Fact Sheet U.S Senate

1. General description of the US Senate

The United States Senate is the upper house of the bicameral legislature of the United States, and together with the United States House of Representatives comprises the United States Congress. The Powers of the Senate are established in Article One of the U.S. Constitution. Each U.S. state is represented by two senators, regardless of population. Senators serve staggered six-year terms.

2. History

-The framers of the Constitution created a bicameral Congress as a compromise between those who felt that each state should be equally represented, and those who felt the Legislature should directly represent the People.

-The Constitution provides that the approval of both chambers is necessary for the passage of legislation .The Senate of the United States was formed on the example of the Roman Senate. The United States has had 50 states since 1959, since then the Senate has had 100 senators.

-The disparity between the most and least populous states has grown since the Great Compromise, which granted each state two members of the Senate and at least one member of the House of Representatives, for a total minimum of three presidential Electors, regardless of population. This means some citizens are better represented in the Senate than those in other states.

-Problems with repeated vacant seats due to the inability of a legislature to elect senators, intrastate political struggles, and even bribery and intimidation gradually led to a growing movement to amend the Constitution to allow for the direct election of senators in the 19th century.

3. Today´s Structure

The last election for the Senate was on November 2, 2010. After those elections the Democratic Caucus has 53 members including 2 Independent Members, while the Republican Conference has 47 members.

4 . Membership

→ Qualifications: 1) each senator must be at least 30 years old, 2) must have been a citizen of the United States for at least the past nine years, and 3) must be an inhabitant of the state he or she seeks to represent.

→ Term: Senators serve terms of six years each, but the the terms are staggered so that approximately one-third of the seats are up for election every two years.

→ Elections: Elections to the Senate are held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years and coincide with elections for the House of Representatives. Senators are elected by their state as a whole.

→ Salary and benefits: The annual salary of each senator, as of 2009, is $174,000; the president pro tempore and party leaders receive $193,400. In June 2003, at least 40 of the then-senators were millionaires.

→ Political prominence: Senators are regarded as more prominent political figures than members of the House of Representatives because there are fewer of them, and because they serve for longer terms, usually represent larger constituencies, sit on more committees, and have more staffers.

5 . Functions of the Senate

→ Legislative functions: Bills may be introduced in either House of Congress. However, the Constitution provides that "All bills for raising Revenue shall originate in the House of Representatives." As a result, the Senate does not have the power to initiate bills imposing taxes.The approval of both houses is required for any bill, including a revenue bill, to become law. Both Houses must pass the same version of the bill; if there are differences, they may be resolved by sending amendments back and forth or by a conference committee, which includes members of both bodies.

→ Checks and balances: The Constitution provides several unique functions for the Senate that its ability to "check and balance" the powers of other elements of the Federal Government. The Senate must ratify besides all treaties with foreign governments; it tries all impeachments and it elects the vice president in the event that no person gets a majority of the electoral votes. The president can make certain appointments only with the advice and consent of the Senate.