

Overview

Every two years, at the beginning of each Congress, the House of Representatives is responsible for adopting rules that govern the procedure and process of the chamber, while the Senate uses its traditional rules and procedures. The adoption of these rules is necessary for sessions of Congress to run as smoothly as possible. Standing rules also dictate how party leadership and committee membership are selected. This is a basic guide to rules and procedures in both chambers of Congress.

Rules and Procedures in the House

At the beginning of each Congress, the House of Representatives must vote on a new rules package to determine the rules that will govern the body for the next two years. Before these rules are adopted, the House operates based on general parliamentary rules. The House usually adopts the rules of the previous Congress and makes amendments the body feels are necessary. The rules package lays out the guidelines for the daily procedure in the House, how the chamber passes legislation, and other rules of decorum.

The House Committee on Rules is among the oldest standing committees and is the mechanism by which the Speaker maintains control of the House Floor. The House Rules Committee has two types of jurisdiction—special orders and original jurisdiction. Special orders, or special rules, determine the rules of debates on a matter or measure on the Floor and are the bulk of the Committee’s work. Original jurisdiction refers to changes being made to the standing rules. The Rules Committee can create or change almost any rule as long as a majority of the House agrees.

Reporting a special rule to the House Committee on Rules is a process that begins with the committee of jurisdiction requesting a hearing by the Rules Committee. The Rules Committee then holds a hearing in which Members of Congress from the committee of jurisdiction can make their case.

Rules and Procedures in the Senate

Unlike the House of Representatives, the Senate, as a continuing body, does not have to adopt or readopt its rules with each new Congress. A set of standing rules govern proceedings in the Senate in conjunction with a body of precedents created by rulings of presiding officers or by votes of the Senate, a variety of established and customary practices, and ad hoc arrangements the Senate makes. The standing rules guarantee rights to senators, however, these rights are sometimes foregone by senators in the interest of conducting business more quickly.

One rule that separates the Senate from the House is the use of cloture to end a filibuster. Senators can prolong voting on bills by debating at length or using other delaying tactics, but a cloture vote by 60 out of the 100 senators can end the debate and force a vote on the bill.

The Senate Committee on Rules and Administration is responsible for upholding the rules of the Senate floor; the

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administration of Senate buildings, the credentials and qualifications of senators, and the development and implementation of strategic plans to improve the operations of the Senate. The committee has jurisdiction over any matters relating to the rules and procedures of the Senate rules and regulations. Unlike its counterpart in the House, the Senate Rules and Administration Committee does not need to develop a rules package for each new Congress.

Selection of House and Senate Leadership

Leadership in the House is decided by internal party elections. These elections typically take place behind closed doors via secret ballot in November following the general election. Leadership elections also determine the chairs of the Democratic Caucus and the Republican Conference and the chairs of the two parties' campaign committees. The parties also elect their nominees for Speaker of the House. The Speaker is elected by a simple majority in a vote put to the entire House of Representatives.

The Speaker is the most powerful member of leadership, followed by the majority leader, minority leader, majority and minority whips, and finally the assistant speaker

In the Senate, leadership consists of the president pro tempore, the majority and minority leaders, conference chairs, policy committee chairs, conference secretaries, and campaign committee chairs. These positions are elected or appointed by their separate parties.

The vice president of the United States serves as the president of the Senate, but the president pro tempore presides over the Senate in the absence of the vice president. The president pro tempore is traditionally, but not always, the most senior member of the majority party in the Senate who is elected to the role by the chamber. Responsibilities of the president pro tempore include appointing the director of the Congressional Budget Office with the Speaker of the House, making appointments to various national commissions and advisory boards, and receiving reports from certain government agencies.

The Democratic leader in the Senate serves as chair of the party conference, but the Senate Republicans divide those duties, electing one person to serve as conference chair and another to serve as leader.

Selection of Committees in the House and Senate

Both parties in both chambers use steering committees, also known as committees on committees, to determine leadership and membership of committees. The Republican Steering Committee and the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee are selected during meetings in November and December after an election. The steering committees then make recommendations to the Republican Conference and Democratic Caucus respectively on committee chairs, ranking minority members, and general committee assignments.

In the House, once the steering committees make recommendations to their parties, the relevant party caucus approves the recommendations of the selection committee. Then the House approves the recommendations of the caucuses, which are brought before the House as privileged resolutions.

Traditionally, though not exclusively, committee chairs have been selected by seniority, so that the longest-serving Members of the committee from the majority and minority parties become the chair and ranking member, respectively, of the committee. Members of the House are typically limited to service on two committees and four subcommittees, with exceptions for particular committees.

In the Senate, the committee assignment process is guided by Senate rules as well as party rules and practices. The Senate governs committee operations through its Standing Rules XXIV-XXVIII.

Senators are formally elected to standing committees by the entire membership of the Senate, but in practice, each party conference is largely responsible for determining which of its members will sit on each committee. Just as they do in the house, steering committees from both parties make recommendations on committee leadership and assignments. In both

party conferences, the floor leader has the authority to make some committee assignments, which can provide the leader with a method of promoting party discipline through the granting or withholding of desired assignments. The number of seats a party holds in the Senate determines its share of seats on each committee.

Senate rules divide committees into three categories based on their importance: Class A, Class B, and Class C. Each senator may serve on no more than two Class A committees and one Class B committee, unless granted special permission. There are no limits to service on Class C committees.

In both chambers, the Republican party has term limits on committee leadership roles.

Links to Other Resources

- Congressional Research Service – [Commonly Used Motions and Requests in the House of Representatives](#)
- Congressional Research Service – [House and Senate Rules of Procedure: A Comparison](#)
- Congressional Research Service – [House Standing Committee Chairs and Ranking Minority Members: Rules Governing Selection Procedures](#)
- CNN – [What to know about upcoming House leadership elections](#)
- GovInfo – [Congressional Calendars](#)
- Office of the Historian of the United States House of Representatives – [House Committees](#)
- Roll Call – [House adopts rules package for 118th Congress](#)
- United States Congress – [Glossary of Legislative Terms](#)
- United States House of Representatives – [A Guide to the Rules, Precedents, and Procedures of the House](#)
- United States House of Representatives – [The Legislative Process](#)
- United States Senate – [Rules and Procedure](#)
- United States Senate – [When a New Congress Begins](#)