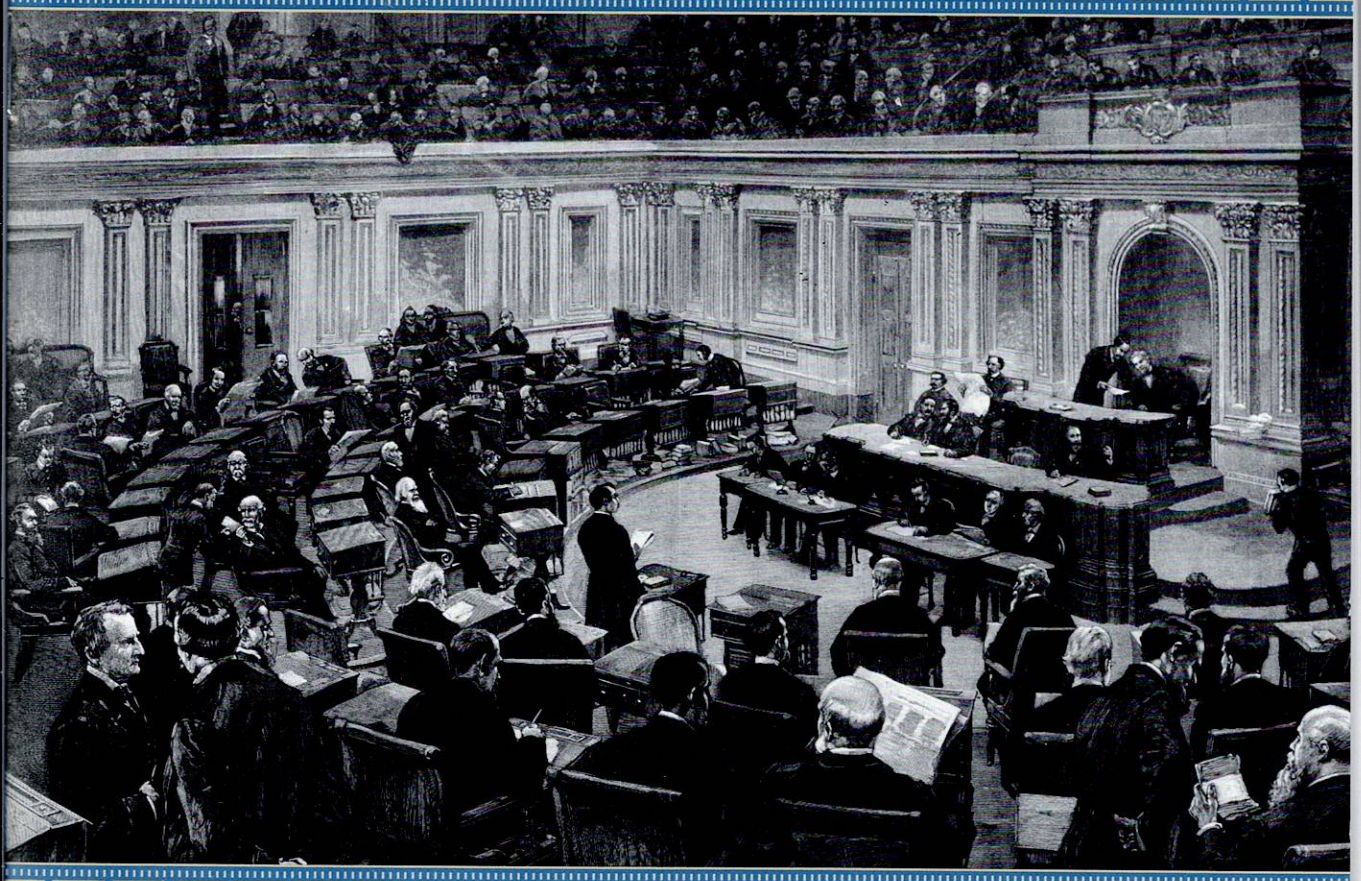
The United States Senate



UNITED
STATES
SENATE

Welcome to the United States Senate

This chamber has served as the Senate's meeting place since 1859. By its continuity over the centuries, the United States Congress has vindicated the framers of our Constitution and affirmed their faith that their great experiment in representative democracy would endure.

Our Constitution created a system of checks and balances between the separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government. In the legislative branch, the Senate represents each of the states equally, while the House represents them according to the size of their respective populations. Each state has two senators, who are referred to in debate as "the senior senator from ..." and "the junior senator from ..." depending on their respective length of service.

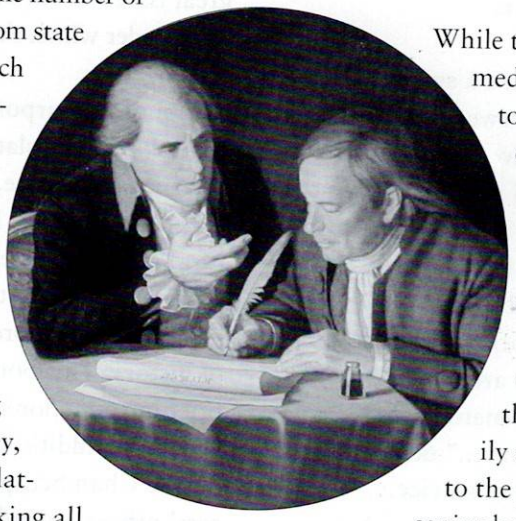
The Constitution assigns specific powers and responsibilities to Congress to enact legislation necessary to provide for the common defense and the general welfare of the United States. It gives the Senate exclusive authority to advise and consent on all nominations and treaties. Most important, the Senate provides a forum where senators, elected by the people, can debate the great issues of our day and help forge the laws under which this nation operates.

Although its purpose is not always apparent, each legislative procedure, each action, each debate, plays a role in the legislative process. Even the architectural and artistic features of the chamber represent various stages of development in the Senate's more than two centuries of history. This booklet is designed as a brief introduction to the workings of the Senate. In addition to your visit to the Senate Chamber, please visit your senators' offices, attend committee hearings, and take a guided tour of the magnificent Capitol building starting with the Capitol Visitor Center.

History of the Senate

The two houses of Congress resulted from the "Great Compromise of 1787," also known as the Connecticut Compromise, between large and small states reached at the Constitutional Convention. Membership of the House of Representatives is apportioned according to a state's population, and the number of representatives varies from state to state. In the Senate each state is equally represented by two senators.

The Constitution assigns the Senate and House equal responsibility for declaring war, maintaining the armed forces, assessing taxes, borrowing money, minting currency, regulating commerce, and making all laws necessary for the operation of the government. The Senate holds exclusive authority to advise and consent on treaties and nominations.



The Connecticut Compromise, *by Bradley Stevens.*

The Constitution requires that senators be at least 30 years of age, citizens of the United States, and residents of the states from which they are elected. Originally the Constitution provided that state legislatures would elect senators, but passage of the 17th Amendment in 1913 established direct election of senators by the people.

While the House in 1789 immediately opened its doors to the public, the Senate conducted its business in secret session for the first five years while meeting in New York and Philadelphia. Initially, senators expected that they would act primarily as an advisory council to the president and, as a senior body, perfect legislation by amendment that came up from the House. As early as 1789, however, the Senate began originating some legislation, and public pressure soon encouraged the body to construct a visitors' gallery, which opened in 1795. In 1800, when the federal government moved

Senator Daniel Webster addressing the Senate, January 1830.

from Philadelphia to the newly created District of Columbia, both the House and Senate Chambers provided public galleries.

By the 1830s, the Senate had attracted the nation's leading political figures and most gifted orators. Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and other towering figures made the Old Senate Chamber the chief forum for debating the great national issues of the day. The French observer Alexis de Tocqueville described the Senate he visited as a body of "eloquent advocates, distinguished generals, wise magistrates and statesmen of note, whose language would at all times do honor to the most remarkable parliamentary debates in Europe."

From the 1830s to the 1850s, the Senate tackled the issues of federal authority versus states' rights, as well as the spread of slavery into the territories. Valiant efforts to achieve compromise eventually failed, and the nation split apart in a bloody civil war. Southern members resigned from the Senate as their states seceded, and in 1861 the new Republican Party became the majority in the sharply reduced Senate, which had just moved into its spacious new chamber in 1859. Following the war, those senators who favored vigorous reconstruction of the Southern states frequently clashed with President Andrew Johnson, who adopted Abraham Lincoln's more lenient policies. When the conflict culminated in the impeachment trial of President Johnson, held in the Senate Chamber, the president escaped removal from office by a single vote.

A series of weak presidents followed Johnson throughout the remainder of the 19th century, allowing the Senate to become the strongest branch of the federal government. Senators argued that the executive should be subordinate to the legislature, and that the president's only role was to enforce the laws enacted by Congress. By the beginning of the 20th century, the energetic presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson challenged senatorial dominance, and the balance of power

Senators gather in 1918 during the Treaty of Versailles debate.

shifted toward the White House. Still, the Senate delivered Wilson a major blow at the end of his presidency by rejecting the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I and created the League of Nations.

In the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Senate enthusiastically responded to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program of recovery, relief, and reform. An unprecedented burst of legislative activity profoundly altered the size, shape, and scope of the federal government.

By 1937, the Senate had broken with President Roosevelt over his proposal to "pack" the Supreme Court, and strong isolationist sentiments limited Roosevelt's international policies. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, however, brought a sudden shift in public opinion, and senators rallied behind the war effort. The slogan that "politics stops at the water's edge" expressed the new spirit of bipartisanship in American foreign policy.

A major turning point in the Senate's history occurred with the passage of the 1946 Legislative Reorganization Act, which reshaped the committee system and

The United States Senate in session, 1940.

Watergate committee hearing, 1973. [L-R] Staff counsel Fred Thompson, Senator Howard Baker (TN), and Chairman Sam Ervin (NC).

provided a more professional staff for senators and committees. The Cold War brought an increase in legislation that resulted in the expansion of the national defense program, foreign aid, and economic and military assistance to America's allies.

During the 1950s the Senate engaged in heated debates over civil rights policies, stimulating lengthy filibusters, but eventually resulting in passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Senate was also divided over American involvement in the war in Vietnam. Although in 1964 senators overwhelmingly approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that authorized the president to repel North Vietnamese attacks, they later disagreed over its application and voted for its repeal. Senate concern over increased presidential powers in foreign affairs led to the passage of the War Powers Act of 1973, requiring congressional notification and approval whenever American troops are sent into combat.

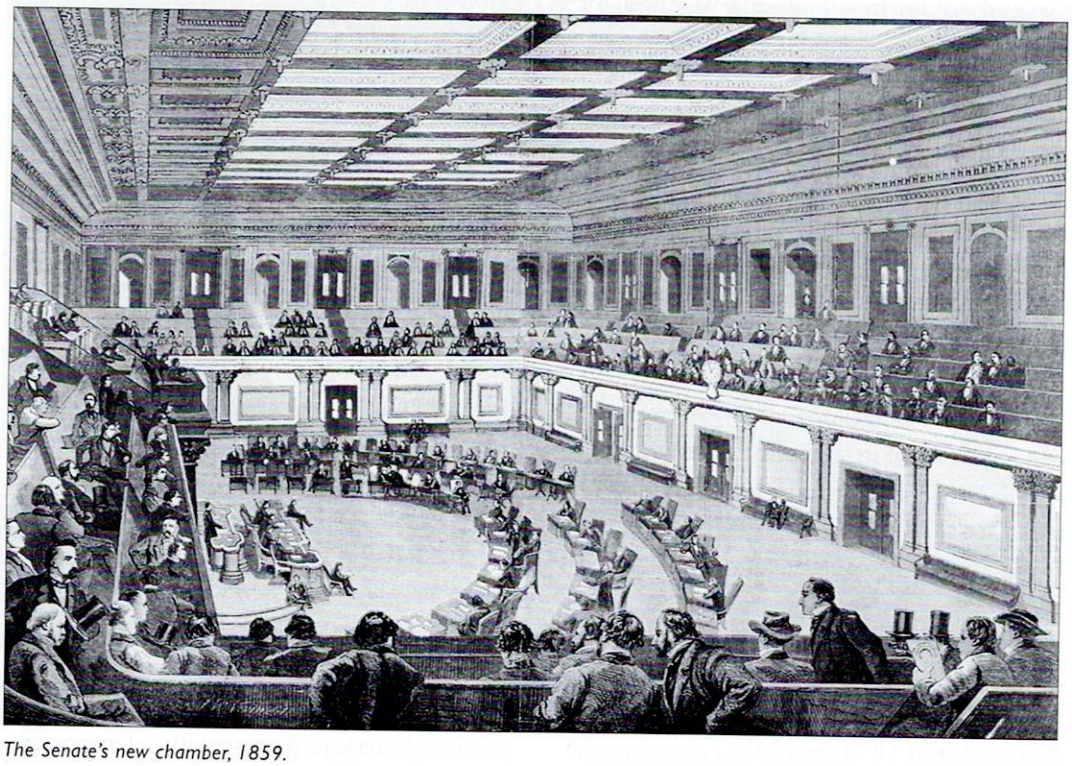
The Watergate burglary and irregularities of the presidential campaign in 1972 led to a Senate investigation chaired by Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina. Testimony and evidence gathered by Ervin's committee eventually led to the 1974 resignation of President Richard Nixon. In 1999 the Senate conducted the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton, ultimately voting not to remove him from office.

In recent years, the Senate has sought to maintain a balance with the president, supporting presidential initiatives while maintaining vigilant oversight of executive branch operations. This is the system of checks and balances the framers of the Constitution had envisioned, which has endured for over 200 years of American representative democracy.

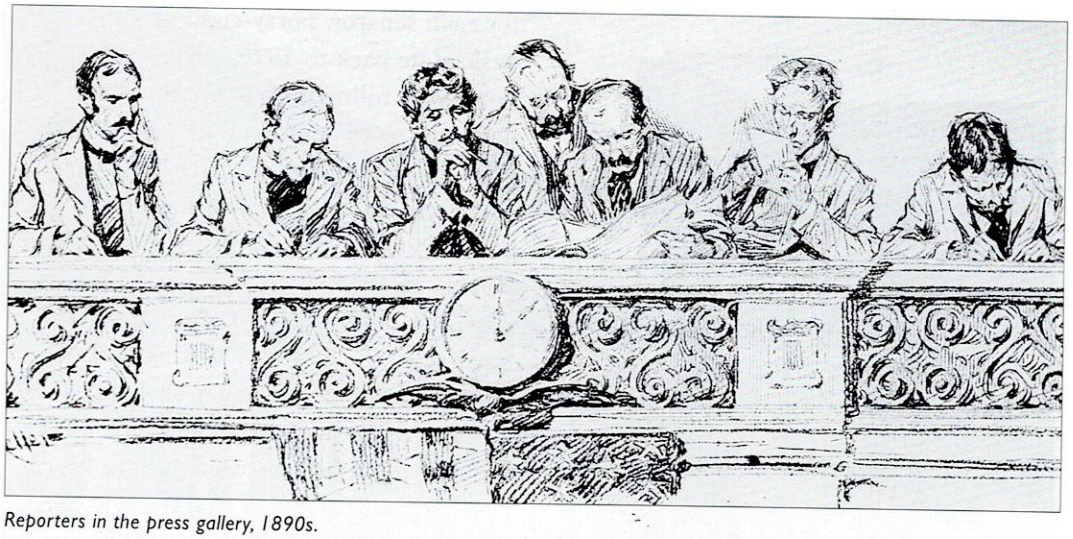
The Senate Chamber

The Senate first occupied its current chamber on January 4, 1859. On that day, senators proceeded down the corridor from the smaller chamber that had served as their meeting place for nearly half a century. The old chamber has been restored to its 1859 appearance.

When Congress moved into the Capitol in 1800, the Union comprised only 16 states. In just 50 years the number of states had grown to 31. Plans were begun to enlarge the building to provide larger chambers for the Senate and the House of Representatives. In 1851 Thomas U. Walter of



The Senate's new chamber, 1859.



Reporters in the press gallery, 1890s.

Philadelphia became the architect and was later joined by Army Captain Montgomery C. Meigs as chief engineer. Together they designed the new Senate Chamber based on the latest advances in lighting, acoustics, and ventilation. A room without windows prevented outside noises from disturbing debate and eliminated drafts that might affect the health and speaking voices of senators. Steam-powered fans provided the room with a constant and reliable supply of fresh air. Originally, sunlight was admitted to the room through a large skylight ornamented with colored glass. At night the room was lighted by gas jets located above the glass ceiling. Almost a century later, in 1938, the skylight was found to be dangerously weak, so plans were made to replace it. At the same time the robust Victorian interior design of the chamber was altered to reflect a simpler, less ornate architectural style. These changes, designed by the Philadelphia firm of Harbeson, Hough, Livingston, and Larson, were undertaken from 1949 to 1950.

Twentieth century alterations, however, did not affect the arrangement of the Senate Chamber floor where senators sit, or its surrounding lobbies, cloakrooms, and galleries. The press gallery, situated immediately above the presiding officer's chair, accommodates reporters from newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the Internet. Other galleries have been set aside for the diplomatic corps, members' families, and staff and visitors.

Twenty busts line the walls at the gallery level, representing all vice presidents from John Adams to Thomas Hendricks, with

Bust of Vice President John Adams in the Senate Chamber.

A Senate Chamber desk.

The presiding officer's gavel.

the exception of Henry Wilson, whose bust is located in the Vice President's Room where he died. The busts pay tribute to the vice president's role as president of the Senate. They are arranged in chronological order, beginning in the Senate gallery, with later busts continuing in the second floor hallway around the chamber.

Arranged below the galleries in a semicircular pattern are 100 desks—one for each senator. Forty-eight of these desks date back to 1819, when they were purchased following the fire that badly damaged the Capitol and its furnishings. Over the years, as new states have joined the Union, matching desks have been added to the chamber, the most recent for Hawaii in 1959. Each desk has an inkwell and a sand shaker for blotting ink. Starting in the 1830s, a writing box was affixed to the top of each desk to provide more space for members. Senator Daniel Webster reportedly refused to have his desk altered, reasoning that if his predecessors had done without the additional space, so could he. Traditionally assigned to the senior senator from New Hampshire, Webster's desk remains the only one in the chamber without a writing box.

The custom of dividing Senate seating by party goes back to the creation of political parties in the United States, but has not always been rigidly followed. In the Old Senate Chamber, equal numbers of desks were placed on each side of the center aisle, requiring a few members to sit across from the rest of their party. Since 1877, however, desks have been moved back and forth across the aisle to permit all members of each party to sit on the appropriate side. Two large roll-top desks at the front of the chamber are reserved for the official party secretaries.

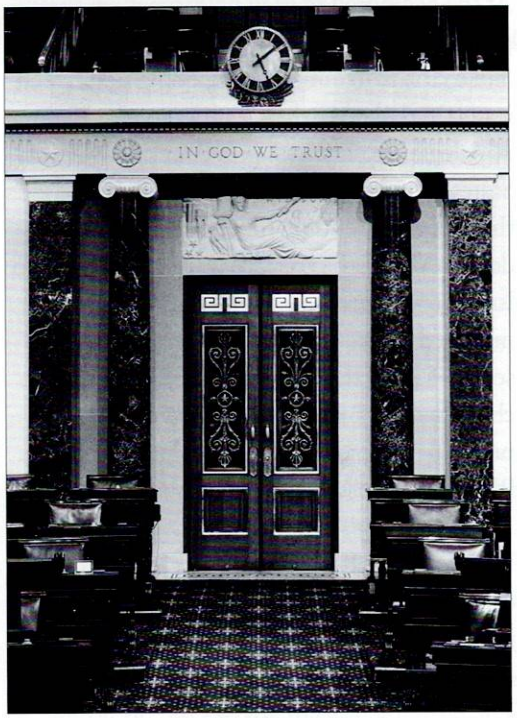
Unobtrusively located on ledges directly behind the presiding officer's rostrum are two small lacquer snuff boxes, relics of an earlier age when senators dipped snuff during their debates. Spittoons at various locations are other reminders of the Senate's past.

A solid ivory gavel now used by the presiding officer was presented to the Senate

The current Senate Chamber.

in 1954 by the vice president of India as a token of his country's friendship. The previously used gavel, yellowed and cracked, occupies a place of honor on the rostrum when the Senate is in session. According to tradition, that gavel, of ivory capped with silver, had been used in the Senate since its first meeting in 1789.

A series of inscriptions appear around the chamber. Over the presiding officer's desk is the motto *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of Many, One). Above the doors are: *Annuit Coeptis* (God Has Favored Our Undertakings) over the east entrance; *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (A New Order of the Ages) over the west entrance; and our national motto, *In God We Trust*, over the south-central entrance.



U.S. national motto, In God We Trust.

The Senate in Session

The ringing of bells throughout the Capitol and the three Senate office buildings signals the opening of a day's session and announces votes, quorum calls, and other legislative activities. The bells correspond with a series of lights above the doors on the north side of the chamber and at various locations on the Senate side of Capitol Hill.

At the beginning of each daily meeting, the presiding officer accompanies the Senate chaplain to the rostrum for the opening prayer and leads the Senate in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. The vice president of the United States serves as president of the Senate and therefore its presiding officer. In the vice president's absence, the president pro tempore—who is generally the most senior member of the majority party—presides or designates other senators from the majority party to take the chair. Senators must direct all remarks to the presiding officer, whom they address as "Mr. President" or "Madam President."

The clerks of the Senate sit at a long marble desk in front of the presiding officer. The journal clerk records the minutes of the proceedings, as is required by the Constitution. The parliamentarian advises the presiding officer and members regarding Senate rules and procedures. The legislative clerk calls the roll and receives bills, resolutions, and amendments offered by senators. At the two mahogany desks in front of these clerks sit the staffs of the party secretaries, who keep members of their parties informed about the subject matter at hand and tallies of votes cast. Senate pages stationed on both sides of the rostrum serve as messengers for senators. Pages, who are in their junior year of high school, attend early morning classes at a school located a few blocks from the Capitol.

The majority and minority leaders occupy the front desks on their respective sides of the center aisle, with the Republicans to the presiding officer's left and the Democrats to the right. The more senior members of each party have priority in seat selection and generally sit toward the front and center of the chamber.

As a senator speaks, an official reporter of debates stands nearby, taking a verbatim account of everything said. Reporters work 15-minute shifts in the chamber and then immediately transcribe their notes. By the next morning, the entire day's proceedings, along with related materials, are printed in the *Congressional Record*. In 1986 the Senate began live radio and television coverage of its floor proceedings. The Senate's gavel-to-gavel proceedings are broadcast by the non-profit Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN).

The Senate usually begins the day with ten-minute speeches by the majority and minority leaders or their designees, followed by a period called "Morning Business." During this time, senators introduce bills and resolutions, which are referred to the various committees for consideration. Members may also request permission to speak briefly on any subject that concerns them.

Following Morning Business, the Senate may consider either executive or legislative business. During an executive session, the Senate may consider any nomination or treaty that the president submits for the Senate's advice and consent. Nominations are confirmed by a simple majority, but the Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of the Senate to approve treaties. For much of the Senate's history, most executive sessions were conducted in secret, with the galleries cleared and the doors locked, enabling senators to speak freely about the character of nominees and to avoid causing any embarrassment to the nation's treaty partners. Not until 1929 were executive sessions routinely opened to the public and the press.

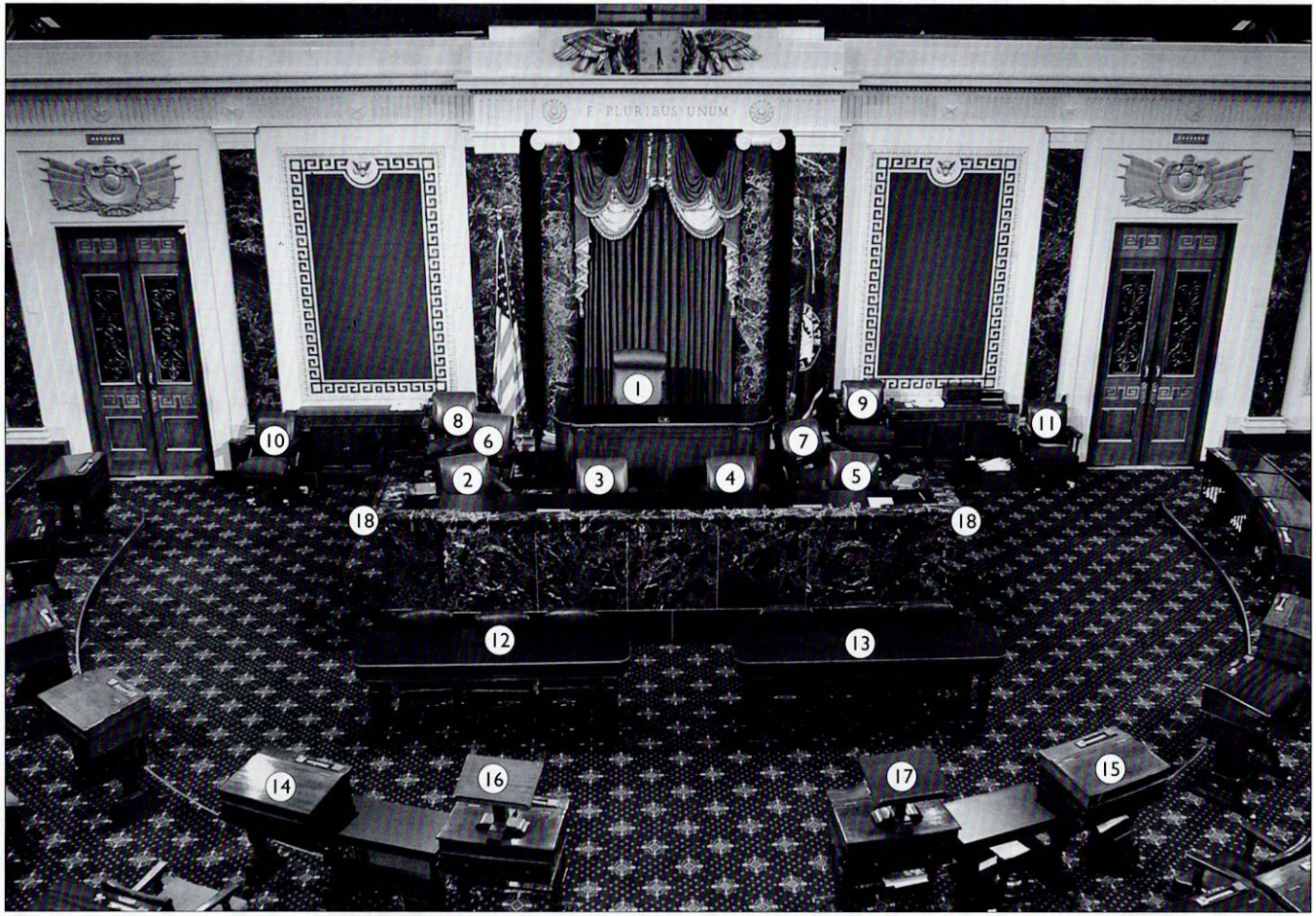
Legislative business consumes the largest share of the Senate's time. When committees report out legislation, the majority leader attempts to schedule it for debate in the chamber. If both parties have agreed to the bill, it may be enacted simply by "unanimous consent," with only a brief reading of its title and a request by the leadership that it be adopted without objection, generally by voice vote. If a single member objects, however, the Senate may not consider the bill at all, or may debate it at length and then take a roll-call vote.

The Senate has long operated under the principle of "unlimited debate" in which all members may speak for as long as they wish on the matter under consideration. To expedite business, the leadership may request unanimous consent to establish a time limit on debate for a specific legislative measure. Extended debate designed to defeat or amend a bill by dilatory tactics is called a "filibuster." Those senators opposed to a filibuster may present a "cloture motion," signed by at least 16 senators, under which a vote of 60 senators can limit the remaining debate.

When a bill is being debated, the floor managers of the two parties often take the front row, center aisle, seats of the majority and minority leaders. If a time limit has been established, they allot portions of their time to senators wishing to speak for or against the bill. It is not unusual to find only a few members in the chamber at any given time during the debate, with other senators attending committee meetings or working in their offices. Members' offices are equipped with "hot lines" and televisions that provide instant access to what is happening on the Senate floor. When the bells signal a vote, senators come to the chamber to record their "yeas" and "nays."

Whenever the Senate is in session, the American flag flies above the chamber's roof. When the legislative load is especially heavy, or when a filibuster is underway, the Senate may hold sessions long into the night or around the clock. A lantern at the top of the Capitol dome is always lit during these night sessions. Whether at 2:00 in the morning or 2:00 in the afternoon, the public is always welcome to the galleries to witness these legislative proceedings.

THE SENATE FLOOR



NOTICE TO VISITORS: Demonstrations of approval or disapproval by occupants of the galleries are strictly forbidden by a rule of the Senate.

1) **Presiding Officer**
The vice president of the United States serves as president of the Senate and therefore its presiding officer. In the vice president's absence, the president pro tempore presides or designates other senators from the majority party to take the chair.

2) **Journal Clerk**
Records the minutes of the proceedings, as required by the Constitution.

3) **Parliamentarian**
Advises the presiding officer and members regarding Senate rules and procedures.

4) **Legislative Clerk**
Calls the roll and receives bills, resolutions, and amendments offered by senators.

5) **Assistant Secretary of the Senate**
Oversees the administration of the departments within the Office of the Secretary and performs the duties of the Secretary in his or her absence.

6) **Sergeant at Arms**
Serves as the protocol and chief law enforcement officer of the Senate and is the principle administrative manager for most support services.

7) **Secretary of the Senate**
Elected by the Senate to serve as the chief legislative, financial, and administrative officer of the United States Senate.

8) **Democratic Secretary &**
9) **Republican Secretary**
Oversee Senate pages on the Senate floor and cloakroom staff. Schedule legislation on the floor and inform senators of all pending business, keeping them updated on bills, motions, nominations, and amendments in preparation for roll call votes.

10) **Assistant Democratic Secretary**

11) **Assistant Republican Secretary**

12) **Democratic Secretary Staff**

13) **Republican Secretary Staff**

14) **Assistant Democratic Leader (Democratic Whip) &**
15) **Assistant Republican Leader (Republican Whip)**
Help the majority and minority leaders track votes on important legislation and serve as acting floor leader in the absence of a party floor leader.

16) **Democratic Leader &**
17) **Republican Leader**
Serve as spokespersons for their parties' positions on issues. The majority leader schedules the daily legislative program and fashions the unanimous consent agreements that govern the time for debate.

18) **Senate Pages**
Serve as messengers for senators and assist with responsibilities on the Senate floor.

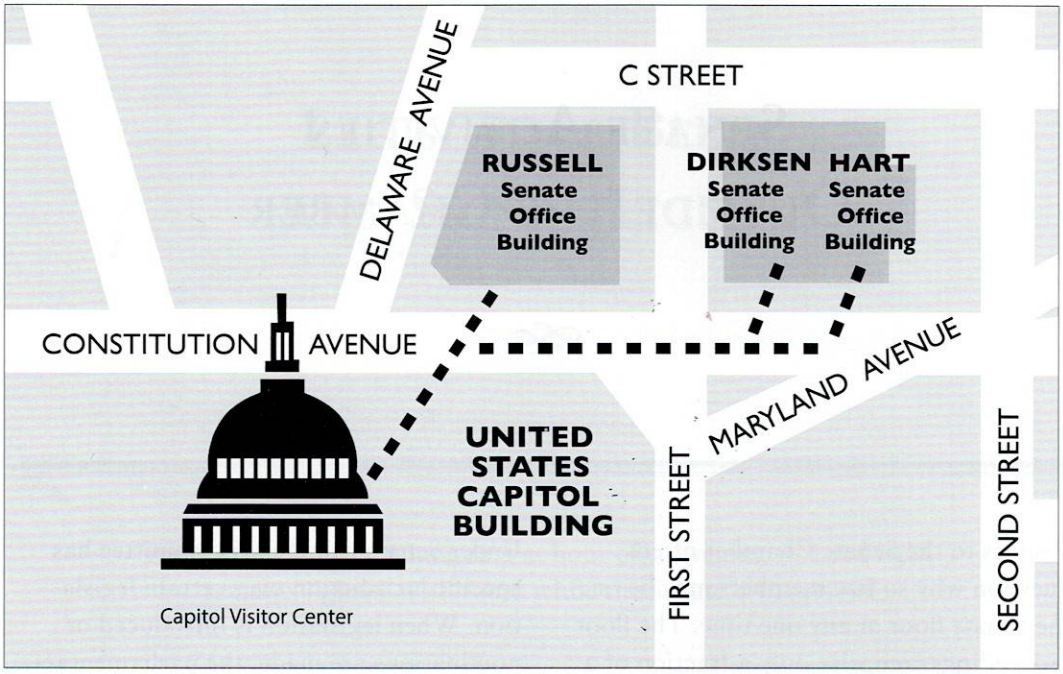
Senate Activities Outside the Chamber

Visitors to the Senate Chamber often question why so few members may be on the Senate floor at any one time. The floor proceedings comprise only a fraction of a senator's average day. The daily schedule of a senator also includes consulting off the floor with fellow senators, administration officials, staff, constituents, and other visitors; answering correspondence; and briefing the media. Generally, the largest share of a senator's time is devoted to committee work.

There are 16 Senate standing committees, three select committees, one special committee, and four joint committees with the House. On average, each senator serves on three standing committees and at least one select, special, or joint committee. In addition, there are numerous subcommittees within each committee. This permits virtually every member of the majority party to serve as chair, and every member of the minority to serve as ranking (senior) member, of a committee or subcommittee.

Under Senate rules, each committee has specific jurisdiction over certain legislation. When legislation is introduced or nominations are made, the parliamentarian refers the legislation or nomination to the proper committee. That committee or one of its subcommittees schedules hearings and takes testimony regarding the matter. At "mark-up" sessions, the committee may recommend amendments for the full Senate to consider when the bill is taken up on the floor. Many bills referred to committees are never reported out. In some cases, several bills of the same nature are consolidated; in other cases, the issue lacks sufficient support to be considered further.

Since far more legislation is shaped in committee than in floor debates, senators necessarily direct their attention toward their committee assignments. Although senators remain informed on the broad range of issues important to their states and the nation, the committees they



Senators' offices and committee rooms are located in the Russell, Dirksen, and Hart Senate Office Buildings, across Constitution Avenue from the Capitol. Offices designated SR are in the Russell Building, named for Senator Richard Brevard Russell of Georgia; those designated SD are in the Dirksen Building, named for Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois; and those designated SH are in the Hart Building, named for Senator Philip A. Hart of Michigan. The buildings are connected to the Capitol by underground railway cars, located on the basement level.

serve on generally determine the bills they sponsor and the issues to which they devote their greatest attention. Senators come to the Senate floor to speak on many matters about which they feel strongly, but they most frequently appear in floor debates relating to bills reported from their committees.

The daily schedule of committee meetings is available on the Senate Web site under the "Committees" and then "Hearings & Meetings."

To Learn More about the Senate:

- **On the Internet:**
  http://www.senate.gov
- **From either of your senators:**
  United States Senate
  Washington, DC 20510
- **From the Senate Historical Office:**
  SH-201, U.S. Senate
  Washington, DC 20510-7108
  (202) 224-6900
  Email: historian@sec.senate.gov
- **From the Office of Senate Curator:**
  S-411, U.S. Capitol
  Washington, DC 20510-7102
  (202) 224-2955
  Email: curator@sec.senate.gov