The Center on Congress
at Indiana University

To help Americans better understand Congress
When I left public office in 1999, I joined with Indiana University to establish the Center on Congress, a nonpartisan educational institution whose mission is twofold: helping Americans better understand Congress and its role in sustaining the health of our democracy; and teaching young people and adults how to communicate their concerns to Congress, so it may truly be the responsive “people’s branch” that the framers intended.

As we mark the Center’s first decade of work, I am pleased to report that we have developed an extensive array of resources and programs that reach out to a wide variety of Americans — students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels; teachers in the social studies; college and university scholars of Congress and American politics; journalists; people seeking to become U.S. citizens; and concerned citizens everywhere who want to make their voices heard in the halls of government.

The following pages provide a brief overview of what the Center does to improve the public’s understanding of Congress, strengthen civic engagement, and teach the skills that are essential to the continued success of our great experiment in representative government: learning, listening, reasoning together, and finding consensus.

The future of our nation depends on Americans understanding our political heritage and being equipped to think critically and participate constructively in local, state, and federal affairs. The freedoms we enjoy carry with them certain obligations — to be informed about issues, to listen to opposing views, and to work in a civil manner to resolve the conflicts that inevitably arise in a nation of more than 300 million people.

In local forums and in the chambers of Congress, it is your voice that matters. By making yourself heard, you make our democracy work. I encourage you to use the Center’s resources, and to participate in your nation’s government.

Lee H. Hamilton
Director, Center on Congress
Representative, United States Congress, 1965-99
Web products

Online at the Center’s Web site are eight interactive learning modules that make learning about Congress and civics an intellectual adventure. Subjects include “How a Member Decides to Vote,” “The Impact of Congress,” “The Dynamic Legislative Process,” and “The Many Roles of a Member of Congress.”

The Center partners with the Library of Congress to offer the Teaching with Primary Sources Web site (www.tpscongress.org), which blends information on how Congress works with digital source materials of the Library in a visually engaging, highly interactive format. Topics include public criticisms of Congress, analyzing congressional arguments, and consensus building.

At www démocr acykids. org, elementary school students have fun learning about Congress, state legislatures, and other democratic institutions through a variety of interactive games and other features. The site is a joint venture of the Center on Congress, the Center for Civic Education, and the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The Center’s new online Virtual Congress replicates the way Congress works, with high school student-legislators introducing bills and working online with others around the country to move their proposals through the legislative process.

In development is Oceana: A Virtual Democracy, a multiplayer online role-play game that will help middle-school students learn the skills they need to participate in representative democracy.

The Center has a Spanish-language Web site, www.centeroncongress.org/spanish/, offering an array of resources about the operations and significance of Congress, with interactive learning modules, videos, commentaries, and news of the Center’s programs and projects.
Representative democracy does not perpetuate itself. Each new generation of citizens must be taught to sustain it. At the Center on Congress, we believe that learning about Congress is central to learning about responsible citizenship. We work with teachers and education professionals to determine the best ways to make civics instruction effective, interesting, and relevant. We are continually enhancing our portfolio of educational products, helping students become capable and confident participants in the democratic process.
**Print Products**

*Understanding Congress: A Citizen's Guide* is a concise introduction to Congress that explains the concept of representative democracy, how Congress functions, its impact on people's lives, and the importance of citizen participation.

*Making Your Voice Heard: How To Work With Congress* gives practical advice to help citizens get off the sidelines and constructively express opinions to their elected representatives.

*Your Ideas Count: Representative Democracy and You* emphasizes that disagreement, debate, and compromise are a natural part of representative democracy.

The Center partners with TIME magazine to produce *TIME for Kids*, a series of mini-magazines — for 2nd and 3rd graders up to high schoolers — that explain how government works and why citizen input is important. They are sent free of charge to civics teachers nationwide for distribution in classrooms and discussion at home.

Lee Hamilton's book *How Congress Works and Why You Should Care* explains in nontechnical terms how Congress operates, how it affects people’s lives, and why citizen engagement is important.

In *Strengthening Congress*, Lee Hamilton's second book on the institution, he details how Congress can work more effectively with the executive branch for the betterment of the nation, and he calls on Americans to take more seriously their obligations as citizens.

Lee Hamilton writes twice-monthly commentaries about Congress and what individuals can do to make representative democracy work better.
VIDEO/AUDIO PRODUCTS

A series of 30 Close Up on Congress videos take you to Capitol Hill for an insider's view of how Congress works, as members of Congress and key congressional staffers field questions from students visiting Washington as part of the Close Up Foundation program.

Thirty fast-paced, one-minute Facts of Congress video segments cover the basic concepts and terms of representative government, such as “Representation,” “Compromise,” and “Checks and Balances.”

Citizen Brain: Feeding on American Democracy is a 15-minute video that takes a humorous tack to educate young people about the fundamental tenets of representative democracy.

A series of two-minute Congressional Moments radio programs each explain a way that the work of Congress has made a difference in people’s lives.

The Center has produced a series of Public Service Announcements for television and radio that deliver the message, “It’s your government — get involved.” They are distributed in cooperation with the National Association of Broadcasters.

The Center contributes material to American Democracy Television, which provides video programs to more than 300 public access stations in 50 states, helping people learn about representative government and engage with their public officials.
To the average citizen, what goes on in Washington can seem distant and puzzling. It is difficult to follow debates in Congress on complex policy issues. But America’s Founders intended for Congress and the people to be in close touch, so that actions taken by the federal government would truly reflect the “consent of the governed.” The Center on Congress works to help citizens understand how they can be effective in bringing their concerns and requests to their elected officials.
PRODUCTS TO PROMOTE AND ENHANCE THE CIVICS-TEACHING PROFESSION

Each year the Center gives the American Civic Education Teacher Awards, recognizing three elementary and secondary teachers who show exceptional expertise and creativity in motivating students to learn about Congress, the Constitution, and public policy. The ACETA program is co-sponsored by the Center for Civic Education and the National Education Association.

At an annual professional development seminar, top civics teachers from across the nation come to Washington, D.C., for intensive training in using the curricular materials produced by the Alliance for Representative Democracy, an educational initiative of the Center on Congress, the Center for Civic Education, and the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The Center offers a wealth of resources to help teachers replicate exemplary civics teaching practices, including video clips of classroom activities, a comprehensive teacher’s guide, and extensive lesson plans aligned with state standards for social studies learning.

Lee Hamilton’s leadership has put the Center on Congress in the forefront of the growing national movement to expand and improve civic education. He is co-chair of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and is much in demand as a speaker about Congress and representative democracy.
PRODUCTS FOR SPECIAL AUDIENCES

The Center’s **Distinguished Speaker Series** brings to the Indiana University campus in Bloomington prominent public figures to foster dialogue among students and community members about current issues and Congress.

The Center and the National Press Foundation co-host **media seminars** to give reporters guidance on producing stories to help citizens see the impact of Congress’s decisions.

The Center conducts annual **national surveys** examining how people learn about and interact with Congress, how they rate its job performance, and how they regard their responsibilities as citizens. Another research resource are **congressional papers** from Lee Hamilton’s 34 years in the House of Representatives, archived at IU’s Lilly Library in Bloomington.

The Center’s **Understanding Congress** and **Making Your Voice Heard** booklets are included in the **Civics and Citizenship Toolkit**, which the federal government offers to people who are studying to become naturalized U.S. citizens. Also, those two booklets are available at Congress’s new **Capitol Visitor Center** in Washington.
Almost every day we are reminded how difficult it is building consensus to solve problems in our large and diverse country. It is important that Americans understand the vital role that Congress plays in sorting through our many differences on policy. The framers of the Constitution envisioned Congress as the place where the great variety of voices and opinions in America would get full airing as new laws are considered. When Congress is functioning as it should, it is a contentious place, where competing proposals are energetically debated.

— Lee Hamilton
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Lee Hamilton and Mark Cowan
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I never forget that I live in a house owned by all the American people, and that I have been given their trust.
Contact Us

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