

INFORM. INSPIRE. DEVELOP CIVIC LEADERS.

# THE POLICY CIRCLE

## THE U.S HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



# ➤ WHAT IS 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.

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES MOST DIRECTLY REFLECTS THE DESIRES OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC DUE TO THE RATIO OF AMERICAN CITIZENS TO U.S. REPRESENTATIVES AND THE CONSTANT ELECTION CYCLE EVERY TWO YEARS. OF ALL THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES IS DESIGNED TO BE CLOSEST TO AMERICAN VOTERS.



# ➤ 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.

IN ADDITION TO THE 435 REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE STATES, THERE IS A RESIDENT COMMISSIONER FROM PUERTO RICO AND DELEGATES FROM WASHINGTON D.C., AMERICAN SAMOA, GUAM, THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS, AND THE VIRGIN ISLANDS. THE RESIDENT COMMISSIONER AND DELEGATES ARE ABLE TO SERVE AND VOTE ON COMMITTEES BUT DO NOT HAVE THE SAME FULL VOTING RIGHTS AS THE 435 STATE REPRESENTATIVES.

# ➤ HOW IT WORKS ◀



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.



AFTER EACH ELECTION, THE POLITICAL PARTY THAT WINS THE MOST REPRESENTATIVES IS DESIGNATED THE “MAJORITY.” THE OTHER PARTY IS THE “MINORITY.” THE MAJORITY PARTY HOLDS KEY LEADERSHIP POSITIONS, SUCH AS SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE. THE SAME PARTY CAN HAVE THE MAJORITY IN BOTH THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE SENATE, OR THE CHAMBERS CAN BE SPLIT.

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? ◀



THE CONSTITUTION "PROVIDES THAT ONLY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES MAY ORIGINATE REVENUE BILLS," AND BY TRADITION IT ALSO ORIGINATES APPROPRIATION BILLS. ADDITIONALLY, WHILE THE CONSTITUTION DOES NOT SPECIFICALLY MENTION INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT, "THE AUTHORITY TO CONDUCT INVESTIGATIONS IS IMPLIED SINCE CONGRESS POSSESSES 'ALL LEGISLATIVE POWERS'." THE HOUSE INITIATES IMPEACHMENT PROCEEDINGS AND PASSES ARTICLES OF IMPEACHMENT (THE SENATE SITS AS A COURT TO TRY THE IMPEACHMENT). FINALLY, DURING A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STEPS IN IF NO CANDIDATE RECEIVES A MAJORITY OF THE TOTAL ELECTORAL VOTES. EACH STATE DELEGATION HAS ONE VOTE TO CHOOSE THE PRESIDENT FROM AMONG THE TOP THREE CANDIDATES WITH THE LARGEST NUMBER OF ELECTORAL VOTES.

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."



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

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 ◀



THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE IS THE PRESIDING OFFICER OF THE HOUSE, AND IS ELECTED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE. THE SPEAKER ADMINISTERS THE OATH OF OFFICE TO HOUSE MEMBERS, CHAIRS CERTAIN COMMITTEES OR NOMINATES COMMITTEE CHAIRS (NAMELY THE CHAIRS OF THE HOUSE ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE AND THE RULES COMMITTEE), AND APPOINTS MEMBERS OF VARIOUS COMMITTEES AND HOUSE STAFF. AFTER THE VICE PRESIDENT, THE SPEAKER IS SECOND IN LINE TO SUCCEED THE VICE PRESIDENT.

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."

THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE IS ELECTED BY THE ENTIRE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, WHILE THE REPUBLICAN CONFERENCE AND DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS ELECT THE OTHER LEADERSHIP POSITIONS. THE REPUBLICAN CONFERENCE IS THE FORMAL ORGANIZATION OF REPUBLICAN MEMBERS IN THE HOUSE, AND THE DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS IS THAT OF THE DEMOCRATIC MEMBERS.



# LEGISLATION IN THE HOUSE



THE HOUSE PARLIAMENTARIANS - LAWYERS AND CLERKS WHO PROVIDE NONPARTISAN GUIDANCE - WORK CLOSELY WITH CONGRESSIONAL STAFF TO DRAFT BILLS. THE STAFF WORKS TO BUILD SPONSORS AND COSPONSORS BEFORE THE BILL IS INTRODUCED. ANY MEMBER, DELEGATE, OR RESIDENT COMMISSIONER CAN INTRODUCE A BILL WHEN THE HOUSE IS IN SESSION BY "PLACING IT IN THE 'HOPPER,'" A BOX ON THE HOUSE CLERK'S DESK IN THE CAPITOL BUILDING. THE BILL IS THEN FORMALLY ASSIGNED A NUMBER BY THE CLERK. A BILL ORIGINATING IN THE HOUSE WILL START WITH "H.R." (FOR THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, AS OPPOSED TO "S." FOR THE SENATE). THE SPEAKER'S OFFICE THEN ASSIGNS THAT BILL TO ITS COMMITTEE(S) OF JURISDICTION, WHICH THEN ASSIGNS THE BILL TO A SUBCOMMITTEE(S).

THE SUBCOMMITTEE SEEKS INPUT FROM RELEVANT DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES AND HOLDS PUBLIC HEARINGS ABOUT A BILL. AFTER HEARINGS, "VIEWS OF BOTH SIDES ARE STUDIED IN DETAIL" AND THEN A VOTE IS TAKEN TO DETERMINE WHETHER OR NOT THE SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDS THE BILL TO THE FULL COMMITTEE. IF THE COMMITTEE TABLES THE BILL OR FAILS TO TAKE ACTION, THE BILL DOES NOT REACH THE FULL HOUSE. TO GET TO THE FULL HOUSE, THE COMMITTEE STAFF WRITES A REPORT DESCRIBING THE PURPOSE OF THE BILL, WHY THE BILL IS RECOMMENDED, AND AN ANALYSIS OF EACH PART OF THE BILL AND HOW THE BILL MAY AFFECT EXISTING LAW. AFTER A COMMITTEE HAS REPORTED A BILL, THE BILL IS PLACED ON THE CALENDAR. THIS MEANS THE BILL IS ELIGIBLE FOR FLOOR CONSIDERATION, BUT NOT THAT IT WILL NECESSARILY MAKE IT TO THE FLOOR. IN THE HOUSE, IT IS UP TO THE MAJORITY PARTY LEADERSHIP TO DECIDE WHICH BILLS THE HOUSE WILL CONSIDER ON THE FLOOR, AND IN WHAT ORDER.

THE RULES COMMITTEE IS ONE OF THE OLDEST STANDING COMMITTEES IN THE HOUSE. TODAY IT IS THE MECHANISM BY WHICH THE SPEAKER MAINTAINS CONTROL OF THE HOUSE FLOOR. THE RULES COMMITTEE DETERMINES HOW MUCH TIME WILL BE ALLOWED FOR DEBATE ON EACH PIECE OF LEGISLATION CONSIDERED ON THE FLOOR, AND IF ANY (AND WHICH) AMENDMENTS WILL BE CONSIDERED DURING DEBATE. MOST BILLS ARE CONSIDERED UNDER A PROCEDURE KNOWN AS SUSPENSION OF THE RULES, "WHICH LIMITS DEBATE TO 40 MINUTES AND DOES NOT ALLOW AMENDMENTS TO BE OFFERED BY MEMBERS ON THE FLOOR." OTHERWISE, THE BILL IS CONSIDERED UNDER TERMS TAILORED FOR THE PARTICULAR BILL. IN THIS CASE, THE HOUSE ADOPTS A RESOLUTION CALLED A SPECIAL RULE FROM THE RULES COMMITTEE. AFTER THE RULES COMMITTEE REPORTS THE RULE FOR CONSIDERING THE BILL AND THE HOUSE VOTES TO ADOPT THE RULE, THE HOUSE CAN THEN PROCEED TO THE FLOOR DEBATE.

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.



**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.

**PLAN -**  
 SET MILESTONES BASED ON YOUR STATE'S LEGISLATIVE CALENDAR OR LOCAL COMMUNITY CALENDAR.



**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.