

Party Leaders in the House: Election, Duties, and Responsibilities

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Each major party in the House has a leadership hierarchy. This report summarizes the election, duties, and responsibilities of the Speaker of the House, the majority and minority leaders, and the whips and whip system. For a listing of all past occupants of congressional party leadership positions, see CRS Report RL30567, *Party Leaders in the United States Congress, 1789-2017*, by Valerie Heitshusen.

Speaker of the House

The Speaker is elected by the House on the first day of a new Congress. Customarily, the caucus or conference of each major party first elects a candidate at early organizational meetings. When the new Congress convenes, each party places the name of its candidate in nomination, and the majority party's candidate is typically elected on a party line vote. A rules change adopted at the beginning of the 108th Congress requires the Speaker to submit the names of Members designated to serve as Speaker pro tempore in the event that the speakership becomes vacant, or in the event the Speaker is disabled. House rules invest the Speaker with substantial powers.¹ These duties include, but are not limited to

- administering the oath of office to Members;
- recognizing Members for the purpose of speaking or making motions;
- referring bills and resolutions to committees;
- putting questions to a vote of Members;
- declaring a quorum (or the absence of one);
- counting and declaring all votes;
- deciding points of order;
- appointing House Members to select and conference committees;
- exercising additional committee appointment authority under party conference rules;
- making appointments to fill temporary vacancies in House administrative offices;
- appointing the chair of the Committee of the Whole and the Speaker pro tempore; and
- signing all bills and resolutions passed by the House.

Traditionally, the Speaker has no formal committee assignments, but serves as an *ex officio* member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.² The Speaker infrequently votes or participates in floor debate.³ Although not prescribed in any formal way, the Speaker is the

¹ The Speaker has other powers specified in law, typically relating to appointing either occupants of House offices (e.g., the Parliamentarian) or members of various commissions and advisory boards. On the latter authority, see CRS Report RL33313, *Congressional Membership and Appointment Authority to Advisory Commissions, Boards, and Groups*, by Matthew E. Glassman.

² The Speaker's ex-officio membership, as well as that of the Minority Leader discussed below, is pursuant to House Rule X, clause 11(a)(2). Rules of the House of Representatives, 115th Congress, and U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Constitution, Jefferson's Manual, and Rules of the House of Representatives, One Hundred Fourteenth Congress* (hereafter cited as *House Manual*), compiled by Thomas J. Wickham, Parliamentarian, 113th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 113-181 (Washington: GPO, 2015).

³ Under current rules, the Speaker may vote on any question before the House (or in the Committee of the Whole); the long-standing practice, however, is that the Speaker only occasionally exercises this right. See *House Manual*, §631, and also Charles W. Johnson, John V. Sullivan, and Thomas J. Wickham, *House Practice: A Guide to the Rules*,

principal spokesperson for the House and, oftentimes, for the party, taking a leading role in negotiations with the Senate and President.

When in the majority, each party designates the Speaker as chair of its committee assignment panel, which assigns party members to standing committee slots, subject to conference or caucus approval and House election. According to both Democratic Caucus and Republican Conference rules, a Speaker from the respective party organization also makes nominations (for conference consideration) for membership on the Committee on Rules and the Committee on House Administration, nominates those committees' chairs, and also appoints one Member to serve on the Budget Committee. Caucus and conference rules also give the Speaker some appointment authority for members of his or her party's internal committees.⁴ (See CRS Report 97-780, *The Speaker of the House: House Officer, Party Leader, and Representative*, by Valerie Heitshusen; and CRS Report RL30857, *Speakers of the House: Elections, 1913-2017*, by Richard S. Beth and Valerie Heitshusen.)

Majority Leader

The majority leader is second to the Speaker in the party hierarchy. Elected by secret ballot of the majority party's caucus or conference in organizational meetings prior to the start of a new Congress, the majority leader's role has largely been defined by history and tradition. Working closely with the Speaker and the party's whips, the majority leader is charged with scheduling legislation for floor consideration, and does not, in modern practice, serve on House committees. The majority leader helps plan daily, weekly, and annual legislative agendas; consults with Members to gauge sentiment on issues; urges colleagues to support or defeat measures on the floor; and, in general, works to advance the goals of the majority party. The majority leader is also responsible for closely watching floor activities, especially the opposition party's parliamentary maneuvers, but by custom, does not typically lead floor debate on major measures. (See archived CRS Report RL30665, *The Role of the House Majority Leader: An Overview*, by Walter J. Oleszek.)

Minority Leader

The minority leader is both the minority party's counterpart to the Speaker, and the floor leader of the "loyal opposition." Elected by the minority party caucus or conference at organizational meetings prior to the start of a new Congress, the minority leader speaks for the minority party and its policies. The minority leader strives to protect the minority's rights, organizes and leads criticism of the majority party, and devises parliamentary strategies and tactics that can put to best use the abilities of his party to influence legislative outcomes. The minority leader chairs the party's committee assignment panel and also directly nominates or appoints minority party members to serve on certain standing committees.⁵ Like the Speaker, the minority leader serves as an *ex officio* member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. When the minority leader's party holds the White House, the minority leader may be the President's chief spokesperson in the House. By custom, the minority leader does not typically lead floor debate on

Precedents and Procedures of the House, 115th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 2017), ch. 34, §5 and ch. 58, §5.

⁴ Examples include the party's policy committee or its campaign committee. See Rules of the House Republican Conference for the 115th Congress, available at <https://www.gop.gov/115th-rules/>; and Rules of the Democratic Caucus, available to congressional clients from the author on request.

⁵ When in the majority, the conference or caucus rules provide these powers to the Speaker, as outlined earlier.

major measures. (See archived CRS Report RL30666, *The Role of the House Minority Leader: An Overview*, by Walter J. Oleszek.)

Party Whips

Republican and Democratic party whips are elected by each party caucus at early organizational meetings. Each majority and minority whip heads an extensive whip network comprised of party loyalists. Each party selects at least one chief deputy whip and a number of deputy and other whips.⁶ The job of the whips is to maintain communication between the leadership of the party and its members, marshal support for party positions on the floor, count votes on key legislation, and persuade wavering Members to vote for the party position. Whip notices and advisories to all party members about the legislative agenda are staple products of both parties' whip organizations and are posted on each party's website.⁷

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⁶ In current practice, the Democratic Party has multiple chief deputy whips, whereas the Republican Party has one. Chief deputy whips are appointed by the party's chief whip; other members of the whip team are either similarly appointed or elected by subsets of the party organization.

⁷ See archived CRS Report RS20499, *House Leadership: Whip Organization*, by Judy Schneider.