Structure of the House of Representatives

Composition of the House

When the Founding Fathers created the Constitution, they divided the powers among the Congress (legislative branch), the president (executive branch), and the courts (judicial branch). The United States Congress is a bicameral legislature consisting of the House of Representatives and the Senate. It is the chief policy-making and representative branch of the national government. Since the United States is a representative democracy, members of Congress represent the people by translating public will into public policy in the form of laws.

Apportionment dictates the number of representatives each state sends to the House, and the distribution is based on the population of each individual state. Each state is guaranteed at least one out of the 435 representatives that are seated in the House. Members represent a district within their state. According to a Constitutional requirement, the Census Bureau measures the population every ten years, and the state's population determines the number of districts in the state. To keep the number of representatives manageable, the number of seats remains 435, as does the number of districts in the country. In order to maintain this number, some states lose seats and other states gain seats in the House following the decennial census.

Reapportionment, or redistribution of seats in the House every ten years, is based on a state's overall population in proportion to other states. For example, although the population of Kansas grew in the 1980s, the state lost a proportional number of the overall population following the census in 1990. Therefore, the state lost a district and went from five to four representatives. The Reapportionment Act of 1929 established this law. Once the number of districts in a state is determined, it is the state legislature's responsibility to determine the boundaries of their districts. Baker v. Carr (1962) upheld the concept of "one person, one vote" that allows the courts to reapportion election districts across the nation.

States are not allowed to gerrymander, or create unusually shaped districts, for political purposes. The term "gerrymander" came from "gerry," the Massachusetts politician, Elbridge Gerry, who attempted to redistrict Massachusetts in 1812 in order to favor Democratic-Republicans, and "mander," from the odd way the districts began to take the shape of a salamander. At times, the federal government has encouraged "benign gerrymandering" that is designed to increase minority representation in Congress.

The 1982 amendments to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 encouraged the creation of legislative districts with predominantly African-American or Hispanic-American populations by requiring states, when possible, to draw district lines that account for concentrations of African-American and Hispanic-American voters. Several long-term, Caucasian Democrats lost their congressional seats as a result of the creation of these new districts in 1991. The decision of Shaw v. Reno (1993) opened the way for challenges to these districts. The ruling stated that a congressional district in North Carolina was so irregular in shape that it was clearly drawn to secure the election of a minority representative. The Court ruled that the district violated the voters' equal rights protection of the 14th Amendment.

The demographics of the body of the House of Representatives do not match the demographics of the American public. Although members come from various career backgrounds, many of them are lawyers or hold elite business or academic positions. Members also tend to be wealthier than their constituents.
Caucasians have a disproportionate membership in the House over minorities including African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, as well as women. Although this representation is unbalanced, it works because Congressional representation is substantive rather than descriptive. In other words, although House members may not look like their constituents, they represent the interests of the people in their districts.

Members of the House must be at least 25 years old, they must be a resident of the state they represent, and they must have been a U.S. citizen for at least seven years. Although there are no constitutional limits on how many terms a representative may serve, states hold elections for members of the House every two years. This frequent voting keeps state representatives in close contact with their constituents and forces them to constantly campaign in their home districts. It also requires representatives to pay close attention to the House votes they cast on matters that are salient to their constituents. In short, frequent elections make the members more accountable to the people they represent.

The hierarchical organization of the House allows both Democrats and Republicans to give chosen leaders, such as the Speaker of the House and the majority and minority leaders, the power to influence members of their parties. The leader of the House of Representatives is the Speaker of the House. The party that holds the most seats in the House, the majority party, elects this leader. The Speaker is second in line for the presidency after the vice president. The Speaker presides over the House when it is in session and controls many aspects of the House’s daily workings; as a result, the Speaker gains a great deal of power. Bill committee assignments, scheduling, committee membership assignments, and party leadership selections give the Speaker a wide range of power. Some Speakers, like Thomas B. Reed in the late 1800s and Joe Cannon in the early 1900s, wielded their authority by changing House rules, limiting debates, and increasing power of certain committees in order to increase their own power. Over time, changes in House procedural rules have limited the power of the Speaker, but charismatic leaders, such as Newt Gingrich in the 1990s, can still influence the House dramatically.

The majority and minority leaders of the House are second in power. These figures lead each party’s delegation. The majority leader works closely with the Speaker, his partisan ally. The minority leader serves as floor leader of the minority party. The majority and minority leaders are assisted on the floor and in party caucuses by the majority and minority whips. Both the majority and minority leaders work with each party’s whips to see that members vote with the party on key issues.

Committee Chairpersons are also powerful in the House. Some committees are more vital and thus give more power to the chairs. The Rules Committee, the Ways and Means Committee, and the Appropriations Committee are “power” committees with highly coveted chairmanships.

All members of the House hold the common power to make key decisions about important public policies. According to the Constitution, members of the House must initiate all revenue bills and pass all articles of impeachment.

Copyright © 2004 The Regents Of The University Of California