# *Read the following editorial and respond to the questions that follow. Submit your completed assignment to your Google Folder. This is expected to be completed today.*

# We Can't Wait Much Longer To Fix Congress

I am an unabashed fan of Congress. It is, to my mind, the American institution that most wholly represents our democracy and guards our freedoms. It is our most representative governmental body, the place where the myriad of currents of American society meet and come to terms with one another. Without it, there is no way for our nation to guarantee freedom, ensure that the passions of the moment are cooled in deliberate debate, or check the power of the President. So I am distressed to say that at the moment, I am not a fan of how Congress often operates, or fails to operate. This is not a partisan comment. Some of Congress' problems have been building for decades, including years during which I served as a member of the Democratic majority. However, there are now so many serious issues that have been allowed to spiral out of control, and so many problems going unresolved, that Congress, as an institution, is in deep trouble. Too often it shirks its constitutional role and appears incapable of doing the work that the American people depend on it to do. There are numerous ways in which I believe Congress has fallen short of its responsibilities:

First, the budget is out of control. The budget is the operating blueprint of our government, but except for a brief time in the 1990s, Congress has been unwilling for some time to exert any meaningful control over it. This is in part because the budget process is broken, and in part because Congress has been unable to rein in spending, tax cuts, or special- interest tax breaks and subsidies.

Second, Congress is too responsive to narrow special interests. The tax breaks, regulatory waivers, and subsidies that it hands out have not only contributed to our nation's alarming budget deficits, they also have made it appear that Congress simply rewards big-time contributors and powerful friends.

Third, Congress has refused to deal effectively with flaws in our electoral system. I'm not just talking here about the need for campaign finance reforms or the decline in competitive elections. We have for decades had a fragile elections process in this country. Lists of registered voters are poorly maintained, registration rules are often convoluted, elections administration is mostly in the hands of partisan office-holders — these problems and more need to be addressed nationally to restore public faith in the underpinning of our democracy.

Fourth, Congress is exceptionally polarized. Pretty much every member of Congress complains these days about the poisonous atmosphere on Capitol Hill. It is not just the moderate center that has atrophied, but also the courtesy and civility that are crucial to productive political discourse.

Fifth, fairness in the legislative process has broken down. A majority-rule-at-all-costs mentality, especially in the House, has stifled discussion, undercut careful deliberation, and worst of all, put an end to the consensus-building that ought to be a congressional hallmark.

Sixth, Congress has refused to look seriously at reforming itself. We no longer have a Congress that is shaped to deal effectively with current challenges. Its committee structure is outdated, its processes do not reflect the nation's diversity, its ability to oversee executive-branch operations in a dangerous and complex world is limited. Yet Congress cannot overcome its own turf battles and bring itself into the 21st century.

Seventh, Congress doesn't work enough at its true job. Members of Congress spend too much of their week campaigning, and not enough of it doing the hard work of governing. Building a consensus behind an approach to a national problem is tough; it takes negotiation, extended discussion, and hard study. This is impossible to do when you spend three days on Capitol Hill and then rush home for an extended weekend of appearances.

Finally, Congress has ceded its war powers to the President. The Founders explicitly gave the powers to declare and fund war to Congress. Yet Congress in recent years has rolled over and refused to take a hard look at the executive branch's war rationale and execution or plans for an end-game. Congress has failed to act as a separate and independent body, and to provide essential oversight during times of great need. All of this has hurt Congress, to the point where people who care about it now openly debate whether it can pull out of its alarming tailspin. So what should our response be to these shortcomings? Should we just give up on the institution? Become cynical and alienated? Throw our hands up and ask, "What's the use?" No, just the opposite. We need to become more engaged, more involved, more insistent that Congress measure up to its constitutional responsibilities.

Congress is at heart a resilient, self-correcting institution that is responsive to the clearly expressed will of the people. I know it can do better, and if prodded enough, it will. As citizens, we always have a responsibility to become involved in the work of Congress, but never more so than when we think it has gotten off track.

(Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.)

**Source:** <http://congress.indiana.edu/radio_commentaries/we_cant_wait_much_longer_to_fix_congress.php>

1. To what does the author attribute the failings of Congress in terms of the budget?

2. How does he theorize that Congress could do to repair what he deems to be a flawed electoral system?

3. In his estimation, what has resulted in a breakdown in the legislative process?

4. What steps does the author argue should be taken to “fix” Congress?

5. What is your perception of Congress? Why do you agree or disagree with the author?