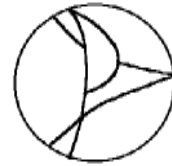


The 111th Congress Is Open for Business

By: Patricia A. O'Malley, originally published in the *51 Corridor Community Newspaper*, January 8, 2009



You can almost see the anticipation in the air. All Americans, regardless of politics, intensely await the new era.

On Tuesday, Congress returned to Washington after the holiday break. The Constitution requires that a new "Congress" convene every two years. Members are elected in November of even-numbered years and the new Congress opens in the following January. There are two sessions of each Congress; each lasts one year. The first Congress assembled in 1789 and 1790. The second session of the 110th Congress ended last month. The first session of the 111th Congress began at noon on January 6.

All of the bills that were pending before Congress, but not passed, at the end of 2008 have expired. Congress will consider only new legislation from this point forward. Anything that didn't pass will have to be re-introduced. Bills are numbered in the order in which they are introduced – HR 1, S1, and so on. Laws adopted by Congress are called "Public Laws" and are numbered consecutively. The first law passed by the 111th Congress will be P.L. 111-1.

Since the election, new members have attended various orientation sessions in Washington to acquaint them with the buildings, their offices, and the routine procedures. There will be 58 new members of the House of Representatives and 12 new senators. The party caucuses met during November and December and voted to retain most of their leadership and committee chairs. So Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-WA) is still the Speaker of the House, Sen. Robert Byrd (D-WV) is still the president pro tempore and Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) is still the Senate Majority Leader. You can find the other Congressional leaders on the Web sites listed below.

As of December 10, there will be 257 Democrats and 178 Republicans in the House of Representatives, and 57 Democrats, 41 Republicans, and 2 Independents in the Senate. The Independents have said that they will caucus with the Democrats. Minnesota state officials certified Democrat Al Franken as the victor in the strongly contested race. Republican incumbent, Norm Coleman, may still challenge the election results in court.

The first day was, by tradition, a family day. Members' families visit their offices, and the House and Senate Chambers, and attend the swearing-in. Contrary to common belief, the swearing-in takes place in a group, not individually. Members may hold bibles or other documents if they wish, but are not required to do so.

The Constitution requires that members take an oath before starting their terms, but does not specify what the oath should be. The oath has evolved over the years, and is the same for House and Senate:

"I, (name of Member), do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign or domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God."

Since this is a new administration, Congress has a lot of work to do. One of the first tasks is a joint session of Congress to count the Electoral College ballots. Vice President Dick Cheney will preside over the event on January 8. At that point, Barack Obama will officially be the president-elect of the United States. He will be inaugurated on January 20, at noon.

There will also be a joint session to hear the new president's State of the Union address. The constitution requires that the president report to Congress "from time to time". It does not require an annual address, but that is the tradition. There is no required date for the address, but it will probably be in late January or early February.

Congress will address the president's budget, economic stimulus proposals, and other items that Obama will introduce from his legislative agenda. The Senate will hold confirmation hearings on presidential appointments.

I'll be writing more about the inauguration, confirmation hearings, the budget process, and other issues in later columns.

For more information, go to: www.house.gov, www.senate.gov, www.change.gov

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