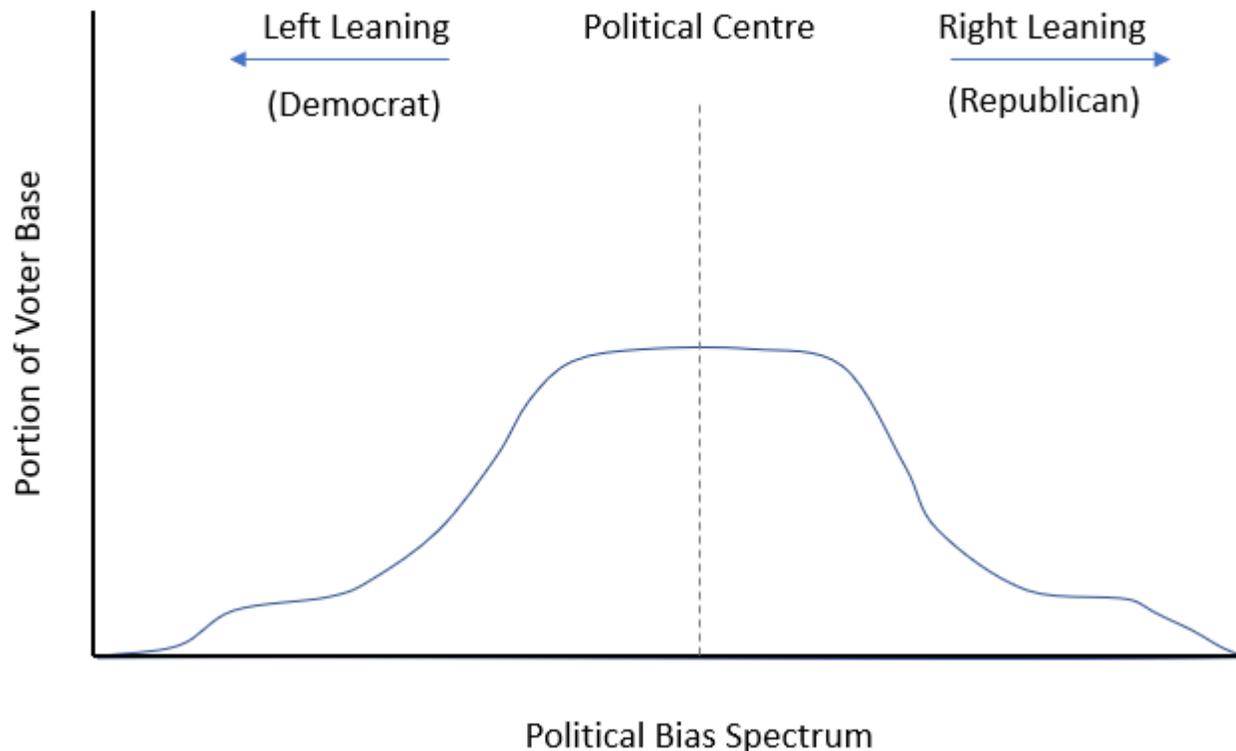
Election Laws

- The rules of how an election is held will determine the outcome
- Duverger's Law-
 - First past the post, single member districts will result in 2 party rule
 - Proportional representation will create systems with 3+ major parties
- General Election- who gets to hold office
 - IN US- Almost all are 'winner take all'- meaning only one candidate for each office will win that office
 - If candidates wins by 20 percent, or .001 percent, same result
 - Losing party gets **no representation** from that specific district.
 - Third parties less viable; voters feel "wasted vote"
 - No incentive to vote for candidates who cannot win because that point of view will not get represented.

- Political parties are not stagnant. They form, change & die to be replaced.
- Party platforms change- realignments happen



Median Voter Theorem



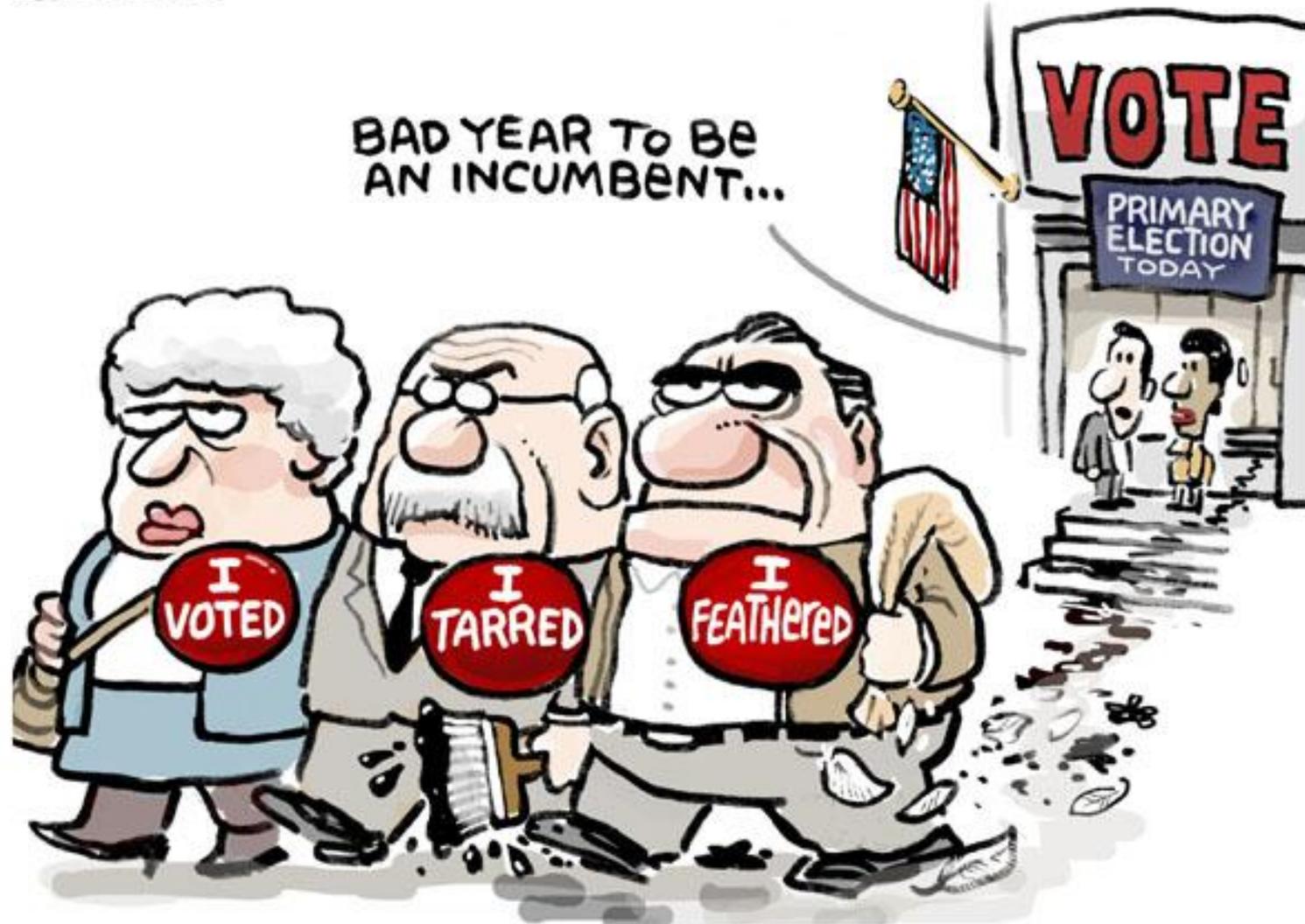
- Candidates in the primaries need to energize their base to win.
- Candidates in the general election need to win more than their opponent- thus they 'moderate'

Congressional Elections

- Three major factors affect who gets elected:
 1. Who runs for Congress – parties cannot control who runs for their nomination
 1. Primary challenges becoming more common
 2. Incumbency advantage
 3. Redistricting process

The Power of Incumbency

STAR TRIBUNE
SACK



The Electoral Connection

- Why do incumbents ‘always’ win reelection?
- Incumbency advantage
 - Fundraising abilities
 - Constituency services
 - Ranking privilege
 - Name recognition and title
 - Pork-barrel spending for district
- The winners make the rules, so of course protect their own interests

The rising costs of congressional elections

House and Senate campaigns collectively spent \$9.5 billion in 2024, nearly six times as much as they spent in 1998.

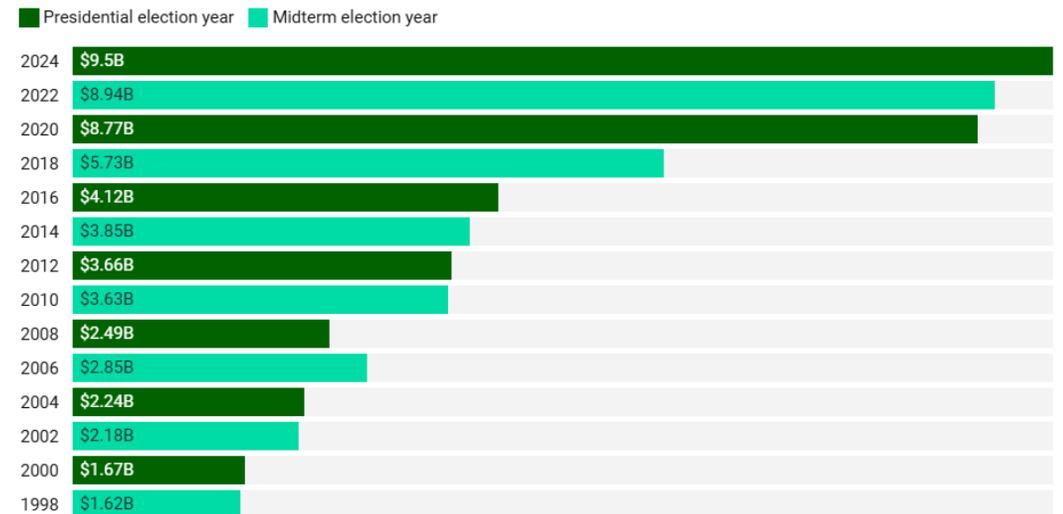
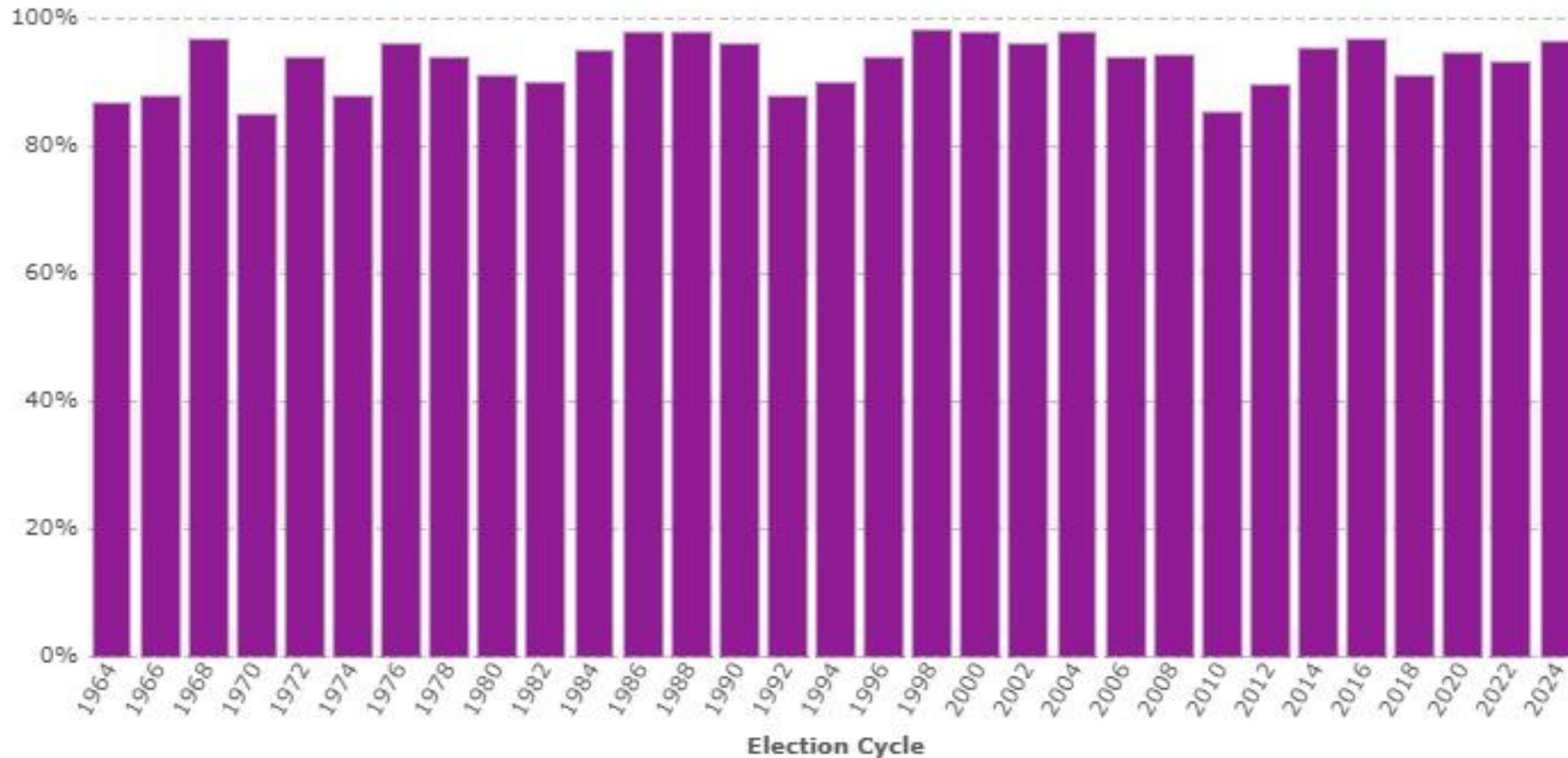


Chart: OpenSecrets • Source: OpenSecrets • Embed • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

<https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2026/01/political-ad-spending-is-projected-to-reach-a-new-high-in-2026-midterms/>

Reelection by Year



- <https://www.opensecrets.org/overview/reelect.php>

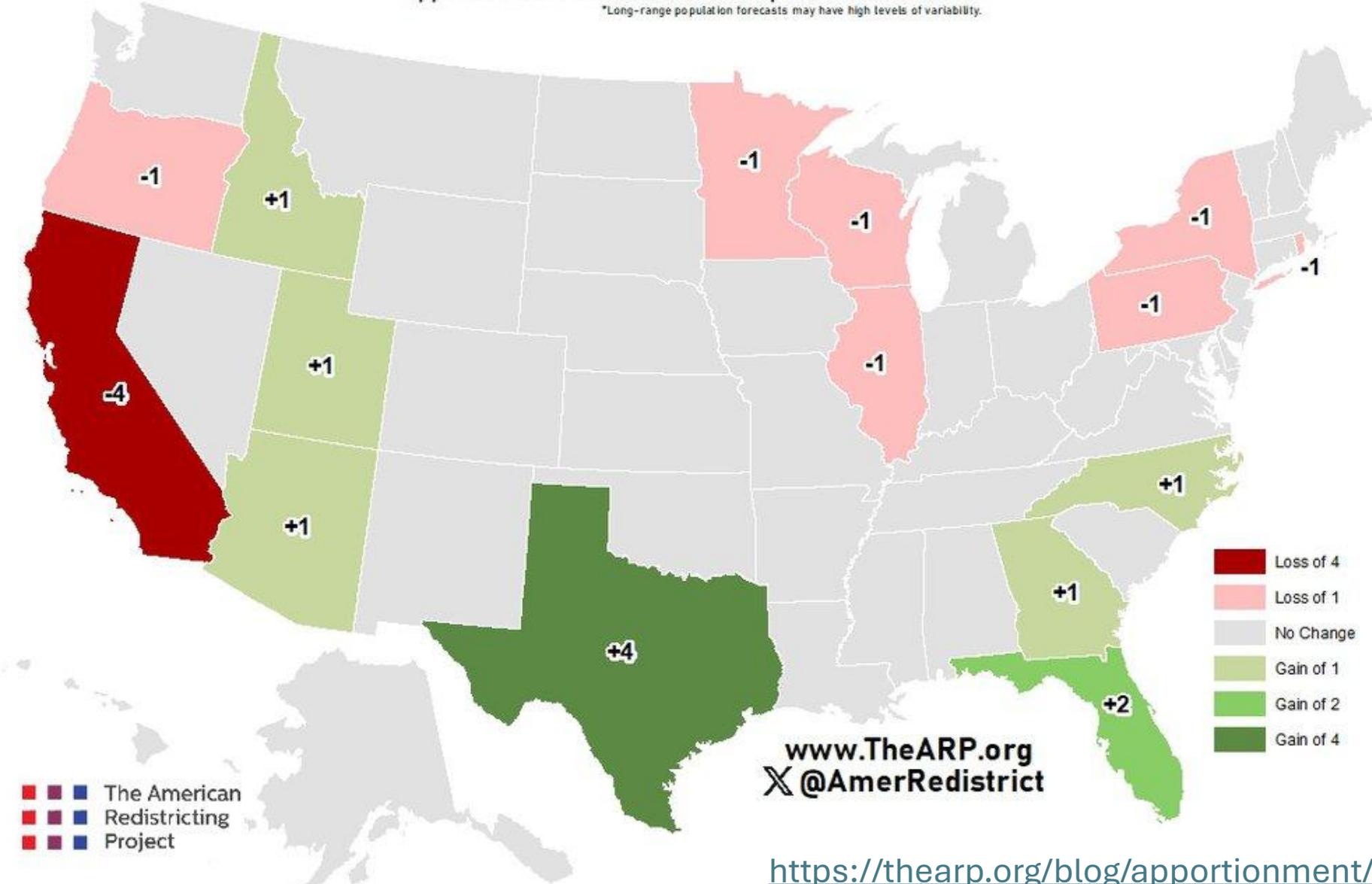
Apportionment

- Every 10 years we count everyone- Article 1 Section 2 of the Constitution
- From there we determine how many representatives each state receives
- States then get to draw the lines for their districts- rules are:
 - Must not gerrymander based on race
 - Districts must be ~equal population
 - Must be contiguous
 - Should be compact/follow natural/other political boundaries
- For Court decisions on redistricting-
https://ballotpedia.org/Timeline_of_redistricting_cases_heard_by_the_Supreme_Court_of_the_United_States

2030 Apportionment Forecast

Apportionment Based on 2025 Population Estimates*

*Long-range population forecasts may have high levels of variability.



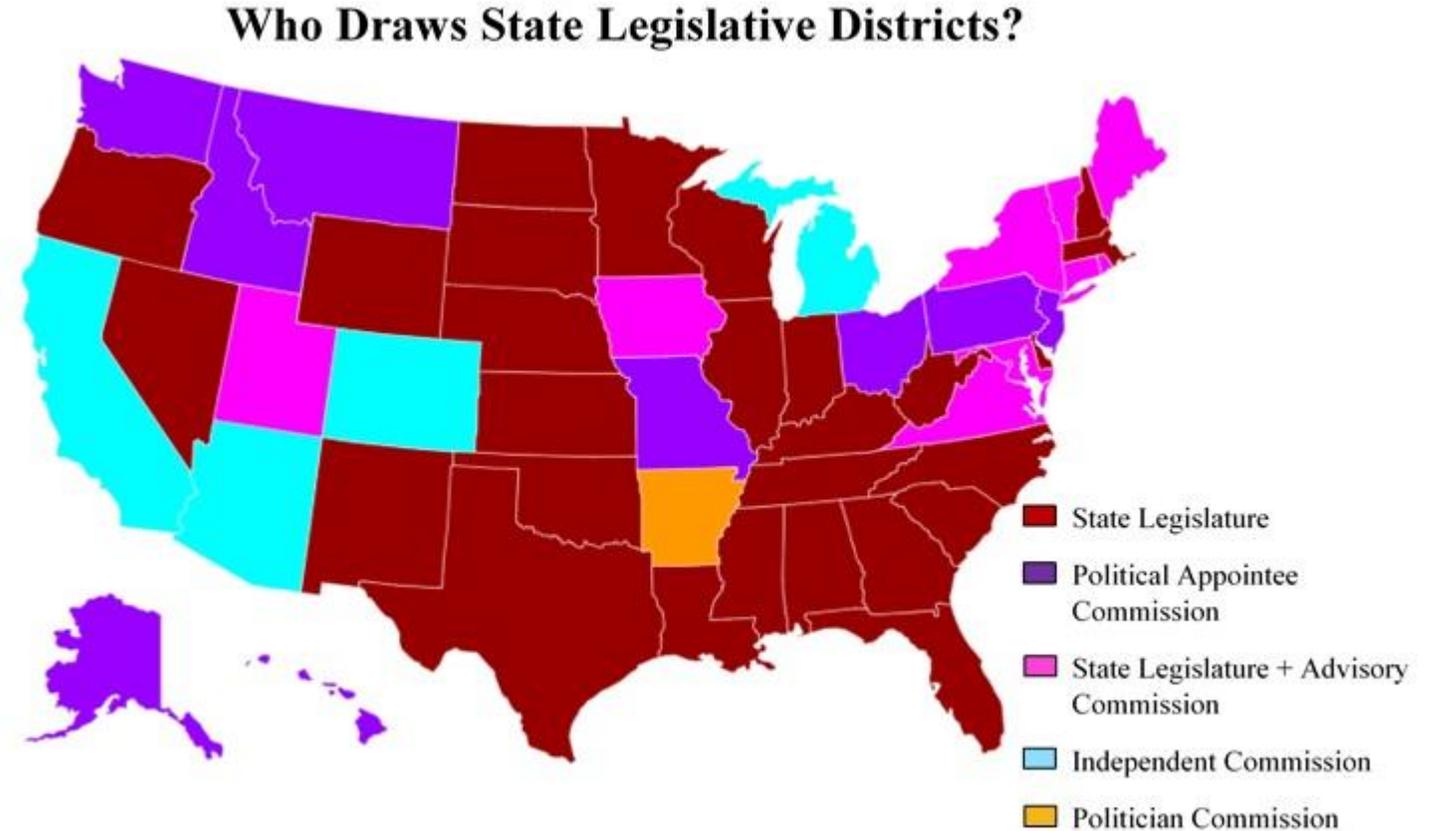
The American
Redistricting
Project

www.TheARP.org
@AmerRedistrict

<https://thearp.org/blog/apportionment/2030-apportionment-forecast-2025/>

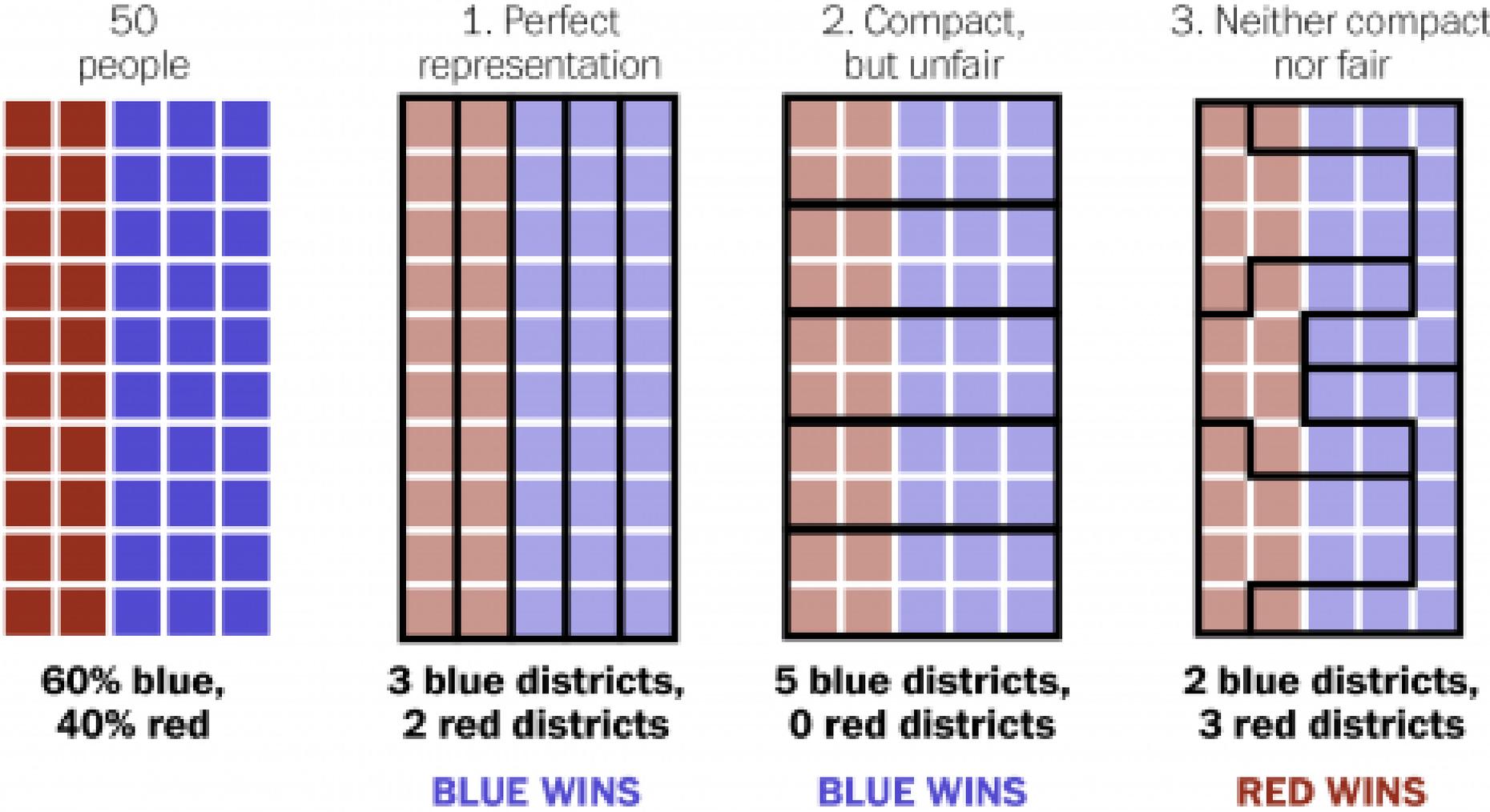
States decide how to draw the lines

- Procedure on how to draw lines varies by state-
 - Gerrymandering has been around since 1812 (Massachusetts)
- Can do:
 - State legislature- treated like regular business
 - Independent Commission (citizen experts)
 - Bi-partisan Commission (officials from both parties)
 - Advisory Commissions- only draft maps- legislatures must approve
 - Courts- only if their above system fails



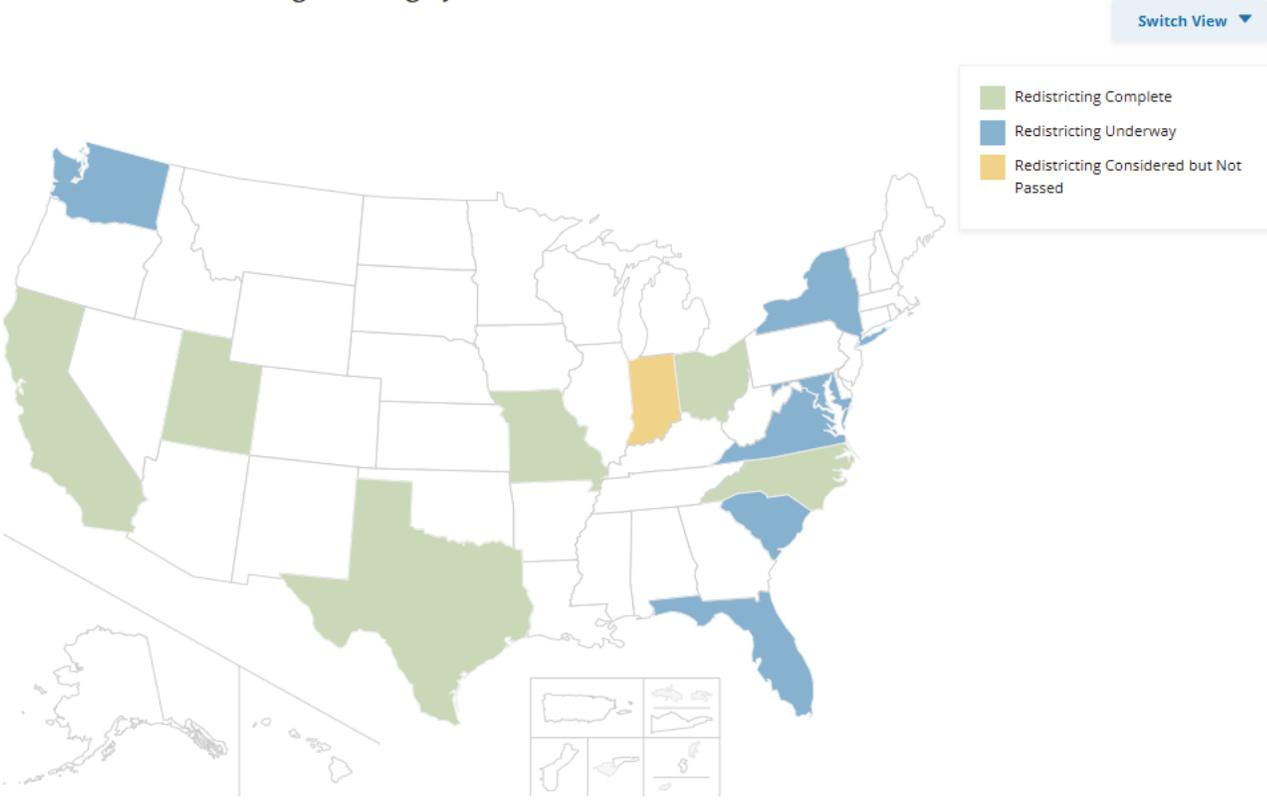
Gerrymandering, explained

Three different ways to divide 50 people into five districts



Current Gerrymandering

Mid-Decade Redistricting Tracking by State

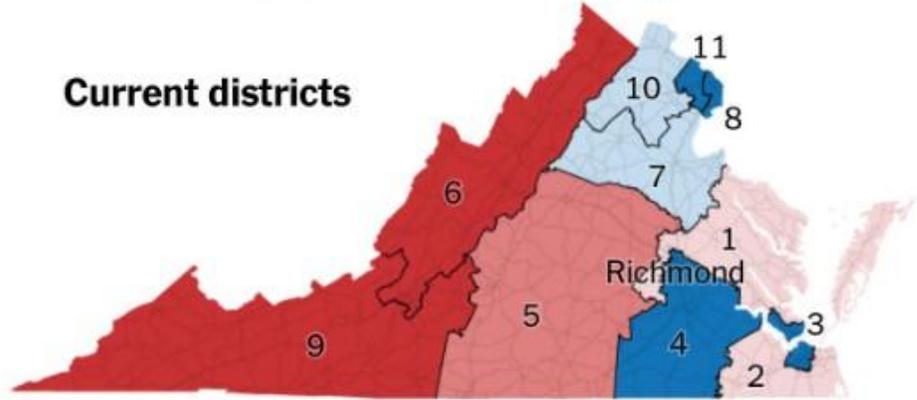


<https://www.ncsl.org/redistricting-and-census/changing-the-maps-tracking-mid-decade-redistricting>

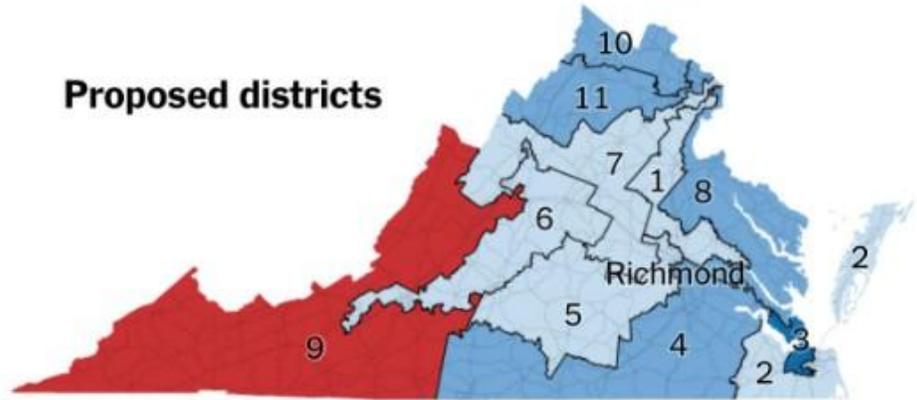
2024 Presidential election margin



Current districts



Proposed districts



- In SC- June 9th is the primary for governor & Congress.
- Candidates wanting to run for Congress- filing period starts March 16th

What happens after the election

- Party sends committee preference paperwork
- Work to hire your DC and regional office staff
 - House limited to 18 permanent staff. Senate has no limit- some have over 60 staffers (<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL30064>)
- Provided an office in DC and a 'regional office' in district
 - If newly elected usually get the worst offices in DC- they are doled out on seniority system. Rest of members get a lottery for offices if new.
 - Existing members can keep their office or upgrade if available.
 - Regional offices often share space with state/county governments
- Sworn in on January 3rd (or nearest weekday)
- Immediately after winning start fundraising for next election

Committee Assignments

- Each party chooses their members who will serve on each committee
 - Seniority, geography, expertise all matter
 - Members asked their preferences
 - steering committee comes up with lists
 - goes back to members for approval
 - then sent to the full chamber for vote
- Committee chairs chosen by majority party
 - Often most senior member- but have some internal term limits/controls

Committees

- Some committees exist in both House & Senate (ex Armed Services)
 - Each own committee chair & powers
- Some committees are exclusive to 1 chamber
- Some are standing committees, some are special/select
- Have 4 current joint committees
- Have commissions as well

<https://www.congress.gov/committees>

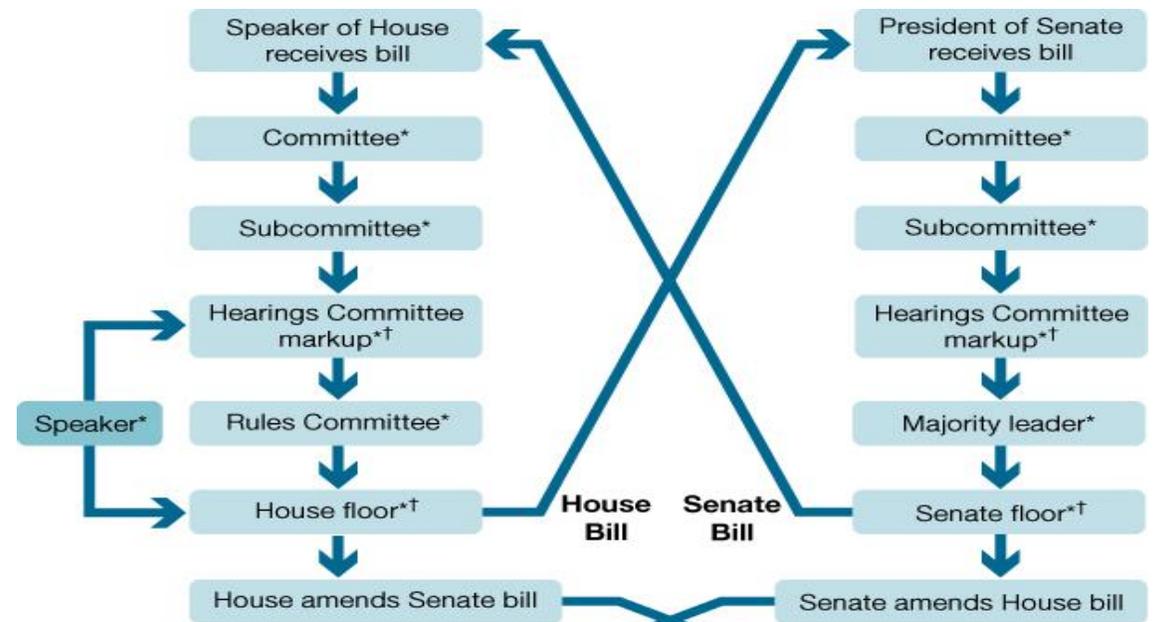
Control of Congress

- Tools party leaders have at their disposal:
 - Leadership PACs
 - Committee assignments
 - Access to the floor
 - The whip system
 - Logrolling
 - Presidency
- Party loyalty in Congress pays dividends. Otherwise, may be primaried for your seat/bad committee assignments etc.

- <https://youtu.be/SZ8psP4S6BQ?si=iLLarxWGAa4fhhYg>

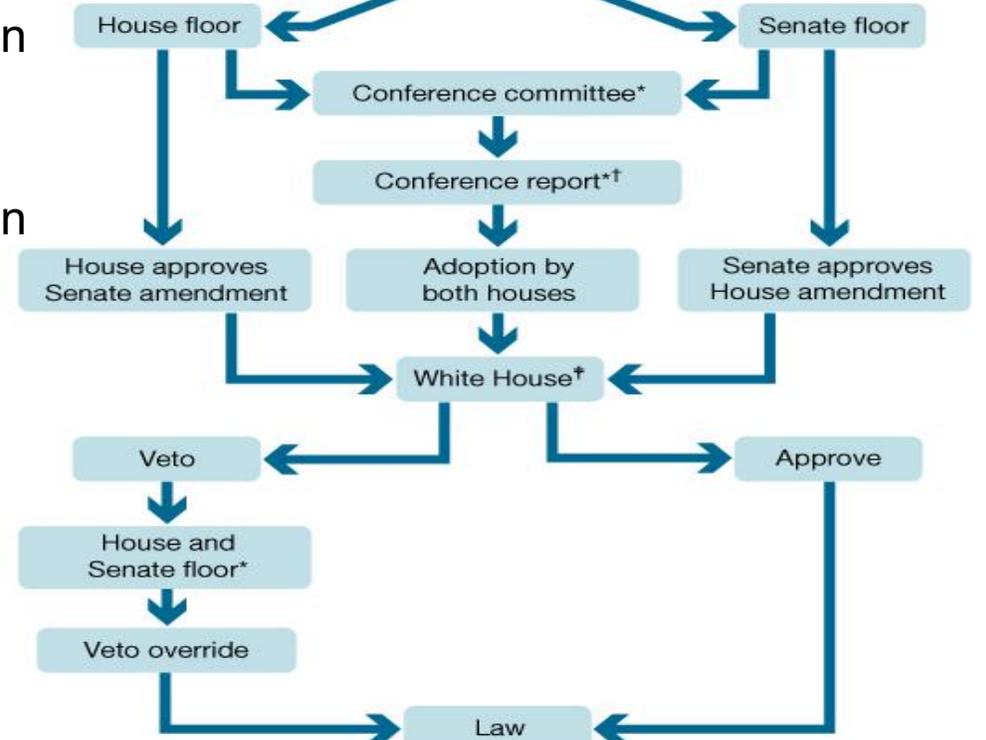
- So- with this system- is 'gridlock' really a bad thing? Or was that the design?

- <https://www.congress.gov/legislative-process>



*Points at which a bill can be amended.

†Points at which a bill can die.



Congress is more than just Making the Law

- Oversight
 - Congress is expected to oversee the activities of the executive branch in order to ensure funding is spent and laws are enforced properly.
- Advice and consent
 - The Senate must confirm top-level executive appointments, ambassadors, and federal judges.
 - Approves all treaties/only one to declare war etc.

NEXT WEEK

- Delegated Authority
- Potential reforms to the congressional system
- Others?

If you want this slide deck email
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