

LEADERSHIP IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Article I, Section 2, Clause 5

The House of Representatives shall choose their Speaker and other Officers; and shall have the sole Power of Impeachment.

Speaker of the House

Elected by the whole of the House of Representatives, the Speaker acts as leader of the House and combines several roles: the institutional role of presiding officer and administrative head of the House, the role of leader of the majority party in the House, and the representative role of an elected member of the House. The Speaker of the House is second in line to succeed the President, after the Vice President.

House Majority Leader

The House of Representatives, with its large membership, has relied on Majority Leaders since the late-19th century to expedite legislative business and to keep their parties united. Since 1899, Majority Leaders have come from virtually every section of the country. No woman or person of color has ever served as Majority Leader from either party.

This officer is charged with scheduling legislation for floor consideration; planning the daily, weekly, and annual legislative agendas; consulting with Members to gauge party sentiment; and, generally working to advance the goals of the majority party.

House Minority Leader

The House of Representatives, with its large membership, has chosen majority and minority leaders since the 19th century to expedite legislative business and to keep their parties united. These leaders are elected every two years in secret balloting of the party caucus or conference.

The minority leader serves as floor leader of the "loyal opposition," and is the minority counterpart to the Speaker. Although many of the basic leadership responsibilities of the minority and majority leaders are similar, the minority leader speaks for the minority party and its policies and works to protect the minority's rights. The minority leader works to promote and publicize the party's agenda.

House Majority Whip and House Minority Whip (Assistant Party Leaders)

What do party whips actually do? They count votes. The principle task of a party whip is to keep track of the number of votes for and against a piece of legislation. They're also responsible, along with the party's leader, for "whipping up" support for a particular position. Not every vote gets whipped. If the party leadership knows that a bill is going to pass easily, they won't go to the trouble of counting every last vote. But when the vote is close, whipping is necessary to get a more accurate head count.

There are three stages of whipping. The most basic one is a simple head count. That's when the whip's staffers call those of every other party member and asks how they're going to vote. The information is then entered into a spreadsheet or onto a paper list of members called a voting sheet.

If the vote is close, the whip moves to the second stage, in which members of the "whip team"—there are nine deputy whips in the House—approach the fence-sitters and hear out their concerns. If a concern can be easily addressed, it gets fixed. If not, the deputy whip (or a committee chairman, or the party leader herself) can offer to help an ambivalent lawmaker on another bill in exchange for his or her vote on the bill at hand (reciprocity/logrolling).

The third and final whip usually occurs the day before a vote, when whip team members approach their designated members and report the final tally.

Whips also serve as liaisons between the members and the party leadership. That means helping mold legislation in such a way that members will support it, as well as persuading members to vote a particular way once the legislation is complete. The whip must also make sure members actually show up to the floor. He sends out a daily schedule of votes and information on how long a given legislative session will last. He may also stand by the chamber door, reminding members how the party wants them to vote by giving a thumbs-up or thumbs-down.