



CRS Report for Congress

Regular Vetoes and Pocket Vetoes: An Overview

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Summary

The veto power vested in the President by Article I, Section 7 of the Constitution has proven to be an effective tool for the chief executive in his dealings with Congress. Since the founding of the federal government in 1789, 36 of 43 Presidents have exercised their veto authority a total of 2,554 times. Congress has overridden these vetoes on 106 occasions (4.2%). Presidents have vetoed 81 appropriations bills, and Congress has overridden 12 (14.8%) of these vetoes. This report will be updated at the beginning of each new Congress.

Constitutional Basis and Importance

The U.S. Constitution (Article I, Section 7) provides that, for a bill to become law, it must be approved by both houses of Congress and presented to the President for his approval and signature.¹ The President may sign a bill into law within the 10-day period (excluding Sundays) provided in the Constitution,² let it become law without his signature, or veto it. The Constitution states that, when the President vetoes a bill, “he shall return it, with his Objections to that House in which it shall have originated.” This type of action is called a “regular” or “return” veto. If, on the other hand, Congress has adjourned within the 10-day period after presentation of the bill to the President (thereby preventing the return of the bill to Congress), the President may simply withhold his signature, and the bill does not become law — a practice that has been dubbed a “pocket” veto.³ The President’s veto authority is among his most significant tools in legislative

¹ These bills include joint resolutions, but do not include proposed amendments to the Constitution, which require a two-thirds vote in each house, and are sent directly to the states for approval. U.S. Constitution, Art. V.

² U.S. Constitution, Art. I, Sec. 7.

³ Beginning in 1929, several judicial decisions have attempted to clarify when an adjournment
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dealings with Congress. Illustrative of this point is the fact that Presidents have vetoed 2,554 bills since 1789; of these, Congress has overridden 106 (4.2%). Moreover, the veto also can be effective as a threat, sometimes forcing Congress to modify legislation before presenting it to the President.

This report presents information on how Congress can override regular vetoes, the number of vetoes by each President, and the use of vetoes in relation to appropriations bills. The report does not address two other types of vetoes — line-item vetoes (since the President has no such power at present) and legislative vetoes (which are wielded by Congress, not the President).⁴ It also does not address presidential signing statements.⁵

Overriding a Veto

If a bill is pocket vetoed while Congress is out of session, the only way for Congress to override the veto is to reintroduce the legislation as a new bill, pass it through both houses, and present it to the President again for his signature. On the other hand, Congress may override a regular veto without introducing new legislation.

According to Article 1, Section 7 of the Constitution, when the President chooses not to sign a bill and instead returns it to the chamber that originated it, the chamber enters the message of the President detailing the reasons for the veto into its Journal and then proceeds “to reconsider” the bill. Because the Constitution does not state exactly how Congress should reconsider a vetoed bill, House and Senate procedures govern the specific treatment of bills returned by the President.⁶

Passage by a two-thirds margin in both houses is required to override a veto before the end of the Congress in which the veto is received. Although the Constitution states that approval requires “two thirds of that House,” congressional procedure, tradition, and judicial rulings have interpreted this requirement to mean two-thirds of those Members present and voting, provided there is a quorum present. If a two-thirds vote is successful in the originating house, that house informs the other of its decision to override the veto by message. Neither house is under any constitutional, legal, or procedural obligation to schedule an override vote. It is not unusual for Congress to make no effort to override the veto if congressional leaders do not believe they have sufficient votes.

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by Congress prevents the President from returning a veto. For information on these cases, see CRS Report RL30909, *The Pocket Veto: Its Current Status*, by Louis Fisher.

⁴ On these types of vetoes, see CRS Report RL33635, *Item Veto and Expanded Impoundment Proposals: Legislative History and Current Status*, by Virginia McMurtry; CRS Report RL33365, *Line Item Veto: A Constitutional Analysis of Recent Proposals*, by Morton Rosenberg; and CRS Report RS22132, *Legislative Vetoes After Chadha*, by Louis Fisher.

⁵ CRS Report RL33667, *Presidential Signing Statements: Constitutional and Institutional Implications*, by T. J. Halstead.

⁶ For information on House and Senate procedures for considering vetoed bills, see CRS Report RS22654, *Veto Override Procedure in the House and Senate*, by Elizabeth Rybicki.

Veto Exercises and Overrides

Pocket Vetoes and Returned Vetoes

Table 1 shows that, since the beginning of the federal government in 1789, 36 of 43⁷ Presidents have exercised their veto authority on a total of 2,554 occasions. Of that number, 1,488 (58.3%) were regular vetoes — that is, the rejected legislation was returned to the congressional house of origin, while it was in session, with a presidential message of explanation — and 1,066 (41.7%) were pocket vetoes, or rejected while Congress was adjourned.⁸ Congress has overridden 106 (7.1%) of the 1,488 regular vetoes. This percentage, though, is skewed downward by the enormous number of vetoes in administrations prior to the 87th Congress (which began in 1961).⁹ If one counts only the normal vetoes since 1961 (the beginning of the Kennedy Administration), one finds 223 vetoes and 33 overridden (14.8%).

George W. Bush was the first President since John Quincy Adams (1825-1829) to serve a full term without wielding his veto. No president since Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) has served two terms without vetoing a bill.

Table 1. Presidential Vetoes, 1789-2007

President	Coincident Congresses	Regular Vetoes	Pocket Vetoes	Total Vetoes	Vetoes Overridden
Washington	1 st -4 th	2	—	2	—
J. Adams	5 th -6 th	—	—	—	—
Jefferson	7 th -10 th	—	—	—	—
Madison	11 th -14 th	5	2	7	—
Monroe	15 th -18 th	1	—	1	—
J. Q. Adams	19 th -20 th	—	—	—	—
Jackson	21 st -24 th	5	7	12	—
Van Buren	25 th -26 th	—	1	1	—
W. H. Harrison	27 th	—	—	—	—
Tyler	27 th -28 th	6	4	10	1

⁷ There have been 43 presidencies, but only 42 persons have served as President. Grover Cleveland was elected to two presidencies.

⁸ President George H.W. Bush attempted to pocket veto two bills during intrasession recesses. Congress considered the two bills enacted into law because the President had not returned the legislation. These two disputed vetoes are not included in **Table 1**.

⁹ Most of those vetoes prior to 1960 were of private bills (i.e., legislation that would confer benefits upon a single person or company) and were almost never overridden. In 1971, Congress gave administrators more discretion to handle the claims of individuals. Thus, the need for congressionally passed private bills has dropped dramatically — from hundreds per annum to a few dozen — and, therefore, the opportunities for vetoes. On private bills, see CRS Report 98-628, *Private Bills: Procedure in the House*, by Richard S. Beth.

President	Coincident Congresses	Regular Vetoes	Pocket Vetoes	Total Vetoes	Vetoes Overridden
Polk	29 th -30 th	2	1	3	—
Taylor	31 st	—	—	—	—
Fillmore	31 st -32 nd	—	—	—	—
Pierce	33 rd -34 th	9	—	9	5
Buchanan	35 th -36 th	4	3	7	—
Lincoln	37 th -39 th	2	5	7	—
A. Johnson	39 th -40 th	21	8	29	15
Grant	41 st -44 th	45	48	93	4
Hayes	45 th -46 th	12	1	13	1
Garfield	47 th	—	—	—	—
Arthur	47 th -48 th	4	8	12	1
Cleveland	49 th -50 th	304	110	414	2
B. Harrison	51 st -52 nd	19	25	44	1
Cleveland	53 rd -54 th	42	128	170	5
McKinley	55 th -57 th	6	36	42	—
T. Roosevelt	57 th -60 th	42	40	82	1
Taft	61 st -62 nd	30	9	39	1
Wilson	63 rd -66 th	33	11	44	6
Harding	67 th	5	1	6	—
Coolidge	68 th -70 th	20	30	50	4
Hoover	71 st -72 nd	21	16	37	3
F. D. Roosevelt	73 rd -79 th	372	263	635	9
Truman	79 th -82 nd	180	70	250	12
Eisenhower	83 rd -86 th	73	108	181	2
Kennedy	87 th -88 th	12	9	21	—
L. B. Johnson	88 th -90 th	16	14	30	—
Nixon	91 st -93 rd	26	17	43	7
Ford	93 rd -94 th	48	18	66	12
Carter	95 th -96 th	13	18	31	2
Reagan	97 th -100 th	39	39	78	9
G. H. W. Bush	101 st -102 nd	29	15	44	1
Clinton	103 rd -106 th	36	1	37	2
G. W. Bush	107 th -110 th	4	—	4	—
Total		1,488	1,066	2,554	106

Sources: U.S. Congress, Senate, Secretary of the Senate, *Presidential Vetoes, 1789-1988*, S.Pub. 102-12, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 1992); and U.S. Congress, Senate, Secretary of the Senate, *Presidential Vetoes, 1989-2000*, S.Pub. 107-10, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 2001).

Veto of Appropriation Bills

A veto of an appropriations bill can result in the closure of federal agencies, the furlough of federal employees, and the interruption of federal programs and services.¹⁰ Despite these high stakes, Presidents have vetoed 81 appropriations bills since 1789; more than half of these vetoes have occurred since 1968.¹¹ For example, Presidents Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton were presented with a total of 387 annual appropriations acts and vetoed 30 of them (7.8%).¹² President George W. Bush has vetoed one appropriations bill. Congressional overrides of vetoes of appropriations are not unusual. For example, of the 81 vetoes, 12 (14.8%) have been overridden (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Appropriations Bills Vetoed, 1789-2007

President	Coincident Congresses	Approp. Acts Vetoed	Vetoes of Approp. Acts Overridden
Washington	1 st -4 th	—	—
Adams	5 th -6 th	—	—
Jefferson	7 th -10 th	—	—
Madison	11 th -14 th	—	—
Monroe	15 th -18 th	—	—
J. Q. Adams	19 th -20 th	—	—
Jackson	21 st -24 th	—	—
Van Buren	25 th -26 th	—	—
W. H. Harrison	27 th	—	—
Tyler	27 th -28 th	2	—
Polk	29 th -30 th	1	—
Taylor	31 st	—	—
Fillmore	31 st -32 nd	—	—
Pierce	33 rd -34 th	4	2
Buchanan	35 th -36 th	1	—
Lincoln	37 th -39 th	—	—
A. Johnson	39 th -40 th	—	—

¹⁰ For additional information on federal government shutdowns, see CRS Report 98-844, *Shutdown of the Federal Government: Causes, Effects, and Process*, by Kevin R. Kosar (out of print; available from the author).

¹¹ The data in this section and in **Table 2** include annual appropriations acts (which provide annual funding for the routine operations of most federal agencies), supplemental appropriations acts, and continuing appropriations acts. Excluded are measures dealing with impoundments, transfers, line-item vetoes under the Line Item Veto Act of 1996, and bills proposing appropriations for the relief of private claims.

¹² CRS Report RS20719, *Vetoed Annual Appropriation Acts: Presidents Carter Through Clinton*, by Mitchell Sollenberger (out of print; available from Kevin R. Kosar).

President	Coincident Congresses	Approp. Acts Vetoed	Vetoed of Approp. Acts Overridden
Grant	41 st -44 th	—	—
Hayes	45 th -46 th	5	—
Garfield	47 th	—	—
Arthur	47 th -48 th	1	1
Cleveland	49 th -50 th	1	—
B. Harrison	51 st -52 nd	—	—
Cleveland	53 rd -54 th	5	1
McKinley	55 th -57 th	—	—
T. Roosevelt	57 th -60 th	—	—
Taft	61 st -62 nd	4	—
Wilson	63 rd -66 th	8	—
Harding	67 th	1	—
Coolidge	68 th -70 th	—	—
Hoover	71 st -72 nd	2	—
F. D. Roosevelt	73 rd -79 th	1	1
Truman	79 th -82 nd	1	1
Eisenhower	83 rd -86 th	3	1
Kennedy	87 th -88 th	—	—
L. B. Johnson	88 th -90 th	—	—
Nixon	91 st -93 rd	5	1
Ford	93 rd -94 th	5	3
Carter	95 th -96 th	2	—
Reagan	97 th -100 th	6	1
G. H. W. Bush	101 st -102 nd	8	—
Clinton	103 rd -106 th	14	—
G. W. Bush	107 th -110 th	1	—
Total		81	12

Sources: U.S. Congress, Senate, Secretary of the Senate, *Presidential Vetoes, 1789-1988*, S.Pub. 102-12, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 1992); and U.S. Congress, Senate, Secretary of the Senate, *Presidential Vetoes, 1989-2000*, S.Pub. 107-10, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 2001).