USAFacts

Key terms

Why doesn't Congress look like the public?

Crash Course: Big Questions on US Government • Episode 8

1. **Substantive representation:** Representatives respond to, and act in the interest of, the people they represent.

   Political theorist Hanna Pitkin argued this is what's needed for good representation, regardless of whether a representative shares their constituents' identity.

2. **Descriptive representation:** When a representative also shares experiences of things like race, gender, or socio-economic status with their constituents.

   Political scientist Jane Mansbridge argued it strengthens substantive representation, since lawmakers who share their constituents' lived experience can better understand and act on their interests.

3. **Dyadic representation:** A form of descriptive representation where we think about congresspeople, and the state or district they represent, as a dyad, or an interacting pair.

   It often happens naturally, since candidates of color are more likely to be elected in districts with more voters of color, and similar patterns hold for other shared identities.

4. **Collective representation:** The idea that Congress as a whole reflects the country as a whole.

   It builds on dyadic representation at the district level, so that as more diverse districts elect more diverse representatives, Congress as a whole increasingly reflects the country's makeup.

5. **Incumbency advantage:** When congresspeople who run for re-election are way more likely to win.

   It's one reason Congress tends to skew older, since sitting members can run for re-election indefinitely and typically have the name recognition and donor connections to keep winning.