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

Valerie Heitshusen
Analyst on Congress and the Legislative Process

August 14, 2014
For more than 35 years, TheCapitol.Net and its predecessor, Congressional Quarterly Executive Conferences, have been training professionals from government, military, business, and NGOs on the dynamics and operations of the legislative and executive branches and how to work with them.

Our training and publications include congressional operations, legislative and budget process, communication and advocacy, media and public relations, research, testifying before Congress, legislative drafting, critical thinking and writing, and more.

TheCapitol.Net encompasses a dynamic team of more than 150 faculty members and authors, all of whom are independent subject matter experts and veterans in their fields. Faculty and authors include senior government executives, former members of Congress, Hill and agency staff, editors and journalists, lobbyists, lawyers, nonprofit executives, and scholars.

We have worked with hundreds of clients across the country to develop and produce a wide variety of custom, on-site training programs. All courses, seminars, and workshops can be tailored to align with your organization’s educational objectives and presented on-site at your location.

TheCapitol.Net is on the GSA Schedule, 874-4, for custom on-site training: GSA Contract GS02F0192X.

TheCapitol.Net has more than 2,000 clients representing congressional offices, federal and state agencies, military branches, corporations, associations, news media, and NGOs nationwide.

TheCapitol.Net is a non-partisan firm.

Our blog: Hobnob Blog—hit or miss ... give or take ... this or that ...
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, 1789-2014*, 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

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.

participates in floor debate. Although not prescribed in any formal way, the Speaker is the 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. (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, 1913-2013, 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 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 standing committees.

---

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, W[illia]m Holmes Brown, Charles W. Johnson, and John V. Sullivan, House Practice: A Guide to the Rules, Precedents and Procedures of the House, 112th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 2011), pp. 647, 924.

4 Examples include the party’s policy committee or its campaign committee. See Rules of the House Republican Conference for the 113th Congress; and Rules of the Democratic Caucus, 113th Congress.
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 major measures. (See 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.\(^7\)

**Author Contact Information**

Valerie Heitshusen  
Analyst on Congress and the Legislative Process  
vheitshusen@crs.loc.gov, 7-8635

**Acknowledgments**

Thomas P. Carr, former Analyst in American National Government at CRS, originally wrote this report. The listed author has updated the report and is available to respond to inquiries on the subject.

---

\(^5\) When in the majority, the conference or caucus rules provide these powers to the Speaker, as outlined earlier.  
\(^6\) 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.  
Learn how Capitol Hill really works

All of our programs and any combination of their topics can be tailored for on-site training for your organization.

For more than 35 years, TheCapitol.Net and its predecessor, Congressional Quarterly Executive Conferences, have been teaching professionals from government, military, business, and NGOs about the dynamics and operations of the legislative and executive branches and how to work with them.

Our custom, on-site training and publications include congressional operations, legislative and budget process, communication and advocacy, media and public relations, research, testifying before Congress, legislative drafting, critical thinking and writing, and more.

- **Diverse Client Base**—We have tailored hundreds of custom on-site training programs for Congress, numerous agencies in all federal departments, the military, law firms, lobbying firms, unions, think tanks and NGOs, foreign delegations, associations and corporations, delivering exceptional insight into how Washington works.

- **Experienced Program Design and Delivery**—We have designed and delivered hundreds of custom programs covering congressional/legislative operations, budget process, media training, writing skills, legislative drafting, advocacy, research, testifying before Congress, grassroots, and more.

- **Professional Materials**—We provide training materials and publications that show how Washington works. Our publications are designed both as course materials and as invaluable reference tools.

- **Large Team of Experienced Faculty**—More than 150 faculty members provide independent subject matter expertise. Each program is designed using the best faculty member for each session.

- **Non-Partisan**—TheCapitol.Net is non-partisan.

- **GSA Schedule**—TheCapitol.Net is on the GSA Schedule, 874-4, for custom on-site training: GSA Contract GS02F0192X.

Please see our Capability Statement on our web site at [TCNCS.com](http://www.tcnscs.com).

Custom training programs are designed to meet your educational and training goals, each led by independent subject-matter experts best qualified to help you reach your educational objectives and align with your audience.

As part of your custom program, we can also provide classroom space, breaks and meals, receptions, tours, and online registration and individual attendee billing services.

For more information about custom on-site training for your organization, please see our web site: [TCNCustom.com](http://www.tcnscustom.com) or call us: 202-678-1600, ext 115.

TheCapitol.Net is on the GSA Schedule, 874-4, for custom on-site training: GSA Contract GS02F0192X.