

What is a Congressional Caucus?

Caucuses come in every shape, size, and subject matter, but they all seek to influence the policy process. Officially known as **Congressional Member Organizations (CMOs)**, congressional caucuses are voluntary associations consisting of Representatives and Senators who share specific policy goals or interests. Importantly, these CMOs are not to be confused with party caucuses and conferences, which are the House Democratic Caucus, House Republican Conference, Senate Democratic Caucus and Senate Republican Conference.

Congressional caucuses date back to the early 1800s and have grown in recent years. There are approximately 807 caucuses in the 118th Congress, compared to only 100 member organizations in 1993. Of those 807, only 376 have filed the necessary paperwork with the [House Administration Committee](#) so far this year to be listed formally as a CMO.

To register, a letter, on official letterhead, is sent via email to the House Administration Committee including the name of the CMO, a statement of purpose, officers of the CMO, and the name, phone number and email address of staff designated to work on issues related to the CMO. The approval is granted by the House Administration Committee. The CMO leadership circulates “Dear Colleague” letters to urge their colleagues to join the CMO and support their efforts. Any caucus that includes House members must follow certain rules, which include the following:

- Caucuses cannot use franking privileges (free mail privileges), although individual members may use official resources for communications related to a caucus. Any such communication must comply with the Franking Regulations.
- Members of both the House and Senate may participate in a CMO, but at least one officer or chair of a CMO must be a House member. The participation of Senators in a CMO does not impact the scope of authorized CMO activities.
- Members can use personal funds to support a caucus but are not allowed to accept goods or services from private organizations or individuals to support a caucus.

The Senate does not have any separate guidelines or regulations for Senators who participate in caucuses, but they are subject to follow the Rules of the Senate and the Senate Code of Official Conduct. In the Senate there is only one officially recognized caucus, the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control established by law in 1985.

Types of Caucuses

Congressional caucuses can fall into one of three categories depending on their constituency and interests.

- **Ideological Caucuses.** Caucuses based around an ideology can represent certain ideological views within a particular party. In America's two-party system, each party tends to have a wide ideological spectrum, and there is room within a party for members with more specific ideologies to gather. All ideological caucuses are in the House, and current examples on the Democratic side include the Blue Dog Coalition, the New Democrat Coalition, and the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Republican examples of ideological caucuses include the Tuesday Group, the Republican Study Committee, and the Freedom Caucus. One group, the Problem Solvers Caucus, contains House members of both parties that seek bipartisan collaboration on key issues.
- **National Constituency Caucuses.** Some caucuses advocate the interests of specific groups of constituents, such as women, racial or ethnic groups, and veterans. Examples include the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Conference, the Congressional Veterans Caucus, and the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues.
- **Interest Group Caucuses.** The most common caucuses consist of members with a shared policy or interest. Examples of these generally bipartisan caucuses include the Congressional Climate Solutions Caucus, the Congressional Postal Preservation Caucus, the **Congressional Printing Caucus**, and the Congressional Supply Chain Caucus.

Do Caucuses Matter?

On paper, caucuses have no real authority. Unlike committees, caucuses lack the ability to markup bills or hire their own staff, for instance. However, they do serve a function by providing a way for like-minded Representatives and Senators with mutual interests and goals to get to know one another. Through these relationships and associations, caucus members often work together to develop specific ideas that could become legislation.

Caucus membership allows members to show that they care about the issues that matter most to their constituents — especially when, as is so often the case in the House, a member cannot get on a committee with jurisdiction over those topics. The 100-member Senate does not have the same collective action problems facing the House.

Many CMOs hold regular meetings, either weekly, monthly, or quarterly depending on the legislative calendar, to exchange information and develop legislative strategy. Many also invite outside speakers and groups to make presentations to the CMO's Members.

The Takeaway

Members of Congress may form a CMO to pursue common legislative objectives. CMOs exist to affect public policy, either directly through policy advocacy for an issue, or indirectly by attracting media attention, or through the socialization and orientation of its Members. All CMOs serve as a forum for the exchange of information.