



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

General Debate in Committee of the Whole

Judy Schneider

Specialist on the Congress

August 25, 2015

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RS20200

Congressional Operations Briefing— Capitol Hill Workshop

Congressional Operations Briefing and Seminar

The definitive overview of how Congress works.

This intensive course is offered as a
3-day public Briefing and as a tailored
on-site 3, 4 or 5-day program.

Public Briefings are offered throughout the year in Washington, DC.
Space is limited.

Dates, Agenda, Previous Faculty, and Secure Online Registration:

TCNCHW.com

On-site Congressional Briefings and
Capitol Hill Workshops for agencies:

CLCHW.com

202-678-1600 TheCapitol.Net



TheCapitol.Net

Non-partisan training and publications that show how Washington works.™

PO Box 25706, Alexandria, VA 22313-5706
202-678-1600 • www.thecapitol.net



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



Courses approved for CEUs from George Mason University

All of our courses and workshops include extensive interaction with our faculty, making our courses and workshops both educational as well as mini-consulting sessions with substantive experts.

Our Upcoming Schedule of Courses can be seen online on our web site or at TCNCourses.com.

All of our courses and any combination of their topics can be customized for on-site training for your organization—we are on GSA Advantage, Contract GS02F0192X.

thecapitol.net
202-678-1600

Summary

The House considers most important bills (and resolutions) on the floor by resolving into the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union. This is a committee on which all Representatives serve and which meets on the House floor. The House acts on a measure by resolving into Committee of the Whole (as it usually is called) first to debate the bill as a whole and subsequently to debate and vote on any amendments to the bill. At the end of this process, the committee “rises” and reports the bill back to the House with whatever amendments the Committee of the Whole has approved. Then the House votes on these amendments and on final passage of the bill. The process of considering a bill in Committee of the Whole has two distinct stages: first, a period for general debate; and second, a process of debating and voting on amendments to the bill. What follows in this report focuses exclusively on the general debate phase; other reports discuss the amendment process in Committee of the Whole.

General debate is a period of time set aside for debating the merits of the bill as a whole, the state of current law on the subject of the bill, the need for new legislation, the various provisions of the bill, and possible amendments to it. This is a time for debate only. No amendments to the bill are in order, nor can Members offer any other motions that can affect the content of the bill or its fate.

Contents

Setting and Allocating the Time for General Debate.....	1
Engaging in General Debate.....	1

Contacts

Author Contact Information	2
Acknowledgments	2

The House considers most important bills (and resolutions) on the floor by resolving into the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union. This is a committee on which all Representatives serve and which meets on the House floor. The House acts on a bill by resolving into Committee of the Whole (as it usually is called) first to debate the bill as a whole and subsequently to debate and vote on any amendments to the bill. At the end of this process, the committee “rises” and reports the bill back to the House with whatever amendments the Committee of the Whole has approved. Then the House votes on these amendments and on final passage of the bill. The process of considering a bill in Committee of the Whole has two distinct stages: first, a period for general debate; and second, a process of debating and voting on amendments to the bill. What follows in this report focuses exclusively on the general debate phase; other reports discuss the amendment process in Committee of the Whole.

General debate is a period of time set aside for debating the merits of the bill as a whole, the state of current law on the subject of the bill, the need for new legislation, the various provisions of the bill, and possible amendments to it. This is a time for debate only. No amendments to the bill are in order, nor can Members offer any other motions that can affect the content of the bill or its fate.

Setting and Allocating the Time for General Debate

The total amount of time available for general debate usually is specified in the special rule, reported by the Rules Committee and adopted by the House, which brings the bill to the floor and governs its consideration while on the floor. Typically, the amount of time set aside for general debate is one hour. That time normally is divided equally between the control of the chairman of the committee with jurisdiction over the bill and the ranking minority Member of the committee; these two Representatives act as the majority and minority party floor managers of the bill. There may be more than one hour provided for general debate on particularly important bills and on bills that touch on the jurisdiction of more than one House committee. In the latter case, the special rule typically allocates control over some portion of the time for general debate to each committee chairman and each ranking minority Member.

Not all measures are considered under the terms of a special rule, however. When a measure is called up for consideration as a privileged matter there is no special rule to govern the terms of general debate. For example, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee can call up a general appropriations bill as a privileged matter and move that the House resolve into Committee of the Whole to consider it. In that case, the chairman proposes to limit and divide the time for general debate, and the House agrees to this proposal by unanimous consent, before Members vote on resolving into Committee of the Whole. Similarly, there may be statutory provisions that govern House floor consideration of certain kinds of measures. These provisions usually specify the amount and allocation of time for general debate. For example, under Section 305 of the Congressional Budget Act, as amended, a congressional budget resolution may be considered as a privileged matter with a maximum of 14 hours for general debate.

Engaging in General Debate

Once in Committee of the Whole, the chairman of the Committee of the Whole first recognizes the majority floor manager to make his or her opening statement. When the majority floor manager concludes, he or she reserves the balance of the time remaining. Then the chairman recognizes the minority floor manager for the same purpose. After these two opening statements, the chairman recognizes each floor manager to yield portions of the time remaining to him or her

to other Members who wish to speak. Members who want to participate in general debate usually contact their party's floor manager in advance to request that time be reserved for them.

A manager may yield one or more minutes at a time to other Members, or sometimes as little as 30 seconds if many Members want to participate in the debate. If Member A is one of the floor managers and yields a certain amount of time to Member B, Member B may use part or all of that time to engage in exchanges with other Members. However, Member B may not yield specific portions of the time (such as one or two minutes) that was yielded to him or her. Member B simply may yield or decline to yield to another Member. If Member B does yield, he or she always has the option of reclaiming the time whenever he or she chooses.

The chairman of the Committee of the Whole normally alternates in recognition between the two floor managers in an effort to ensure that they use their time at roughly the same rate. From time to time, floor managers may ask the chairman how much time they have remaining, so they can allocate their time carefully. The majority floor manager has the right to make the closing statement during general debate. If a floor manager has no need for the remaining time, he or she may "yield back" the balance of that time.

When all the time for general debate has been consumed or yielded back, general debate ends, and Members may proceed into the second stage of consideration in Committee of the Whole: the process of offering, debating, and voting on amendments.

Related CRS reports include CRS Report 98-564, *Committee of the Whole: Stages of Action on Measures*, by Richard S. Beth; CRS Report 98-143, *Procedural Distinctions between the House and the Committee of the Whole*, by Judy Schneider; CRS Report 98-439, *Amendment Process in the Committee of the Whole*, by Judy Schneider; and CRS Report 98-870, *Quorum Requirements in the House: Committee and Chamber*, by Christopher M. Davis.

Author Contact Information

Judy Schneider
Specialist on the Congress
jschneider@crs.loc.gov, 7-8664

Acknowledgments

Stanley Bach, former senior specialist at CRS, originally wrote this report. The listed author updated this report and is available to respond to inquiries on the subject.

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 40 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.

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 or call us: 202-678-1600, ext 115.



TheCapitol.Net

Non-partisan training and publications that show how Washington works.™

PO Box 25706, Alexandria, VA 22313-5706
202-678-1600 • www.thecapitol.net



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

