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Legislative Lingo

The following terms will help you to understand and communicate about the legislative process

The Humane Society of the United States

Act: A bill once it has been signed into law (that is, passed by both the House and Senate and either signed by the president or passed over his veto).

Amendment: A change to a bill; it usually is debated and voted on.

Appropriation: Legislation approving the withdrawal of specified funds from the Treasury.

Authorization: Legislation defining or creating a program with defined funding levels.

Bill: A law proposed by a member of Congress. (House bills are designated "H.R."; Senate bills are designated "S.").

Budget: Congress's proposal for federal spending during a given fiscal year.

Committee: A division within the House or Senate, to which members of Congress are appointed, that has jurisdiction over a set area. Once a bill is introduced, it is assigned to the appropriate committee(s) for consideration. The committee(s) usually will refer the bill to a subcommittee.

Conference Committee: A group of members of the House and Senate charged with reconciling differences in a bill passed separately by both the House and the Senate.

Conference Report: The outline of changes to a bill that have been agreed upon by the conference committee. The report must be accepted by the House and the Senate for the bill to be approved.

Congressional Hearing: An official meeting of a committee or subcommittee held to obtain information on a bill or an issue.

Floor: The area where the business of the full Senate or House is conducted.

Leadership: The most powerful members of the majority and minority parties — elected by the other members of Congress. "The leadership" usually refers to the majority party leaders.

Majority Leader: A position, elected by the majority party membership in each chamber, that basically controls the schedules and workings of both chambers. In the Senate, the majority leader is first in command, although technically the vice president of the United States is the president of the Senate. In the House, the majority leader is second in command behind the Speaker of the House.

Mark-up: The consideration of a bill in subcommittee or committee during which the bill is actually written on to indicate revisions.

Motion to Recommit: A call to send a bill that is currently being considered on the floor back to the committee of jurisdiction for further consideration.

On the Floor: Under consideration by the full House or Senate.

Pending: Awaiting action.

President Pro Tempore: The temporary presiding officer of the Senate in the absence of the vice president of the United States.

Ranking Minority Member: The senior member of the minority party on any given subcommittee or committee.

Recess: The conclusion of a legislative day that is accompanied by a set time to reconvene.

Regulation: A rule or order issued by the executive branch of government that has the force of law and usually is authorized by a law.

Report: A document giving a committee's (or subcommittee's) opinion and actions on a bill, or the act of a committee (or subcommittee) concluding its consideration of a bill and referring the bill to the full Senate or House to be placed on the legislative calendar for consideration.

Rider: An amendment that has been attached to an unrelated bill so that the amendment will slide easily through passage. Riders are often attached to appropriations bills.

Rules: Regulations governing the conduct and processes of the Senate and the House. For instance, the Rules Committees in the Senate and the House are responsible for determining if a bill complies with the conditions for consideration and what amendments will be allowed to be offered.

Speaker of the House: The presiding officer in the House and first in command of the majority party — an elected position within the party membership. The Speaker is second in line (after the vice president) to succeed to the U.S. presidency.

Subcommittee: A division of a committee having a more specific area of jurisdiction.

Suspension of the Rules: A procedure in the House to allow an expedited consideration of a bill on the floor — debate is limited, no amendments may be offered, and the bill must receive a two-thirds majority to pass.

Table: To move to kill an amendment, bill, or motion immediately without a direct vote on its substance.

Veto: The act by which the president rejects a bill, returning it to Congress along with a message stating his/her objections. Congress can override a veto with a two-thirds majority in both the House and the Senate.

Whip: The assistant to the party leader in the House or Senate — responsible for rounding up votes on bills.