Lesson 3  Influencing Congress

I. Influences on Lawmakers
   A. A lawmaker’s vote may be based on compromise; principle; the party position; the type of issue; views of constituents; trusted advice from staffers, experts, or other lawmakers; special interest groups; and personal beliefs.

II. The Influence of Voters
   A. Constituents have limited information or interest on some issues, such as foreign affairs, and lawmakers often make their own decisions on those issues.
   B. During reelection, a candidate’s opponent may bring up the incumbent’s voting record if some votes are unpopular with constituents, and a lawmaker might also want to remind voters about the voting record on laws benefiting the constituents.
   C. Lawmakers keep track of their constituents’ opinions through frequent visits to their districts to learn the concerns of local voters; through personal contacts by phone, meetings, and mail or e-mail; and through surveys and polls of constituents.
   D. These key supporters personally affect the lawmaker by working in the lawmaker’s campaign and contributing money, which is important for reelection.

III. The Influence of Parties
   A. One reason is that party members tend to share the same political views, but sometimes lawmakers do not have strong opinions on a particular issue, so they get advice from party members or are pressured to vote according to the party position.

IV. Other Influences on Congress
   A. Presidents can make White House speeches and television appearances to influence public opinion, which can lead to public pressure on Congress. Presidents also influence individual members of Congress by supporting or opposing their legislative goals.
   B. Lobbyists are the paid representatives of interest groups. Their job is to try to convince members of Congress to support policies favored by the groups they represent.
   C. Since former lawmakers, as well as their staff, and former executive branch officials can use past friendships and privileges to gain special access to Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate have created “cooling off” periods of one to two years, during which former members cannot be involved in lobbying.
   D. PACs are political action committees, which are political fund-raising organizations established by corporations, labor unions, and other special interest groups. They use their money to support individual candidates and political parties. “Super” PACs do not directly support candidates or parties; instead they pay for advertising campaigns to raise issues that favor one candidate or side over another.

Summary and Reflection
There are a number of reasons why a Congress member might vote against his or her personal beliefs. In some cases, the lawmaker may feel that the needs of the constituents or the nation are more important than personal conviction. Party loyalty or pressure from party leadership may cause a Congress member to vote a particular way. At times, political pressure from the opposition, particularly the threat of negative advertising by a PAC, might also affect a lawmaker’s willingness to vote based on personal beliefs.