What is the structure and organization of Congress?

If the president dies or is unable to perform his or her duties, the vice president steps in. If the vice president is unable to perform, the next person in the line of succession is the Speaker of the House, the most powerful person in the House of Representatives.

Before a person can become Speaker, he or she must already be a member of the House of Representatives, elected by voters to represent them. The Speaker also must be a member of the political party that holds the most seats in Congress, called the majority, or majority party. The Speaker is chosen behind closed doors by the other elected representatives from the majority party.

What do you think about the Speaker’s place in the line of succession? Why is the person who holds this position a good choice or a bad choice to take over the leadership of the country? Explain your answer.

Rules in the House

GUIDING QUESTION What rules govern lawmaking in the House?

Political divisions are unavoidable in a democracy; political debates have always stirred strong passions. Tempers have flared and angry words—even physical blows at times—have been exchanged over political disagreements. Legislators must be free to express their opinions, but rules are needed to help ensure fairness and to protect the minority. Article I, Section 51 of the Constitution says: “Each House may determine the Rules of its Proceedings.” Thomas Jefferson stressed the importance of rules when he was vice president.

PRIMARY SOURCE

It is much more material that there be a rule to go by, than what that rule is; that there may be a uniformity of proceeding in business not subject to the caprice [whims] of the Speaker or captiousness [criticisms] of the members.”

— Thomas Jefferson, 1797
Jefferson spent much of his four years as vice president writing Congress’s first rules manual. To avoid angry confrontations and foster reasonable debate, the manual instructed members not to address each other directly but to speak to the presiding officer. Members could disagree strongly on the issues but were not to question each other’s motives or criticize each other’s states. Above all, members were to maintain decorum—polite behavior—in the chamber. More than 200 years later, Jefferson’s admonitions still influence congressional language and conduct during legislative debates.

**Complex Rules** Each chamber has scores of precedents based on past rulings that serve as a guide to conducting business. The House and Senate each print their rules every two years. House rules are generally aimed at defining the actions an individual representative can take, such as limiting representatives to speaking for five minutes or less during a debate.

The complex rules in the House are geared toward moving legislation quickly once it reaches the floor; consequently, House debates rarely last more than one day. Moreover, leaders of the House of Representatives have more power than leaders in the Senate. For example, the rules of the House allow its leaders to make key decisions about legislative work without consulting other House members.

**Committee Work** The committees of Congress perform most legislative activity. Because of the size of the House, committee work is even more important than in the Senate. Membership in the House is so large that organizing members into committees allows representatives to have more influence than on the House floor; committee work also gives representatives the time to study and shape bills. Finally, because members represent districts, they serve on committees that are important to their constituents.

**Importance of Party Affiliation** Political parties are important to many procedures in Congress. Party distinctions are physically obvious: In both the House and Senate, the Republicans and Democrats sit on opposite sides of the center aisle from each other. In each house, the majority party has the power to select the leaders of that body, to control the flow of legislative work, and to appoint the chairs of all the committees.

When an election produces a change in majority in the House, the incoming majority party can make sweeping changes. For example, in 1994 Republicans won a significant number of congressional seats that had been held by Democrats for years. The Republicans’ new rules concentrated more power in the Speaker’s office, provided for fewer committees and fewer staff members, and limited the terms of committee chairs. Absentee voting in committees was also ended.

The Republican majority pushed through these rules changes over objection from the Democrats. Yet when Democrats returned to the majority after the 2006 elections, they continued many of these practices. Nancy Pelosi, the first woman to serve as Speaker, concentrated authority in the Speaker’s office at the expense of committees. Like Speakers before her, she used the powers of her office to maintain unity within her party and to promote its legislative agenda.

**REVIEW PROGRESS CHECK**

**Determining Importance** How do committees and party affiliation influence lawmaking in the House?
Many democracies have legislatures that include members of multiple parties. This can force collaboration among parties—when no party has a majority in the legislature, parties must work together to get legislation passed. There is no guarantee that will happen, however, and gridlock can thus result in multi-party systems as well as two-party systems.

At any one time, about a dozen parties are represented among the 120 members of Israel’s Knesset. The government (a coalition of parties working together to operate as a majority) introduces most legislation, but any member of the Knesset can present a bill. Most bills can be passed with a simple majority.

Every day that the Knesset is in session, time is reserved for members to question government ministers about matters for which they are responsible. Members will ask questions about policies or actions that concern them. Sometimes, the members of the Knesset will heckle, or shout, boo, or cheer, while the minister is speaking, to express their opinions about the policy being discussed.

In India, nearly 40 parties are represented in its 790-member Parliament—although one party, the Indian National Congress, has dominated the country since its independence.

The Indian Parliament has two houses—Rajya Sabha (Council of States) and Lok Sabha (House of the People). Every bill has to be passed by both houses and assented to by the president before it becomes law.

The members of Parliament (MPs) of Lok Sabha are directly elected by the Indian public. The MPs of Rajya Sabha are elected by the members of the State Legislative Assemblies. Several seats are reserved for representatives from groups that have been historically discriminated against.

**EXPLORING THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION**

1. **Contrasting** What key differences do you see between the U.S. Congress and the legislatures in these two multi-party systems?
2. **Evaluating** Are there any customs or rules from Israel’s Knesset or India’s Parliament that you would recommend the U.S. Congress adopt? If so, explain how that custom or rule aligns with the principles of democracy.

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**House Leadership**

**GUIDING QUESTION** Who makes up the House leadership?

Leaders of the House coordinate the work of this large body of 435 individual members. It is helpful to think of the work of the leadership as meeting six kinds of goals:

- Organizing and unifying party members
- Scheduling work
- Making certain that lawmakers are present for key floor votes
- Distributing and collecting information
- Keeping the House in touch with the president
- Influencing lawmakers to support their party’s positions
The Speaker of the House The Speaker of the House is the presiding officer and its most powerful leader. The Constitution states that the House "shall choose their Speaker and other officers." A caucus, or closed meeting, of the majority party chooses the Speaker of the House at the start of each session of Congress, and the entire House membership approves the choice of Speaker.

As both the presiding officer of the House and the leader of the majority party, the Speaker has great power. Presiding over the sessions of the House, the Speaker can influence proceedings by deciding which members to recognize first. The Speaker also appoints the members of some committees, schedules bills for action, and refers bills to the proper House committee. Finally, the Speaker of the House follows the vice president in the line of succession to the presidency.

Today, Speakers rely as much on persuasion as on their formal powers to influence other members. On a typical day, the Speaker may talk with dozens of members; the Speaker frequently does this just to hear their requests for a favor. As former Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill once put it, "The world is full of little things you can do for people." In return, the Speaker expects representatives' support on important issues.

House Floor Leaders The Speaker's top assistant is the **majority leader**.
The majority leader's job is to help plan the party's legislative program, steer important bills through the House, and make sure the chairpersons of the many committees finish work on bills that are important to the party. The majority leader is the floor leader of his or her political party in the House and, like the Speaker, is elected by the majority party. Thus, the majority leader is not a House official but rather a party official.

The majority leader has help from the majority **whip** and deputy whips, who serve as assistant floor leaders in the House. The majority whip's job is to watch how majority-party members intend to vote on **bills**, to persuade them to vote as the party wishes, and to see that party members are present to vote.

The minority party in the House elects its own leaders—the minority leader and the minority whip. Their responsibilities **parallel** the duties of the majority party, except that they have no power over scheduling work in the House.

**READING PROGRESS CHECK**

**Listing** What are the main responsibilities of the Speaker, majority leader, and majority whip?

**EXPLORING THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION**

**Analyzing** After serving as a representative for 16 years, in 2006 Congressman John Boehner, a Republican from Ohio, was chosen as the House Majority Leader. Five years later, he became the Speaker of the House and was reelected to that position by his caucus in 2013. What skills do you think House majority and minority leaders must develop and demonstrate? Make a list and rank them. How might this work and experience help them ascend to the job of Speaker? Do you possess any similar skills or experiences? What could you do to develop your leadership abilities?

**Lawmaking in the House**

**GUIDING QUESTION** How does the House conduct business?

On a typical day, the House of Representatives might look a bit disorganized. Representatives are talking in small groups, reading newspapers, or constantly walking in and out of the chamber. Most representatives are not even on the floor but are in committee meetings, talking with voters, or in
PARTICIPATE
IN Your Government

Becoming Informed About Your Elected Officials, Part 1

In this lesson and the remainder of the lessons in this chapter, you will develop a profile called “My Representation in Congress.” Begin by investigating basic information about the person who represents you in the U.S. House.

- What is his or her name?
- Party affiliation?
- Experiences prior to being elected?
- Legislative priorities?

CRITICAL THINKING
Using Technology Present these facts in a format that you like, such as a news article, multimedia presentation, video, or blog. Then add a commentary. Do you share your representative's legislative priorities? Do you think those priorities reflect the demographics, economy, and priorities of people in your district? Would you vote for his or her re-election? What else do you need to know before you decide?

their offices. Representatives reach the floor quickly, however, when it is time for debate or a vote on proposed bills.

Usually, the House starts its floor sessions at noon or earlier. Buzzers ring in members’ offices in the House office buildings, committee rooms, and in the Capitol to call representatives to the chamber. The House is normally in session from Monday through Friday. Mondays are for routine work, and not much is done on Friday because many representatives leave to go to their home districts over the weekend. Thus, most of the House’s important work is done from Tuesday through Thursday.

How House Bills Move Through Committees to a Vote All laws start as bills. A proposed law is called a bill until both houses of Congress pass it and the president signs it. According to the procedure that is currently in place, to introduce a bill in the House, representatives drop it into the hopper, a mahogany box that is accessible to all near the front of the chamber.

After a bill is introduced, the Speaker of the House sends it to the appropriate committee for study, discussion, and review. Of the thousands of bills and resolutions that are introduced during each legislative term of Congress, only about 10 to 20 percent ever go to the full House for a vote. Bills that survive the committee process are put on one of the House calendars. Calendars list bills that are up for consideration.

The House Rules Committee The Rules Committee is extremely important because it is a “traffic officer,” helping to direct the flow of major legislation. It is one of the oldest and the most powerful House committees. The representative who chairs this committee has great influence over legislative activity and how bills progress through Congress. After a committee has considered and approved a major bill, it usually goes to the Rules Committee. The Rules Committee can move bills ahead quickly, hold them back, or stop them completely. As a result, the power of the Rules Committee has often been the focus of political battles.

From 1858 to 1910, the Speaker of the House chaired this committee and dominated the flow of legislation. In 1911 the House revolted against Speaker Cannon’s authoritarian leadership and removed him from the Rules Committee.
Party battles over the Speaker’s power also have arisen in relatively recent times. In 1975 Democratic majorities in the House once again placed the Rules Committee under the control of the Speaker. The Democratic Caucus gave the Speaker the power to appoint all majority members of the Rules Committee, subject to caucus ratification. The Republican Caucus continued with this process when they gained majority control of the House in 1995. They appointed nine members and gave the Democrats the remaining four slots on the committee. While the members of the Rules Committee are usually senior representatives, in 2011 Republicans broke with tradition by selecting four freshmen representatives to serve on the committee.

**Function of the Rules Committee** Major bills that reach the floor of the House do so by a rule—or special order—from the Rules Committee. As major bills come out of committee, they are entered on the calendar in the order in which they are received.

Calendars have so many bills on them that if they were taken up in calendar order, many would never reach the floor before the session ended. To solve this problem, the chairperson of the committee that sent the bill to the Rules Committee can ask for it to move ahead of other bills. The Rules Committee can also say how long the bill can be debated and revised.

The Rules Committee also settles disputes among other House committees. For example, the Armed Services Committee may consider a bill that involves a subject that is covered by the Veterans’ Affairs Committee. Sometimes sections of a bill will be sent to two or more committees, a practice known as **concurrent jurisdiction**.

Finally, the Rules Committee often delays or blocks bills that representatives and House leaders do not want to come to a vote on the floor. In this way, it can draw criticism away from members who might have to take an unpopular stand on a bill if it did reach the floor.

**A Quorum for Business** A **quorum** is the minimum number of members needed for official legislative action. For a regular session, a quorum requires a majority of 218 members. When the House meets to debate and amend legislation, it often sits as a Committee of the Whole. In that case, 100 members constitute a quorum. This procedure helps speed consideration of important bills, but the Committee of the Whole cannot pass a bill. Instead, it reports the measure back to the full House with any revisions it makes. The House then passes or rejects the bill.

**READING PROGRESS CHECK**

**Determining Importance** What is the function of the House Rules Committee?

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**LESSON 2 REVIEW**

**Reviewing Vocabulary**

1. **Defining** Who are constituents and why are they important to members of Congress?  
2. **Summarizing** Use your completed graphic organizer to write a short description of each House leadership position.

**Using Your Graphic Organizer**

2. **Summarizing** Use your completed graphic organizer to write a short description of each House leadership position.

**Answering the Guiding Questions**

3. **Describing** What rules govern lawmaking in the House?

4. **Identifying** Who makes up the House leadership?

5. **Explaining** How does the House conduct business?

6. **Informative/Explanatory** How does a bill move through the committee process and what is the role of the Rules Committee? Write a brief fact sheet explaining the process of getting a bill created and out of committee.