



# Harvard Model Congress

## Europe 2024

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# Introduction to American Government

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While it is important to know the basics of American government for committees based on United States governmental bodies, it is not necessary to know every detail. Below is a guide to the must-knows, which should be sufficient for your work during the conference

### *The Legislative Branch*

The American Congress is made up of two chambers: The Senate and the House of Representatives. The Senate is smaller with two representatives, called Senators, from each state for a total of 100. The House is larger, with 435 voting Representatives. Each of the 435 members of the House represents and is elected by the people in a district, which is a geographic area within a state. Districts in the House are distributed to the 50 states by population. The largest US state by population, California, has 52 districts (so, it has 52 Representatives). The entire state of Wyoming, meanwhile, is a single House district because its population is so small!

### *Checks and Balances*

The Legislative Branch (the House and the Senate) is one of 3 branches of the US federal government, along with The Executive Branch and The Judicial Branch. Each branch serves a specific function, and with their unique powers “check” and “balance” the other branches. The Executive Branch (this is the President of the United States!) can “check” the Legislative Branch by vetoing legislation. A veto gives the President the right to not sign any bill into law, in which case the bill returns to the legislature, where it must receive 2/3 of House and Senate votes in order to overturn the veto. The Judicial Branch (these are the courts, including the US Supreme Court!) checks the Legislative Branch by making sure the laws it passes do not violate the US Constitution. All passed legislation is subject to review by the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court can rule that laws are “unconstitutional,” meaning something about the law does not follow the rules laid out in the US Constitution.

## Conservatism and Liberalism

Conservatives are associated with the Republican Party. They make up the American political “right.” Liberals, on the other hand, are associated with the Democratic Party. They make up the American political “left.” The below table is a good start on distinguishing conservative and liberal views; however, one key tenant will help you make more informed decisions as to how your congressman may vote on an unfamiliar issue: Conservatives believe that a small federal government is best, whereas Liberals support putting in place programs at the federal level, increasing the size of the federal government.

Conservatives believe the government should interfere less in the lives/activities of the average citizen/business and allow citizens/businesses greater freedom and control. Because the US has both federal government (the national government) and state governments (Massachusetts, home to Harvard, is a state, and it has its own government!), power is distributed between the two (this system is known as federalism). The states’ rights idea is based on two tenants: that state governments may be better at solving issues because each state is unique and that the US Constitution intentionally limited the power of the federal government. Conservatives want small federal government and want to expand states’ autonomy over their budget and laws.

Liberals, on the other hand, are likely to believe that many issues (social, economic, environmental or other) should be solved with federal government intervention. Liberals in the United States are most similar to centrist politicians in Europe, although on some issues would more closely resemble politicians that are slightly right of center.

### Conservatism and Liberalism Table

ISSUE	LIBERAL STANCE	CONSERVATIVE STANCE
<b>GUN CONTROL</b>	More Regulation	Less Regulation
<b>ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION</b>	More Regulation	Less Regulation
<b>ECONOMIC REGULATION</b>	More Regulation	Less Regulation
<b>STATES’ RIGHTS</b>	The Federal Government should retain most powers	Individual states should have more autonomy
<b>ABORTION</b>	Pro-choice	Pro-life
<b>IMMIGRATION</b>	Easier path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants	Tighter immigration controls
<b>FOREIGN POLICY</b>	Diplomacy first	Military power plays a larger role
<b>MILITARY</b>	Maintain/Decrease spending	Increase spending

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## *The Ideologies as a Spectrum*

It is important to not only think of your Member of Congress (another term for Representative) as either a Republican or a Democrat, but rather as being on a spectrum. Not all conservatives agree with the Republican party on all elements of their platform, and the same goes for liberals. Some individuals are very moderate and hold many views inconsistent with the party with which they identify. When researching your Member of Congress, ensure you understand their views on a broad number of issues. One may be pro-choice and anti-gun control, for example, which, if you note in the chart above, are contradictory stances. Your Member of Congress's views may not fit neatly along party lines.

## *Bipartisanship and Agreement*

While American democracy seeks to have high levels of respect and cooperation, bipartisanship is not the opposite of disagreement. In many instances, bipartisan bills are not necessarily the most effective solution. Bipartisanship, at its foundation, necessitates compromise, and on some issues, the parties are unwilling to compromise, and that's okay. America is built on the mutual tolerance of our political opponents. In session, make sure not to compromise your Member of Congress's central views just for the sake of compromising. Instead, ask yourself if this is really a bill that will help your constituents and if it is, join; if it is not, do not join. Often, when delegates work too hard to compromise, the bill fails to be effective in solving the issue. It is okay to disagree as long as you are polite about it!