Understanding the Role of Congressional Leadership

Christopher M. Davis
Washington, D.C.
September 19, 2014
Political Parties & Congress

- Political parties have been central to Congressional operation since 1789
- House and Senate leadership is organized strictly by political party
- Majority party in Congress establishes the floor agenda (including, in the House, its rules of procedure)
- Majority Members chair committees and preside over session
Party Leadership in Congress

- Congressional leadership positions are structured by the Constitution, by chamber rules and by tradition
- Members are elected to party and committee leadership by their party peers
- Leaders are in charge, but are accountable to those who elected them
Running Two Very Different Chambers

**House**
- Majority rule
- Strict limits on debate
- Germaneness rule for amendments
- “Top down” management
- Rules Committee establishes ground rules for considering major bills

**Senate**
- Minority rights
- Few debate limits
- No general germaneness rule
- “Bottom up” control
- Most legislative and executive business is conducted by unanimous consent
Remember!

All of the big decisions in the House and Senate are made by the Members collectively.
What Do Congressional Leaders Do?

- Promote the agenda of the majority party
- Counter the minority party (inside and outside of Congress)
- Oversee the selection of committee assignments and chairmanships
- Support majority party congressional candidates with appearances in their state or district and by fundraising
- Reward and punish Members
- Work with the other body and with the President
Congressional Leadership Positions

- **Presiding Officers**
  - Speaker
  - Vice President
  - President Pro Tempore

- **Floor Leaders**
  - Majority /Minority Leaders

- **Whips**

- **Party Caucus Chairs**

- **Standing Committee Chairs/Ranking Members**
The Work of Committees

- 20 House committees; 16 Senate
- Gather information
- Make legislative recommendations
- Perform oversight
Speaker of the House

- Position established by U.S. Constitution (Art. 1, § 2, cl. 5)
- Second in line of Presidential succession, behind V.P.
- Position wears “two hats”
- Speaker controls the overall legislative agenda of the House
- Oversees appointment of committee chairs and members
- Serves as national spokesperson of the majority party

Speaker John A. Boehner (OH-8)
House Majority Leader

- Position created by House rule in late 19th Century
- Appointed by Speaker until 1911; Today is elected by majority party members
- Second in command
- Responsible for day-to-day management of legislation on the House floor
- Builds majority party consensus

Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (CA-23)
House Minority Leader

- Elected by members of the minority party to serve as their leader and spokesperson
- Seeks to amend or even block majority party agenda
- Provides counterpoint to the majority party
- Responsible for minority party members’ committee assignments and ranking member assignments

Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (CA-12)
House Majority & Minority Whips

- “Whip” comes from British fox hunting: the “whipper-in”
- Now directly elected by party members
- Responsible for counting and mobilizing votes
- Helps disseminate scheduling information
- Serve as floor leaders in their absence

Majority Whip Steve Scalise (LA-1)

Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer (MD-5)
Rules Committee Active Bills

H.R. 5272 - To prohibit certain actions with respect to deferred action for aliens not lawfully present in the United States, and for other purposes. [Meeting II] View Bill »

H.R. 5230 - Making supplemental appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2014, and for other purposes. [Meeting II] View Bill »

H.R. 4800 - Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2015 View Bill »

Recent Updates

Aug 01, 2014 PRESS RELEASE Sessions: House Approves Legislation to Alleviate Border Crisis

Aug 01, 2014 ANNOUNCEMENT Meeting Announcement for H.R. 5230 [Meeting II] and H.R. 5272 [Meeting II]

Jul 31, 2014 ANNOUNCEMENT Meeting Announcement for H. Res. 700


Jul 29, 2014 ANNOUNCEMENT Meeting Announcement for H.R. 5230, Senate amendment to H.R. 5021, and H.R. 5272
President of the Senate / President Pro Tempore

- Vice-President of the United States is the President of the Senate (U.S. Const. art. 1, § 3)
- The Vice President may only vote in the case of a tie
- He may not participate in debate or use the power of the presiding officer to regulate floor business
- In the absence of the Vice President, the Senate President Pro Tempore performs his duties
Senator Majority Leader

- Responsible for setting the Senate floor agenda
- Has the right of priority recognition on the Senate floor
- Primary spokesperson for majority party
- Must build coalitions and consensus in order to succeed
- The “hardest job in Washington”

Majority Leader Harry Reid (NV)
Senate Minority Leader

- Sets the legislative agenda and political strategy for the minority party
- Negotiates terms of consideration of floor business with the Majority Leader
- Responsible for minority party members’ committee assignments and ranking member assignments

Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (KY)
Cloture: The “60-Vote” Senate

- Action occurs in the Senate by unanimous consent or when forced by a supermajority
- Cloture may be filed on a pending question
- Petition signed by at least 16 Senators
- Roll call vote two days of session later
- Approval Vote: 3/5 of all Senators for legislation; 2/3 of those present and voting for standing rules changes; Simple majority for nominations except to Supreme Court of U.S.
- 30-hour cap on post-cloture consideration
- Amendments must be germane post-cloture
Tools of Leaders in a Collegial Body

- Personal qualities
- Prestige of the office
- *Ability to pass legislation
- *Fundraising
- Committee assignment
- *Earmarks & patronage
- *Foreign travel
- *Favorable press
- Appointment power to various boards and commissions