THE POLICY CIRCLE
THE U.S HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
“TO ENSURE A SEPARATION OF POWERS, THE U.S. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS MADE UP OF THREE BRANCHES: LEGISLATIVE, EXECUTIVE AND JUDICIAL. TO ENSURE THE GOVERNMENT IS EFFECTIVE AND CITIZENS’ RIGHTS ARE PROTECTED, EACH BRANCH HAS ITS OWN POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES, INCLUDING WORKING WITH THE OTHER BRANCHES.” THIS IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS “CHECKS AND BALANCES,” AND PREVENTS ANY ONE PART OF GOVERNMENT FROM WIELDING TOO MUCH POLITICAL POWER.

FACTS TO KNOW

THE HOUSE IS THE ONLY INSTITUTION THAT HAS BEEN DIRECTLY ELECTED BY AMERICAN VOTERS SINCE ITS FORMATION IN 1789.

ONLY THE HOUSE MAY ORIGINATE REVENUE BILLS, AND BY TRADITION IT ALSO ORIGINATES APPROPRIATION BILLS, WHICH MEANS THE HOUSE HAS THE MOST INFLUENCE ON POLICIES THAT IMPACT YOU, YOUR BUSINESS, AND YOUR FINANCES.

A BILL PASSES THE HOUSE BY SIMPLE MAJORITY, 218 VOTES OF 435 TOTAL.

SPECIFICALLY, SEATS IN THE HOUSE "ARE APPORTIONED BASED ON STATE POPULATION ACCORDING TO THE CONSTITUTIONALLY MANDATED CENSUS." TYING REPRESENTATION TO CENSUS DATA ALLOWS THE NUMBER OF EACH STATE’S REPRESENTATIVES TO INCREASE OR DECREASE ALONG WITH FLUCTUATIONS IN STATE POPULATION. THE CENSUS DATA IS THEN USED TO DETERMINE CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS, AREAS IN THE STATE FROM WHICH REPRESENTATIVES ARE ELECTED TO THE HOUSE. THIS PROCESS IS CALLED REDISTRICTING.

MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES "MUST STAND FOR ELECTION EVERY TWO YEARS, AFTER WHICH IT CONVENES FOR A NEW SESSION AND ESSENTIALLY RECONSTITUTES ITSELF – ELECTING A SPEAKER, SWEARING-IN THE MEMBERS-ELECT, AND APPROVING A SLATE OF OFFICERS TO ADMINISTER THE INSTITUTION." BIENNIAL ELECTIONS ARE HELD IN NOVEMBER, AND THE CONGRESS COMMENCES IN THE FOLLOWING JANUARY. TO BE ELECTED, A REPRESENTATIVE MUST BE AT LEAST 25 YEARS OLD, A UNITED STATES CITIZEN FOR AT LEAST SEVEN YEARS, AND A RESIDENT OF THE STATE HE OR SHE REPRESENTS. U.S. HOUSE CANDIDATES ARE NOT REQUIRED TO LIVE IN THE CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT THEY REPRESENT.


WHEN A MAJORITY OF MEMBERS VOTE TO DO SOMETHING IN THE HOUSE, IT GETS DONE. MAJORITY RULE MAKES PASSING LEGISLATION RELATIVELY EFFICIENT, AND THAT MEANS THAT THE PARTY IN THE MINORITY HAS LESS POWER TO SET THE AGENDA OR PASS ITS PROPOSALS. THIS CONTRASTS WITH THE SENATE, WHERE A SINGLE SENATOR – IN THE MAJORITY OR THE MINORITY – CAN GENERALLY FORCE A VOTE OR STOP A BILL IN ITS TRACKS.
WHAT DOES THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES DO?


COMMITTEES "ARE PERMANENT PANELS GOVERNED BY HOUSE CHAMBER RULES, WITH RESPONSIBILITY TO CONSIDER BILLS AND ISSUES AND TO HAVE GENERAL OVERSIGHT RELATING TO THEIR AREAS OF JURISDICTION." COMMITTEES HAVE DIFFERENT LEGISLATIVE JURISDICTIONS, BUT EACH CONSIDERS, SHAPES, AND PASSES LAWS RELATED TO ITS JURISDICTION, AND MONITORS AGENCIES, PROGRAMS, AND ACTIVITIES WITHIN THEIR JURISDICTION. EACH COMMITTEE HAS A CHAIR THAT LEADS THE FULL COMMITTEE, AND A RANKING MEMBER WHO LEADS THE MINORITY MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE. COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENT DIRECTLY AFFECTS A REPRESENTATIVE'S WORK IN CONGRESS. AFTER A CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION, POLITICAL PARTIES ASSIGN NEWLY ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES TO STANDING COMMITTEES.

WHEN REPRESENTATIVES ARE IN WASHINGTON, D.C., THEY REPORT SPENDING:
35% OF TIME ON "LEGISLATIVE/POLICY WORK,"
17% ON "CONSTITUENT SERVICES WORK,"
17% ON "POLITICAL/CAMPAIGN WORK,"
9% ON "PRESS/MEDIA RELATIONS,"
9% ON "FAMILY/FRIENDS,"
7% ON "ADMINISTRATIVE/MANAGERIAL WORK,"
6% ON "PERSONAL TIME."

SOME OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN COMMITTEES INCLUDE:
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS, WHICH OVERSEES ALL TAXATION, TARIFFS, AND OTHER REVENUE-RAISING MEASURES. THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS, WHICH HAS JURISDICTION OVER SETTING SPECIFIC GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES. THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, WHICH HAS JURISDICTION OVER FOREIGN ASSISTANCE AND OVERSEES NATIONAL SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING FOREIGN POLICY. THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY, WHICH OVERSEES THE JUDICIARY AND CIVIL AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS.
LEADERSHIP IN THE HOUSE


MAJORITY AND MINORITY LEADERS REPRESENT THEIR RESPECTIVE PARTIES ON THE HOUSE FLOOR. EACH IS ELECTED BY HIS OR HER RESPECTIVE PARTY. THE MAJORITY LEADER IS SECOND TO THE SPEAKER AND SCHEDULES LEGISLATIVE BUSINESS, PLANNING LEGISLATIVE AGENDAS RATHER THAN SERVING ON COMMITTEES. THE MINORITY LEADER SERVES AS THE MINORITY PARTY'S SPOKESPERSON, ESSENTIALLY THE MINORITY PARTY'S COUNTERPART TO THE SPEAKER. HE OR SHE ALSO CHAIRS THE MINORITY PARTY'S COMMITTEE ASSIGNMENT PANEL.

MAJORITY AND MINORITY WHIPS SERVE AS MIDDLEMEN TO BETWEEN THEIR PARTY LEADERS AND MEMBERS. THEY "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."


ONCE THE RULE HAS BEEN ADOPTED, THE HOUSE USUALLY CONSIDERS THE BILL “[IN A PROCEDURAL SETTING CALLED THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE, WHICH IS ESSENTIALLY ‘THE HOUSE ASSEMBLED IN A DIFFERENT FORM; IT IS A COMMITTEE OF THE HOUSE COMPOSED OF EVERY REPRESENTATIVE THAT MEETS IN THE HOUSE CHAMBER.’]” THIS PROCEDURE “ALLOWS MEMBERS AN EFFICIENT WAY TO CONSIDER AND VOTE ON AMENDMENTS.” AFTER THE FLOOR DEBATE ON AMENDMENTS AND THE UNDERLYING LEGISLATION, THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE REPORTS TO THE FULL HOUSE, WHICH THEN VOTES ON THE BILL.
WHAT YOU CAN DO

**MEASURE** -
Do you know who your congressional representative is? What about your state elected officials? Track your representatives’ votes with GovTrack.

**PLAN** -
Set milestones based on your state’s legislative calendar or local community calendar.

**REACH OUT** -
Find allies in your community or in nearby towns and elsewhere in the state. Foster collaborative relationships with colleagues, neighbors, friends, and local organizations to mobilize an effort to bring attention to your issue to your local congressional office. Also reach out to community leaders to educate them and request their engagement on the issue.

**EXECUTE** -
Research: Make sure you know the facts about the issue you are raising. Government agencies, think tanks, and media outlets can all be good resources. Remember to research all sides of the issue to make sure you understand various angles. You can also talk with people who are affected by the issue with which you are concerned; anecdotal information combined with measured data can be powerful. Write: Although we may be more inclined to email in the digital age, writing an old-fashioned letter to your local elected representatives or to members of Congress is still one of the most effective ways to influence lawmakers. Organize: Organize people to call in, follow-up on written material, and reach out to other community members to educate them on the issue. Demonstrating wide support can be very effective in influencing a legislator to support your position.