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**Civics 101**

**Episode 28: CONGRESSIONAL CAUCUSES**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:19] Hi there. I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101. The podcast refresher course on some basics that you may have forgotten or slept through in school. As always we invite you to submit your questions about how our democracy works through our listener line e-mail Twitter and our website which is how we got today's question.

[00:00:36] Hi my name is Elise and I am from Anchorage Alaska. This is David from Georgetown Texas. This is Tracy from Hanover Pennsylvania. My name is and I'm calling from Pensacola Florida. I was hoping you could help me understand what congressional caucuses are considering the current health care legislation. Are caucuses really that powerful? How are they formed? Why did they form? And can they really make that much different. Thank you so much. Keep up the excellent work, bye.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:09] Our guide for today's lesson is Colleen Shogun. She's deputy director of outreach at the Library of Congress. So Colleen ready to go?

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:01:17] Absolutely.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:18] What is a congressional caucus?

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:01:21] A congressional caucus is a formal organization in Congress. Neither the House or Senate that brings together members of Congress who share a common interest.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:34] Now you say formal what's the difference between a congressional committee and a caucus.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:01:40] The committee system is actually the vehicle in which legislation is produced in the House or the Senate. The committee system is where there's formal hearings that take place. There's the consideration, like I said, of legislation and legislation makes its way through the process of being considered in either house of Congress. Congressional caucuses don't have that type of formal authority within the House or the Senate. There more of a place in which members can come together to discuss a particular issue or common interest.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:16] What is that process. I mean it sounds a little bit like a club.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:02:20] It is. It is it's like a Congressional Club although like I said it's a it's a formal club in that you're registering with the Committee on House Administration which is the committee in the house that manages the day to day operations. There are a whole range of interests so there's a congressional caucus on bicycles for example there's a congressional caucus on candy which I thought was kind of interesting. There's very serious things such as human trafficking. There's one on bourbon. There's one on baseball.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:02:56] So they range the entire gamut of interests that might really be relevant to members personally or they might be relevant to the constituents that members are representing. If you would like to start a congressional caucus and you're a member of Congress you would simply write a letter to the Committee on House Administration explaining who the leader or leaders of the caucus will be what the purpose of the caucus is what the title of the caucus is and who the congressional staff point of contact is for the caucus.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:30] All right. So I am a member of Congress and I join a caucus so what happens next? I mean am I expected to do anything. Do they hold any formal meetings or power.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:03:42] There's a lot of caucuses in both the House and the Senate. They have various occasions on which to meet, some caucuses meet very regularly some would meet every week. Other caucuses would meet perhaps on a monthly basis others maybe three or four times a year and some caucuses probably meet very rarely. So there's the whole range. And if you're a member that is joining a caucus it's really up to you how involved you might want to be. You might want to go to all of the meetings or functions that are organized by the caucus or you might want to go to just select meetings or caucuses.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:20] You mention there there are many. How many.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:04:22] There's over 300 registered caucuses or congressional member organizations in the House of Representatives.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:29] Are they connected to legislative work in any real way.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:04:33] Not formally. There's no role for caucuses in the legislative process per se. So a lot of bills make their way through Congress without ever having been touched necessarily by a congressional caucus. But they can have a role in fact it's more likely there's been some research done on the role of congressional caucuses and what was found was that if congressional caucuses do become involved in the legislative process they're usually involved very early on in the process. So when members or staff are just starting to figure out that they want to perhaps write a bill or if they want to write an amendment about a particular topic or subject it might be the case that if they're a member of a caucus that's the first place that they start in which they can discuss you know informally in a way about what they might want to write. But as the bill moves through the formal legislative process the caucus becomes less involved.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:31] Or in the case of the replacement for the Affordable Care Act proposed by the Republicans more recently the Freedom Caucus was said to have shot that down. Is there any real legislative authority for a caucus?

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:05:46] No there's no legislative authority for a caucus. In the case of the House Freedom Caucus that's a group of House Republicans of like minded members coming together and having a discussion really about a bill a particular bill and then deciding collectively about what their particular stance or opinion of that bill is. But that would be no different than a group of members meeting you know at one of our Capitol Hill bars that are you know close to the House of Representatives and sitting down and having a drink and deciding that they do or don't want to support a particular bill.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:26] But there's something about caucus there's something about binding together people in this group, informal though it may be, that can actually exert real power. Correct?

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:06:36] Absolutely. That would be the case for any group of members or senators by the way. I think a few years ago we were talking about this in the context of judicial nominations with the Gang of Six in the Senate. So any grouping of members that gets together and decides to want to like I said advocate or oppose a particular piece of legislation if the margins in either house in the House of Representatives or the Senate are close enough then any group of members that bands together whether they're of one party or a bipartisan can certainly have an effect.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:10] Do caucuses generally form by party or around bipartisan causes?

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:07:15] They are generally not formed around party in fact out of the 300 caucuses that are registered with the Committee on House Administration. In last Congress I checked and only eight of them were organized by party.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:29] Although there are some from what I understand the Congressional Hispanic Caucus which is run by a Democrat and the Congressional Hispanic Conference run by Republicans if I've got that right.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:07:42] I think that's right. That's that's correct.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:44] So they can be bipartisan.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:07:47] Yes. They can be. And the vast majority of them that are organized around an issue area like we were talking about before whether it's something that they're advocating for like the steel makers caucus a particular region of the country or a particular interest in diplomacy such as the Congressional UK caucus. Those are all going to be bipartisan organizations usually with Republican cochair and a Democratic cochair.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:16] So you mentioned rules about governing caucuses and their formation. What are some of the others what can can and cannot they do?

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:08:25] Well if you're if you're registered as a congressional member organization, that's the actual formal title for a Caucus Congressional member organization or a CMO. If you're registered as a CMO and the house then you can do certain things you can for example list your affiliation with the caucus on your official stationery. You can mention your caucus affiliation on your official member Web site. What you can't do is spend any of your official representational money, your members represent representational allowance which are given to spend for the operations of your office you're not allowed to spend any of that money to run the caucus.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:09] So stationery. That's that's the perk?

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:09:13] That's, you can also send out letter or you can send out letters within the house they're called Dear Colleague letters and they advertise meetings they advertise amendments they advertise pieces of legislation. If you're of a official congressional member organization you can make use of the Dear Colleague system which is quite powerful because that's the way to reach all four hundred thirty five members of Congress, 441 if you count the delegates. All in one swoop just by pressing a button and just by sending the letters so that's pretty powerful.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:49] So why Colleen join a caucus. What is the real benefit for a member of Congress.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:09:53] I think there's...And by the way members join a fair number of caucuses. So there's a reason why they're doing it and they're spending their time to do it. There's two parts to a member of Congress's job. One is to represent his or her constituents and the other is to hopefully produce good public policy for the United States. And I think caucuses help members do both. Sometimes members join caucuses. I'll go back to you know an industry caucus of some sort like auto automobile makers caucus. They join that caucus because they're representing constituents who work in that particular industry. So by joining a caucus they feel as though they're going to get better information about how they can represent the interests of their constituents better. So that's the first reason. The second reason would be a policymaking or legislative function. Perhaps a member in that particular district does not sit on the relevant committee where there would be legislation concerning the manufacture of cars in the United States. Perhaps he or she is not given that committee assignment. They can join the automobile makers caucus so they can have a way in which they can hopefully meet other members who are interested in that particular issue area and perhaps offer an amendment or cosponsor a bill that will be relevant to their interests.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:26] OK so appeal, to constituents, pretty good networking opportunity it sounds like. These informal relationships can be quite strategic. What do you think Colleen is the most important takeaway for our listeners? What should they know about congressional caucuses.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:11:40] I think that even though some congressional caucuses that grab a lot of the headlines are the partisan caucuses that we hear a lot about, the vast majority of caucuses are bipartisan and they're a way for members of Congress to gather information and a way for them to hopefully represent constituents better.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:03] Colleen Shogun. Thank you for leading our lesson.

**Colleen Shogun:** [00:12:05] Thank you.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:10] OK we are done caucusing for the moment. This episode was produced by Maureen McMurry and edited by Taylor Quimby. Music by broke for free.