

## Using NewsHour Extra Feature Stories

### STORY

#### **New Congress Convenes Amid Questions Over Senate Seats, 01/06/09**

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/us/jan-june09/congress\\_01-06.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/us/jan-june09/congress_01-06.html)

Estimated Time: One 45-minute class period with possible extension

[Student Worksheet](#) (reading comprehension and discussion questions without answers)

### PROCEDURE

#### **1. WARM UP**

Use initiating questions to introduce the topic and find out how much your students know.

#### **2. MAIN ACTIVITY**

Have students read NewsHour Extra's feature story and answer the reading comprehension and discussion questions on the student handout.

#### **3. DISCUSSION**

Use discussion questions to encourage students to think about how the issues outlined in the story affect their lives and express and debate different opinions.

### INITIATING QUESTIONS

**1. Name the two bodies of Congress.**

**2. What is the difference between the two?**

**3. What does Congress do?**

### READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS – [Student Worksheet](#)

**1. When did the new Congress open?**

#### ANSWER

The 111<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress opened Tuesday, January 6, 2009.

**2. Which party is in the majority in Congress?**

#### ANSWER

The Democratic Party is the majority party in this Congress.

**3. Which Senate seats are currently being disputed? Why?**

#### ANSWER

Two different seats are being questioned. President-elect Obama's former Senate seat in Illinois, which he gave up to become president, is at the center of a political scandal because Illinois' Democratic Governor Rod Blagojevich was arrested in December on charges he was attempting to sell Obama's vacated seat .

In Minnesota, Democrat Al Franken, a comedian and former member of Saturday Night Live, appears to have beaten Republican incumbent Senator Norm Coleman but only by 225 votes out of 2.9 million ballots cast. Coleman has promised to file a lawsuit that could keep the race outcome up in the air for weeks.

**4. What other Senate seats are predicted to be influx? Why?**

**ANSWER**

New York, Delaware and Colorado are expected to be vacated because Senator Hillary Clinton of New York is expected to be Obama's Secretary of State, Delaware Senator Joe Biden's seat will open when he is sworn in as vice president on Jan. 20, and Colorado Senator Ken Salazar is expected to be Obama's Secretary of the Interior.

**5. How many members make up the U.S. Congress?**

**ANSWER**

The U.S. Congress is a bicameral legislature with 535 members -- 100 in the Senate and 435 in the House.

**6. How many representatives does each state have?**

**ANSWER**

In the House of Representatives, each state has a different numbers of representatives based on how many people live there. For example, California has 55 representatives, while North Dakota has three.

**7. How long is the term of a senator?**

**ANSWER**

Senators serve six-year terms, which are staggered. One-third of the Senate is re-elected every two years.

**8. Name at least three important issues expected to be taken up by the new Congress.**

The top issue for the new Congress is the economic crisis. Other areas Congress could tackle include the health care system, the development and use of renewable energy and changes to U.S. military policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

**1. What do you think of the scandal around the Illinois Senate seat? Do you think there is a better way of filling vacant Senate seats?**

**2. The Minnesota Senate race is incredibly close. Why do you think Senator Norm Coleman is asking the state Supreme Court to look at more of the challenged ballots? Can you think of better ways for us to vote so that no ballots get thrown out?**

**3. Do you think that the two houses of Congress are a good idea? Does this system seem fair? If not who benefits?**

**4. Name your senators and representatives.**

**Extension Activity**

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.