

(STUDY MATERIALS FOR LONG QUESTION AND SHORT NOTES)

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The House of Representatives in US Congress

Introduction: The U.S. House of Representatives is the lower house of Congress and plays a vital role, along with the Senate, in the process of moving proposed legislation to law. The bicameral relationship between the two bodies is vital to the American system of checks and balances that the Founding Fathers of the United States envisioned when writing the U.S. Constitution. The House of Representatives is part of the Legislative branch of government.

Composition

The House of Representatives shares equal responsibility for lawmaking with the U.S. [Senate](#). As conceived by the framers of the Constitution, the House was to represent the popular will, and its members were to be directly elected by the people. In contrast, members of the Senate were appointed by the states until the ratification of the [Seventeenth Amendment](#) (1913), which mandated the direct election of senators.

Each state is guaranteed at least one member of the House of Representatives. The allocation of seats is based on the population within the states, and membership is reapportioned every 10 years, following the decennial [census](#). House members are elected for two-year terms from single-member districts of approximately equal population. The constitutional requirements for eligibility for membership of the House of Representatives are a minimum age of 25 years, U.S. citizenship for at least seven years, and residency of the state from which the

member is elected, though he need not reside in the [constituency](#) that he represents.

The House of Representatives originally comprised 59 members. The number rose following the ratification of the Constitution by [North Carolina](#) and [Rhode Island](#) in 1790; the first Congress (1789–91) adjourned with 65 representatives. By 1912 membership had reached 435. Two additional representatives were added temporarily after the admission of [Alaska](#) and [Hawaii](#) as states in 1959, but at the next [legislative apportionment](#), membership returned to 435, the number authorized by a law enacted in 1941.

Speaker of the House

The two houses of Congress may effectively have the same legislative powers, but they operate differently.

In the House of Representatives, the legislative schedule (which defines when bills are debated and voted upon) is set by the body's leader, known as the Speaker of the House. The Speaker, who is chosen among the membership of the political party with the most seats in the House, establishes the legislative priorities for the body and presides over the deliberation of bills under consideration.

The Speaker of the House is also the second person in the U.S. presidential line of [succession](#)—the order in which presidents are replaced if they die, resign or are removed from office—after the Vice President and before the President pro tempore of the Senate.

[Nancy Pelosi](#) was the first female Speaker of the House and the closest female ever in line to the presidency. The longest serving Speaker of the House was Sam Rayburn (1882-1961) of Texas, who served for a total of over 17 years

The House Majority Leader—who is also chosen from among the membership of the political party with the most seats in the House—schedules time for floor debate on legislation and sets the legislative strategy for the party in control.

As a check to the power of the Speaker and Majority Leader, the Minority Leader, selected from the membership of the political party with fewer seats in the House, serves as an advocate for their party's concerns and procedural rights.

Each of the two political parties also elect a “Whip”—the Majority Whip for the party with the most seats, and the Minority Whip for the other party—from their House delegations. The whip's official role is to count potential votes for bills being debated for the party leaders.

Whips also work to promote party unity in upcoming votes. Procedurally, they also are responsible for sending out notices to the Representatives from their respective parties regarding the floor schedule, providing membership with copies of bills and reports and authoring their parties' official positions on legislation up for debate.

Powers of the House of Representatives

The Constitution vests certain exclusive powers in the House of Representatives, including the right to initiate impeachment proceedings and to originate revenue bills. The organization and character of the House of Representatives have evolved under the influence of political parties, which provide a means of controlling proceedings and mobilizing the necessary majorities. Party leaders, such as the speaker of the House and the majority and minority leaders, play a central role in the operations of the institution. However, party discipline (i.e., the tendency of all members of a political party to vote in the same way) has not always been strong, owing to the fact that members, who must face re-election every two years, often vote the interests of their districts rather than their political party when the two diverge.

A further dominating element of House organization is the [committee system](#), under which the membership is divided into specialized groups for purposes such as holding hearings, preparing bills for the consideration of the entire House, and regulating House procedure. Each committee is chaired by a member of the majority party. Almost all bills are first referred to a committee, and ordinarily the full House cannot act on a bill until the committee has “reported” it for floor action. There are approximately 20 standing (permanent) committees, organized mainly around major policy areas, each having staffs, budgets, and subcommittees. They may hold hearings on questions of public interest, propose legislation that has not been formally introduced as a bill or resolution, and conduct investigations. Among important standing committees are those on appropriations, on ways and means (which handles matters related to finance), and on rules. There are also select and special committees, which are usually appointed for a specific project and for a limited period.

The committees also play an important role in the control exercised by Congress over governmental agencies. [Cabinet](#) officers and other officials are frequently summoned before the committees to explain policy. The Constitution (Article I, section 6) prohibits members of Congress from holding offices in the [executive branch](#) of government—a chief distinction between parliamentary and congressional forms of government.

After the census of 1920, Northeastern and Midwestern states held 270 House seats and the South and West held 169. Thereafter, the balance between the two regions gradually shifted: following the 2010 census, the Northeast and [Midwest](#) accounted for only 172 seats, compared with the South and West’s 263. Most notably, the number of representatives from New York declined from 45 in the 1930s to only 27 in 2012, while the number from [California](#) increased from 11 to 53.

The Difference Between The Senate And The House of Representatives

The Senate includes 100 members, with each of the 50 states electing two senators to this body of Congress to six-year terms. The House of Representatives has 435 members, with each of the 50 states electing varying numbers of legislators according to the size of their population.

Because the number of representatives in each state's delegation is based on population, larger states such as New York and [California](#) elect more representatives to the House, each to two-year terms. A general rule of thumb is that each member of the House of Representatives represents roughly 600,000 people.

Interestingly, although the Senate is sometimes referred to as the "upper body," and the House as the "lower body," the two legislative bodies hold the same amount of power within the U.S. system. Both must agree to, vote on and adopt pieces of identical legislation (known as bills) in order for the legislation to become law.

Representatives of the House are addressed as "The Honourable," before their names, or as congressman, congresswoman, or representative. Members of the senate are typically called senators.

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