

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE

The House of Representatives is often referred to as “The People's House” because its members represent the smallest unit of the population. The typical House district encompasses approximately 700,000 people. Moreover, with re-election every two years, members tend to spend a great deal of time in the district tending to their constituents.

It is often the case that constituents in need turn to their representative for assistance, whether in finding a lost Social Security check, helping a son or daughter get into a military academy, or navigating the federal bureaucracy. Not surprisingly, most members specialize in constituency casework, with the good ones having elevated it to an art form. Over the course of their careers, many members will come to know thousands of their constituents by name — a surefire way to guarantee a long tenure in the House!

The two-year terms, smaller districts, and direct election by the people were intended to make the House a populist institution where minority interests give way to majority passions. In fact, until the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment, which called for direct election of U.S. senators, the House of Representatives was the only branch of the federal government elected directly by the people.

TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER

Without strict leadership and discipline, little would get accomplished in a body with 435 members, so leadership positions play a critical role in the function and operation of the House of Representatives.

Congressional leadership is organized by party. Congressional leaders serve an important function within the institution (as parliamentarians) as well as “outside” the House in their efforts to recruit candidates, advocate policy positions in the media, raise money, and provide long-term political and policy strategy.

Speaker of the House

The Speaker of the House is the most powerful and visible member of the House of Representatives. It is the only House leadership position specifically accounted for in the Constitution. The Speaker stands third in line in presidential succession.

The Speaker is nominated by a majority of his party's caucus or membership in the House (the nomination is usually unanimous) at the beginning of each two-year session of Congress, and is formally elected by a straight-party vote of the entire House of Representatives. Rarely

do members of the minority party cast a vote for the opposing party's Speaker designee.

The Speaker derives much of his power from the sheer force of his personality and the knowledge of House procedures. In addition, the Speaker has the institutional powers to do the following:

- Determine committee assignments
- Preside over the House
- Decide on points of order and interpret the rules
- Refer legislation to the appropriate committees
- Set the agenda and schedule legislative action
- Coordinate policy agenda with Senate leadership

Majority and Minority Leaders

The majority leader is the principal deputy to the Speaker of the House, and the floor leader of the majority party. He is elected by a secret ballot of his party's caucus at the beginning of each two-year session of Congress. His primary function is to foster unity and cohesion among the majority members, and assist the Speaker in setting the agenda, scheduling debate, and monitoring the legislative process. Often, the majority leader is considered next in line to serve as Speaker of the House, although this is not always the case.

The minority leader is the leader of the opposition party in the House. His function is similar to that of majority leader — to maintain unity within the ranks. Often, the minority leader will work closely with the Speaker and majority leader on scheduling floor debate, recognizing members who wish to speak on the House floor, and determining the rules for particular pieces of legislation, although he doesn't have institutional powers to do any of these. The minority leader will sometimes use procedural maneuvers and delaying tactics to “gum up” the legislative process in an effort to win concessions, make a point, seek compromise, or simply gain the attention of his counterparts.

Whips

Both the majority and minority leadership rely on “whips” — deputies who are responsible for maintaining party loyalty and “counting heads” on key votes. Whips are also elected by secret ballot, and are notorious for exerting pressure on their members to vote the party position. Both the majority and minority whips recruit deputy whips to assist in this process.

HOUSE BY COMMITTEE

Although not specified in the Constitution, committees are where the substantive and legislative work of Congress takes place. Given the enormous complexity and diversity of issues that members confront each

session, committees have evolved into specialized divisions of labor where members can concentrate on particular areas of expertise. As a general rule, each House member serves on two standing committees, although members of the powerful Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means committees serve only on those committees. Most House committees are divided into five subcommittees that focus on more specific areas.

Types of Committees

There are four primary types of committees in the House of Representatives.

Standing Committees - These are the permanent bodies of Congress where virtually all of the legislative action takes place. Standing committees are by far the most important structures in Congress. The following are the nineteen standing committees of the 108th Congress:

- Agriculture
- Appropriations
- Armed Services
- Banking and Financial Services
- Budget
- Commerce
- Education and the Workforce
- Government Reform
- House Administration
- International Relations
- Judiciary
- Resources
- Rules
- Science and Technology
- Small Business
- Standards of Official Conduct
- Transportation and Infrastructure
- Veterans Affairs
- Ways and Means

Select or Special Committees - These committees are temporary panels created from time to time to study or investigate a particular problem or issue. They have a narrow focus and are usually disbanded at the end of the Congressional session in which they were created. These committees produce reports, not legislation. Several years ago, the 105th Congress convened a special committee to examine the issue of aging. Congresses also employed select committees to investigate the Iran-Contra and Watergate scandals.

Joint Committees - These committees are composed of members from both the House of Representatives and Senate. Typically, they deal with administrative matters pertaining to Congress. Joint committees can be either permanent or temporary, and are most likely to produce recommendations, not legislation.

Conference Committees - These committees are also composed of House and Senate members, but they have the express purpose of standardizing the exact language

of concurrent pieces of legislation that the two chambers have passed.

Joining a Committee

For members of Congress, committee assignments rank among the most important aspects of their job. The Speaker of the House and the minority leader determine assignments for their respective party members in conjunction with their steering committee, which is convened for that specific purpose.

Committees vary in importance. Some committees, such as Ways and Means, Banking and Financial Services, Rules, and Budget, are considered prized appointments. Others, such as Standards of Official Conduct and House Administration, are less coveted posts. Oftentimes, committee assignments can determine the career trajectory and expertise of a member.

There are several factors that go into committee assignments. The most important is seniority — the longer a member has served in Congress, the greater his or her chances of receiving a plum assignment. Some members receive committee assignments based on particular knowledge or expertise, while others are assigned based on the needs of his or her district (midwestern members often serve on the Agriculture Committee, for instance). It's not unusual for members to receive a desired committee post as a reward for party loyalty or fundraising prowess, or for ideological reasons.

Committee Leaders

The most powerful member of any committee is the chairperson. The chair hires majority staff, appoints subcommittee members and leaders, and allocates the committee and subcommittee budgets. At one time, it was said that chairpersons dominated their committees like feudal lords, ruling with an iron fist. Recent reforms, however, have curbed their powers.

RULES RULE

The large size and populist composition of the House of Representatives require that its activity be governed by a strict set of formal rules. The House rules that matter most are those that deal with legislative debate, determining the amount of time a bill can be debated on the floor and the types of amendments that can be offered. At the request of the reporting committee's chairperson, the Rules Committee typically grants one of three rules that govern floor debate and the amendments process for a given piece of legislation:

- An open rule allows for any amendments to be offered, as long as they are relevant to the subject of the bill.
- A closed rule prohibits any amendments from being offered.
- A modified rule allows amendments to some parts of the bill.