STUDY NOTES · BASIC CONCEPT

What is the US Congress, Midterm Elections and Checks and Balances?

Polity & Governance

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1. Introduction

The United States follows a presidential system of government based on the separation of powers. Legislative authority rests with Congress, executive authority with the President, and judicial authority with the federal judiciary.

The 2026 midterm elections, including Democratic Senator Jon Ossoff’s reported re-election in Georgia, illustrate how elections can influence the political balance within Congress and the President’s ability to implement policies.

2. Structure of the US Congress

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The US Congress is a bicameral legislature, meaning it has two chambers.

Feature	Senate	House of Representatives
Total membership	100 senators	435 voting members
Representation	Two senators per state	Based broadly on state population
Term	6 years	2 years
Election cycle	Approximately one-third of seats every two years	All seats every two years
Major role	Legislation, confirmations and treaty-related functions	Legislation, taxation and initiation of revenue bills

Both chambers participate in federal lawmaking. A bill generally must pass both chambers before being presented to the President.

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3. What Are Midterm Elections?

Midterm elections are elections held halfway through a US President's four-year term. They occur every four years, between presidential elections.

Their main features include:

1. Elections for all voting seats in the House of Representatives.
2. Elections for approximately one-third of Senate seats.
3. Elections for various state and local offices, depending on the electoral calendar.
4. An opportunity for voters to express approval or dissatisfaction with the President's policies.

Although the President is not elected during midterms, the results can substantially affect the administration's ability to govern.

4. How Do Midterm Elections Influence Governance?

The political party controlling Congress can influence legislation, public spending and executive oversight.

Voters elect members of Congress

The balance of power in Congress changes or remains

Impact on legislation, budgets and executive oversight

If the President’s party loses control of one or both chambers, opposition parties may have greater power to scrutinise government decisions, block or modify legislative proposals and conduct congressional investigations.

However, the effects depend on the issue, party unity, procedural rules and the distribution of seats.

5. Checks and Balances in the US Political System

Checks and balances prevent any one branch of government from exercising unlimited power.

Institution	Important checking function
Congress	Legislation, budgetary oversight and investigations
President	Can veto legislation passed by Congress, subject to constitutional procedures
Federal judiciary	Reviews the constitutionality of laws and government actions in appropriate cases

The Senate has additional responsibilities, including confirming many presidential nominees and consenting to treaties under constitutional procedures.

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6. Midterm Elections and Democratic Accountability

Midterm elections serve as a mechanism of political accountability. Voters may respond to inflation, employment, public services, foreign policy, corruption allegations or other concerns.

Jon Ossoff’s reported victory in Georgia demonstrates the importance of competitive Senate elections. However, one state’s result should not automatically be interpreted as a complete reflection of national public opinion.

Election outcomes are shaped by local issues, candidate appeal, turnout, campaign finance and broader political developments.

7. US Presidential Elections vs Midterm Elections

Basis	Presidential election	Midterm election
Main purpose	Elect the President through the Electoral College process	Elect congressional representatives and other officials
Frequency	Every four years	Every four years, halfway between presidential elections

Basis	Presidential election	Midterm election
President on ballot	Yes	No
Congress affected	Congressional elections also occur	Congressional elections are central
Political significance	Determines executive leadership	Can strengthen or constrain the incumbent President

8. Conclusion

US midterm elections are central to representative democracy because they allow voters to influence the composition of the legislature without directly electing a President. Their results shape legislative priorities, executive accountability and the operation of checks and balances.

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