

# CRS Report for Congress

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

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**Speaker of the House.** The Speaker is elected by the House on the first day of a new Congress. Customarily, the 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 - though not always - elected on a party line vote. (There is no requirement that the Speaker be a member of the majority party or even a Member of Congress.) House rules invest the Speaker with substantial powers. His duties include:

- 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 the offices of the Clerk of the House, Sergeant-at-Arms, Chief Administrative Officer, and Chaplain;
- appointing the Chairman 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, although he serves as an *ex officio* member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. He infrequently votes or participates in floor debate. A rule adopted in 1995 limits the Speaker's term to four consecutive Congresses.

The Speaker is the leader of his party. Within the Republican Party Conference, the Speaker acts as chair of the Steering Committee, which assigns Republican members to committees, subject to conference approval and House election. Under Republican Conference rules, the Speaker makes nominations for the conference's consideration for

membership on the Rules Committee and House Administration Committee, and designates their chairs. He also appoints one Member to serve on the Budget Committee.

Although not prescribed in any formal way, the Speaker is the principal spokesman for the House and, oftentimes, for his party. He takes a leading role in negotiations with the Senate and President. In periods of divided government, the Speaker may be the leader of his national party. (See also CRS Report 97-780, *The Speaker of the House: House Officer, Party Leader, and Representative*; and CRS Report RL30857, *Speakers of the House: Elections, 1913-2001*.)

**Majority Leader.** The majority leader is second to the Speaker in the party hierarchy. He is chosen by the majority party's conference in organizational meetings prior to the start of a new Congress. Contested elections are decided by secret ballot. The majority leader's role has largely been defined by history and tradition. Among other responsibilities, he is charged with scheduling legislation for floor consideration, on which he works closely with the Speaker and his party's whips. He 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. By custom, he does not typically lead floor debate on major measures. At times he may serve as a national spokesman for his party. (See also CRS Report RL30665, *The Role of the House Majority Leader: An Overview*.)

**Minority Leader.** The minority leader is both the minority party's counterpart to the Speaker and the floor leader of the "loyal opposition." The minority leader is elected by the minority party caucus at organizational meetings prior to the start of a new Congress. He speaks for the minority party and its policies, 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 his party's committee assignment panel, the Democratic Steering Committee, and like the Speaker serves as an *ex officio* member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. When his party holds the White House, the minority leader may be the President's chief spokesman in the House. He may also be the national spokesman for his party when the majority party holds both the House and the White House. By custom, he does not typically lead floor debate on major measures. At times, he may serve as a national spokesman for his party. (See CRS Report RL30666, *The Role of the House Minority Leader*.)

**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. 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 Web site. (For Democrats, [<http://democraticwhip.house.gov>], and for Republicans, [<http://majoritywhip.house.gov>]. See also CRS Report RS20499, *House Leadership: Whip Organization*.)