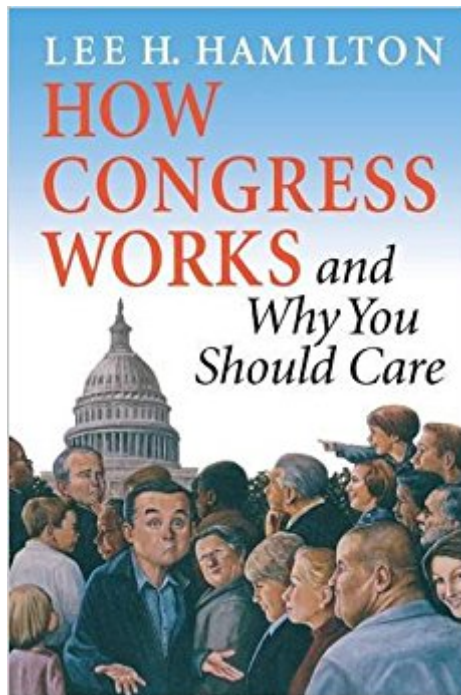




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# How Congress Works And Why You Should Care



## Synopsis

How Congress Works and Why You Should Care is a concise introduction to the functions and vital role of the U.S. Congress by eminent former Congressman Lee H. Hamilton. Drawing on 34 years as a U.S. Representative, Hamilton explains how Congress reflects the diversity of the American people, serves as a forum for finding consensus, and provides balance within the federal government. Addressing widespread public misperceptions, he outlines areas where Congress can work better and ways for citizens to become more engaged in public affairs through their representatives in Washington. How Congress Works and Why You Should Care is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the inner workings of Congress, and how all citizens can participate in its unique mission.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Remember that "how a bill becomes law" charts in your high school civics class? It doesn't begin to describe the "messy" process that really operates in Congress, according to Hamilton, a former congressman from Indiana who was respected on both sides of the aisle. He offers a strong defense of the institution he served from 1965 to 1999. This basic primer details the history of Congress, its importance and some of the critical actions it has taken—from the Tariff Act of 1790, which established duties on imported goods, to landmark laws of the 1960s, such as the Voting Rights Act and the bills that established Medicare and Medicaid. Hamilton also describes the "complicated and untidy" process by which Congress really works and why we "need more people who know how to practice the art of politics." Congress, he argues, acts "as the people's voice

against unchecked power[;] it is the guarantor of liberty." The author is not uncritical of Congress, offering several suggestions as to how that body could improve itself. But here and elsewhere in the book, his suggestions and arguments fail to scratch much below the surface. It's hard to disagree with the statements that congressional discourse should be more civil and that citizens should be more active in politics, but Hamilton fails to address the causes of these and other problems. Still, in a cynical age, and a time of increasing presidential authority, it's encouraging to see a true, reasonable believer call for recognizing Congress as a necessary pillar of American democracy. Parents should send this primer off with their kids to college. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"A passionate and eloquent defense of the essential role Congress plays in the American constitutional system and a reasoned call for citizens to engage more actively in their representative democracy. Like Hamilton himself, this volume is scrupulously honest, fair-minded, and accessible to a wide audience." •Thomas Mann, W. Averell Harriman Senior Fellow in American Governance, The Brookings Institution"Lee Hamilton's new book... should be required reading for any American contemplating writing a "Letter to the Editor" or calling into (or hosting) a radio talk show, or for that matter, stepping into a voting booth. It is an owner's manual for citizens interested in their Congress." •Charlie Cook, Editor and Publisher, The Cook Political Report"Lee Hamilton's book not only describes the Madisonian vision of what Congress is supposed to be and assesses how it measures up to that vision today, it also serves the same function of educating and edifying the American public that the Federalist papers did.... Every student of Congress, and every American, can benefit from this book." •Norman J. Ornstein, Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute"Americans cannot be faulted for having a deeply jaundiced view of their Congress, says Hamilton (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars); he ought to know, because he served as a Representative for Indiana from 1965 to 1999. But he argues that people can and should fix it rather than give up on it completely." •SciTech Book News, February 2010

This book is especially valuable because the author's insights on Congress come from his long legislative career. It is a substantive view of the legislative branch from the inside. Hamilton provides a good sense of the usually messy process involved in a bill becoming law, explaining how powerful members can often circumvent the normal process, and sometimes even avoid bringing a bill into committee. After reading this book, I came away with a better operational sense of politics---the

compromise, listening, and coalition building that are essential in our democracy. I also learned more about how power affects the system---in the House, for example, the party in the majority can set the rules for debate, and thus controls a lot of the legislative process. Power shifts as well---over the years, speakers have become less powerful, committee heads more so. Some members can command more national attention than others, which adds weight to whatever issue or initiative they are pushing. But more significant than the how is the why. Hamilton makes a great case for the average citizen getting civically involved, and he explains the positive impact government can have in our lives. He doesn't mince words in acknowledging government's faults. But he also explains that some common criticisms people have of government---that politicians compromise too much, and that the process is too slow---are actually misplaced because these types of things are part of the democratic process itself. Autocracies tend to work quickly. Democracies are more complicated, often more messy, but ultimately more representative.

I was expecting to learn the day in and day procedures of Congress. Instead, I only discovered a superficial view of how Congress works, incorporated with some small, but present, political ideology. Maybe my expectations were too high.

My son had to read this for summer homework for AP Lit.. He said he actually found the book to be very interesting and enjoyed reading it.

great way to learn about congress

This is a very good overview of how the legislative branch of the federal government works. After 34 years in the House of Representatives, the author is a certified expert on his subject and he treats it objectively in a nonpartisan manner. The book opens with a spirited and convincing defense of the institution, continues with a critical look at what improvements can be made, and concludes with an impassioned plea for increased civic participation. From the first page of the book, Hamilton tackles the public's "far less grand view of Congress" and the lack of trust they have in the institution. He systematically addresses each of the public's main concerns, and although it is a bit repetitive and his defense of certain topics (most specifically "pork" spending) is not convincing, he is overall successful in his arguments. Hamilton hammers home the importance of Congress's role in balancing the power of the three branches of the federal government and lists many of its major accomplishments (ie the federal highway system and civil rights legislation). A representative

democracy requires debate and compromise, which can appear to be slow and messy to an outsider, but is necessary to build consensus and ensure that no one branch of government becomes too powerful. The author does not blindly support institution of Congress and points out several key areas of reform. He calls upon members of Congress to be more civil (something that declined significantly during his tenure), more willing to tackle the tough issues, and have a more strategic, longer term mindset with an eye towards the impact on the greater public good. Hamilton acknowledges that money has too much influence on campaigning and further ethical reforms are still needed. It is also important to maintain "good process," ensuring that members don't bypass critical steps in the legislative process. A strengthened relationship with the White House would also allow the executive branch to consult with more subject matter experts and make better policy decisions. The final chapter outlines how the public can participate in governmental affairs and why it is important to do so. Hamilton calls upon us all to become more involved by becoming more educated on the process and issues (which will also make us less cynical), vote in all elections, contact and get to know their representatives (they listen to us more than we think), and become more active in community and interest groups. The book includes many examples of individuals who have made a significant difference to the country and will hopefully inspire other future successes as well.

Like another reviewer I came away with a far better understanding of what Congress does and why it can be so difficult. Hamilton doesn't pull any punches in addressing - and to a certain extent agreeing with - many of the standard criticisms but he highlights why it can be changed and how it needs to be changed. This is a very well written, balanced, view from trenches that left me feeling quite optimistic about an institution that, although far from perfect, is still within the grasp of the average person to change, or at least influence. It's light on technical detail (eg. passage of a bill) and partisan political viewpoints, fortunately, and is sprinkled with interesting anecdotes. The writing style is way more engaging than I would have expected about a book of this nature and it's slim enough that it gets to the point without unnecessary padding. Highly recommended.

Lee Hamilton is a good, clear writer who effectively leads the reader through a hit parade of American public complaints about congress, the source of the dissatisfaction.... and how this seems to always been the case (see Samuel Clemens' famous comment about congress as a permanent criminal class in American society). If you are considering purchasing book, just know it's very basic. It was published a while ago. Perhaps back when it came out, the ideas were fresh. Today, it seems

old hat. The issues are well known to most people. I was hoping for a lot more detail on how the behind the scene process of this branch works. But that's not the focus of the book. It much more big picture oriented. You will not learn any secrets or inside information from an insider who served in this body for many years. - A little simplistic.

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