

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Date of Elections: 4 November 1986

Purpose of Elections

Elections were held for all the seats of the House of Representatives and one-third (34) of those of the Senate on the normal expiry of the members' term of office.

Characteristics of Parliament

The bicameral Parliament of the United States of America, the Congress, consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The Senate is composed of 100 members elected for 6 years on the basis of two for each of the country's 50 States, a third of whom are chosen every two years in such manner that, in each State, both Senators are not normally standing for election at the same time.

The House of Representatives is composed of members elected for 2 years in the 50 States in such manner that each Representative represents roughly the same number of citizens, provided that each State has at least one Representative. Within the constitutional limitation that "the number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty thousand" inhabitants, the Congress itself has the power to determine the size of the House of Representatives. Under the law currently in force, the membership from the 50 States is fixed at 435. In addition to these Representatives, there are Delegates from the District of Columbia, Guam, the Virgin Islands and American Samoa, who are elected for 2 years, and a Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico, elected for 4 years; these five officers may take part in the debate of the House, but have no right to vote except in committees.

Electoral System

The Constitution of the United States lays down that all citizens who, "in each State, shall have the qualifications requisite for electors of the most numerous branch of the State legislature", are entitled to vote in elections for Congress; it prescribes, furthermore, that the right of citizens to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of race, colour or sex, or by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.

Within these limitations, the determination of who may vote falls under the jurisdiction of each State, with the proviso that no violation be made of the factors of discrimination proscribed by the Constitution. In all States, electors are required to be United States citizens and not less than 18 years of age. In elections other than presidential, the United States Supreme Court has held that a maximum period of 30 days' residence in a State is what will be constitutionally permissible. Most States have conformed their durational residence requirements to meet this Supreme Court standard.

With the passage of the Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1970, the States ceased to have the right to impose literacy tests or similar devices as a condition for voting; the 1975 Amendments to the Voting Rights Act made permanent the ban on such tests or devices.

The insane and persons convicted of a crime which carries the penalty of disfranchisement are disqualified from voting in many States. Other grounds for disqualification found in some States include conviction for an electoral offence, duelling, and imprisonment.

Electors must have their names appear on the registers as eligible voters in virtually all the States. In these cases, persons must take the initiative in order to become registered to vote. Once on the register, voters generally need take no initiative other than to continue to vote regularly, provided that they do not change their names or addresses. The registers - which are mostly drawn up at the county level - are revised almost continuously, and particularly before State-wide elections. The Overseas Voting Rights Act of 1975 requires States to adopt uniform absentee registration and voting procedures covering overseas citizens in federal elections.

Although voting is not compulsory, employers in many States are required to allow their employees to take time off to vote without loss of pay. Most States permit absentee voting, especially for members of the armed forces and their dependents and government employees.

No person may be a Representative who has not attained the age of 25 years and been for seven years a citizen of the United States and an inhabitant of his State; for the Senate, the requirement is 30 years of age and nine years' citizenship and an inhabitant of his State. No Senator or Representative may hold any civil office under the authority of the United States during his term in Congress.

A person may run for Congress either as an independent or as a member of a political party; most candidates are, in practice, presented on the ballot paper under a party designation. Voters may "write in" the name of a candidate who does not appear on the printed ballot.

Nomination as a result of "nominating", or primary, elections of parties is the practice in most States. It is regulated by State law. Usually, a person may become a candidate in the primary election by obtaining a petition subscribed by a designated number of voters of his political party. Voters then choose their party's candidate at the primary election. The number of voters whose support is necessary to qualify as a candidate in either a party's primary or in a general election, and the necessity or amount of an accompanying filing fee, vary according to State law.

The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended in 1974, 1976 and 1980, provides for the civil enforcement of the federal campaign financing laws; these laws provide for various overall contribution limitations for individuals and political committees. The United States Supreme Court has held expenditure limitations to be unconstitutional since they place substantial direct restrictions on political expression that are prohibited by the First Amendment; expenditure limitations, however, are valid in situations where candidates agree to adhere to them in order to receive public financing.

Each State is entitled to at least one Representative and all beyond this minimum number are apportioned among the States according to population, so that no congressional district is exactly the same geographical size. Districts must, however, be substantially the same size in terms of population. All Representatives come from single-member districts.

Each of the 50 States is entitled to two Senators, both of whom represent the State as a whole regardless of its population. Each elector therefore votes for two senatorial candidates, but not normally in the same election since their terms are staggered.

Members of Congress are all directly elected, generally on the basis of simple plurality of vote. The two exceptions are the State of Georgia and the District of Columbia, both of which provide for a run-off election in the event that no candidate obtains an absolute majority of the votes cast in the general election.

If a seat in the House of Representatives becomes vacant between general elections, a special election is held as soon as practicable. If a seat becomes vacant in the Senate, the Governor of the State concerned may, through a temporary appointment, fill it until a special election or the next general election is held in conformity with the laws of that State.

General Considerations and Conduct of the Elections

The two-month election campaign was devoid of one central national theme. It rather focused on regional and local issues and personalities (including considerable "negative advertising"), leading to widespread ticket-splitting. Farm problems, the local impact of foreign trade, the slump in the energy industry, nuclear waste and drugs were among the more debated questions.

As is traditional in "midterm" elections, voter turnout on polling day was low. Final results gave the Democratic Party control of the Senate as it made a net gain of eight seats for a 55-45 majority. Coupled with a slight increase of five House seats, the Democrats thus became dominant in Congress for the first time since the election of Republican President Ronald Reagan in 1980. Significant Democrat Senate victories occurred in the South and, nationwide, the six closest races all went against the Republican Party. Altogether 50 House and 13 Senate freshmen were elected.

Statistics

1. Results of the Elections

Number of registered electors.	178,000,000	(approx.)
Voters.	37.3%	(approx.)
Valid votes.	48,261,575	(Senate)
	59,491,001	(House of Representatives)

2. Distribution of Seats in the Senate

Political Group	Votes obtained		Number of Seats won at 1986 Elections	Total Number of Seats
Democratic Party.	24,289,869	50.3	20	55 (+ 8)
Republican Party.	23,487,494	48.7	14	45 (- 8)
Others.	484,212	1.0		
			34	100

3. Distribution of Seats in the House of Representatives

Political Group	Votes obtained		Number of Seats	Number of Seats held prior to Elections
Democratic Party.	32,438,594	54.5	258	253
Republican Party.	26,512,967	44.6	177	180
Others.	539,440	0.9		
			435	433*

* Plus 2 vacancies.

4. *Distribution of Members of Congress according to Professional Category*

	Senate	House of Representatives
Law.	12	184
Business or banking.	28	142
Public service/Politics.	20	94
Education	12	38
Agriculture.	5	20
Journalism.	8	20
Law enforcement.	—	7
Engineering . . . . .	.1	4
Aeronautics. . . . .	.2	3
Medicine. . . . .	.1	3
Professional sports. . . . .	.1	5
Clergy. . . . .	.1	2
Military.	—	1
Labour officials.	—	2
Actor/Entertainer.		J
	141*	526*

* Because some members have more than one occupation, totals are higher than total membership.

5. *Distribution of Members of Congress according to Sex*

	Senate	House of Representatives
Men	98	412
Women	2	23
	100	435

6. *Average Age of Members of Congress*

Senate.	54.4 years
House of Representatives.	50.7 years