Congressional Leadership

Inquire: How is Congress Organized and Who is in Charge?

Overview

Every group must have a leader, and the more power a leader has, the more they can influence the group. Congress is composed of 535 successful, driven, and strong-willed individuals. Men and women who feel the need to lead, but who leads the leaders? The 100 Senate members and the 435 House members pick leaders, each with varying amounts of authority but reliant on the support of their party’s Congress members. There are no “terms” of office; the leaders serve only as long as a majority of their party supports them. Also, there are no “term limits;” someone can be in leadership as long as his or her party elects them.

So, who are these leaders of leaders, and what roles do they play in the American government?

Big Question: How important is Congressional leadership?

Watch: How Should Representatives Govern - In What Capacity Do They Serve?

Americans elect their senators and representatives. One very important question a democratic government asks is how elected representatives should behave once sworn into office. In what capacity should they serve their constituents? Should members of Congress reflect the will of the people, or should they pay attention to their own points of view, even if they disagree with their constituents? Many considerations influence the voting patterns of Congress members, including the following:

1. Delegate: the constituents' views. Members of Congress often visit their home districts and states to keep in touch with their constituents' views. They also read their mail, keep in touch with local and state political leaders, and meet with their constituents in Washington. Some pay more attention than others, but they all have to consider the views of the folks back home. Completely ignoring one's constituency would be foolhardy if a politician hoped at all to be reelected.

2. Partisan: the party views. Congress is organized primarily along party lines, so party membership is an important determinant of a member's vote. Each party develops its own version of many important bills, and party leaders actively pressure members to vote according to party views. It is not surprising that representatives and senators vote along party lines about three-fourths of the time.

3. Trustee: their personal views. What if a representative or senator seriously disagrees with the views of his or her constituents on a particular issue? How should he or she vote? Those who believe that personal views are the most important factor argue that people vote for candidates
whose judgment they trust. If the people disagree with their decisions, they can always vote them out of office.

4. Politico: a combination of all three. The best representatives understand the importance of all three capacities and attempt to combine them as they make their decisions. This takes more work and is often unpopular with the party or the people, depending on decisions made. Regardless, the best leaders usually act in this capacity, as politicos.

As a representative, a member of Congress has a great responsibility to both the people and the country. Balancing all of the interests and people who will be impacted in order to make the best decision requires dedication and hard work — some of the most important work a man or woman can do in a lifetime.


Read: Congressional Leadership

Overview

The House and Senate leadership structures are instrumental in understanding how these two legislative bodies function and who holds the power in the American government.

Party Leadership

The party leadership in Congress controls the actions of Congress. Leaders are elected by the two-party conferences in each chamber. In the House of Representatives, these is the House Democratic Conference and the House Republican Conference. These conferences meet regularly and separately, not only to elect their leaders but also to discuss important issues and strategies for moving policy forward. Based on the number of members in each conference, one conference becomes the majority conference and the other becomes the minority conference. Independents like Senator Bernie Sanders will typically join one of the major party’s conferences, as a matter of practicality and often based on ideological affinity. Without the membership to elect their own leadership, independents would have a very difficult time getting things done in Congress unless they had a relationship with the leaders.

Leadership in the House

Despite the power of the conferences, however, the most important leadership position in the House is actually elected by the entire body of representatives. This position is called speaker of the house and is the only House officer mentioned in the Constitution. The Constitution does not require the speaker to be a member of the House, although to date, all 54 speakers have been. The speaker is the presiding officer, the administrative head of the House, the partisan leader of the majority party in the House, and an elected representative of a single congressional district. As a testament to the importance of the speaker, since 1947, the holder of this position has been second in line to succeed the president in an emergency, after the vice president.

The speaker serves until his or her party loses, or until he or she is voted out of the position or chooses to step down. Republican Speaker John Boehner became the latest speaker to walk away from the position when it appeared his position was in jeopardy. This event shows how the party conference, or caucus, oversees the leadership as much as, if not more than, the leadership oversees the party membership in the chamber. The speaker is invested with quite a bit of power, such as the ability to assign bills to committees and decide when a bill will be presented to the floor for a vote. The speaker also rules on House procedures, often delegating authority for certain duties to other members. He or she appoints
members and chairs to committees, creates select committees to fulfill a specific purpose and then disband, and can even select a member to be speaker pro tempore, to act as speaker in the speaker’s absence. Finally, when the Senate joins the House in a joint session, the speaker presides over these sessions, because they are usually held in the House of Representatives.

Below the speaker, the majority and minority conferences each elect two leadership positions arranged in a hierarchical order. At the top of the hierarchy are the floor leaders of each party; these are generally referred to as the majority and minority leaders. The minority leader has a visible, if not always powerful, position. As the official leader of the opposition, he or she technically holds the rank closest to that of the speaker, makes strategy decisions, and attempts to keep order within the minority. However, the majority rules the day in the House, like a cartel. On the majority side, because it holds the speakership, the majority leader also has considerable power. Moreover, historically the majority leader tends to be in the best position to assume the speakership when the current speaker steps down.

Below these leaders are the two party’s respective whips. A whip’s job, as the name suggests, is to whip up votes and otherwise enforce party discipline. Whips make the rounds in Congress, telling members the position of the leadership and the collective voting strategy; sometimes they wave various carrots and sticks in front of recalcitrant members to get them in line. The remainder of the leadership positions in the House include a handful of chairs and assistantships.

**Leadership in the Senate**

Like the House, the Senate also has majority and minority leaders and whips, each with duties very similar to those of their counterparts in the House. Unlike the House, however, the Senate doesn’t have a speaker. The duties and powers held by the speaker in the House fall to the majority leader in the Senate. Another difference is that, according to the U.S. Constitution, the Senate’s president is actually the elected vice president of the United States, but he or she may only vote in case of a tie. Apart from this and very few other exceptions, the Senate president does not actually operate in the Senate. Instead, the Constitution allows for the Senate to choose a president pro tempore — usually the most senior senator of the majority party — who presides over the Senate.

Despite the title, the job is largely a formal and powerless role. The real power in the Senate is in the hands of the majority leader and minority leader. Like the speaker of the house, the majority leader is the chief spokesperson for the majority party, but unlike in the House, he or she does not run the floor alone. Because of the traditions of unlimited debate and the filibuster, the majority and minority leaders often occupy the floor together in an attempt to keep things moving along. At times, their interactions are intense and partisan, but for the Senate to get things done, they must cooperate to get the 60 votes needed to run the super-majority legislative institution.

**Conclusion**

It is important to remember the dual-nature of each leader’s responsibilities. While they are trying to lead and mold the legislation for the entire country, they are also responsible to their constituents — the House members to their Congressional Districts and the Senate members to their states. As they are performing their duties on behalf of their parties, they must also represent their constituents. Regardless, each of the men and women in leadership have an ability to impact the legislative process and, thus, the United States’ laws and public policies.
Reflect: House or Senate?

Poll
Based on what you know now, would you rather be a member of the House of Representatives or a senator?
- House
- Senate

Expand: Leadership: It’s a Party Thing

Overview
Is walking the plank dangerous? Certainly, for a pirate. But, for a politician, it may be prudent.

Partisanship — or fierce loyalty to one’s political party — generally is not admired in the United States today. Many people today call themselves independent voters, while bickering between the parties in Congress is often condemned. But, parties are very important in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Even though political parties do not play as big a role in elections as they once did, they still provide the basic organization of leadership in Congress.

After each legislative election, the party that wins the most representatives is designated the majority in each house, and the other party is called the minority. These designations are significant because the majority party holds the most significant leadership positions, such as speaker of the house. Usually, the same party holds both houses, but occasionally they are split. For example, from 1983-1985, the House majority was Democratic and the Senate majority was Republican.

At the beginning of a new Congress, the members of each party gather in special meetings to talk party policy and themes and to select their leaders by majority vote. Democrats call their meeting a caucus, and Republicans call their meeting a conference. Next, when each House convenes in its first session, Congressional leaders, such as the speaker of the house and the majority leader in the Senate, are selected. Even though the whole House votes for its leaders, the majority party makes the real selections ahead of time behind the scenes.

House Leadership
Because the House has 435 members to the Senate’s 100 members, House leaders tend to have more power over their membership than Senate leaders do. With 435 people trying to make decisions together, the sheer numbers require leaders to coordinate the lawmaking process. Political parties choose all top leadership positions.

The speaker of the house is the most powerful member of the House of Representatives, and arguably, the most influential single legislator in both houses. Always a member of the majority party, the speaker’s influence depends partly on strength of personality and respect of colleagues, but also on several important powers.

The speaker:
- presides over proceedings on the House floor;
- influences which bills go to which committees;
The majority leader, usually the second ranking member of the majority party, is the party leader on the floor. Often hand-picked by the speaker, the majority leader helps plan the party's legislative program. Many speakers came to their positions by serving as majority leader first.

The minority leader heads and organizes the minority party. Because the party has less voting power than the majority party has, this person's influence is usually limited. If the minority party succeeds in the next congressional election, the minority leader could well be the next speaker.

Senate Leadership

The Senate leadership is characterized by its highest positions actually having very little power. By Constitutional provision, the president of the Senate is the vice president of the United States, who can only cast a vote in case of a tie. The vice president rarely sits with the Senate, so a president pro tempore is selected to take his place. This role too is largely ceremonial, so the chair is often passed to a junior Senator.

The floor leaders are the real leaders in the Senate, although they generally have less power than leaders in the House do. The majority leader is usually the most influential person in the Senate. He or she has the privilege of beginning debates on legislation and usually influences choices for committee assignments. The majority leader shares his power with the minority leader, who leads the other party. Usually the two leaders cooperate to some extent, but the leader of the majority party always has the upper hand.

Partisanship?

The major leadership positions — speaker of the house, and majority and minority leaders in both houses — are based almost exclusively on party membership. Does this system encourage party loyalty above all else in members of Congress who want to get ahead? If that is the case, many Americans’ impatience with “partisan politics” is perhaps understandable.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Congressional Leadership: Crash Course Government and Politics #8
- A video exploring the leadership structure of Congress
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8urcMLGFyU

4.7 Majority and Minority Parties in Congress AP Gov
- A video discussing in depth the majority and minority parties in Congress
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaYy2J84-tc

The Congressional Leadership
- A video discussing leadership in Congress
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4olRP-n8Hk
Lesson Glossary

partisanship: strong support, or even blind allegiance, for a particular political party
speaker of the house: the presiding officer of the House of Representatives and the leader of the majority party; the speaker is second in the presidential line of succession, after the vice president
select committees: a small legislative committee created to fulfill a specific purpose and then disbanded; also called an ad hoc, or special committee
minority leader: the party member who directs the activities of the minority party on the floor of either the House or the Senate
majority leader: the leader of the majority party in either the House or Senate; in the House, the majority leader serves under the speaker of the house, in the Senate, the majority leader is the functional leader and chief spokesperson for the majority party
whips: in the House and in the Senate, a high leadership position whose primary duty is to enforce voting discipline in the chambers and conferences
president pro tempore: the senator who acts in the absence of the actual president of the Senate, who is also the vice president of the United States; the president pro tempore is usually the most senior senator of the majority party

Check Your Knowledge

1. The duties and powers held by the speaker of the house fall to the president pro tempore in the Senate.
   A. True
   B. False

2. At the beginning of each new Congress, the Democrats meet in a conference and the Republicans meet in a caucus to talk about party policy and themes, and to select their leaders by majority vote.
   A. True
   B. False

3. Although the constitution does not require the speaker of the house to be a member of the House of Representatives, all but one of 54 speakers have been.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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