

# Speaker of the United States House of Representatives

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## Speaker of the United States House of Representatives

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- *The Constitution does not require the speaker to be an incumbent member of the House of Representatives, although every speaker thus far has been.*
- *The current House speaker, Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California, was elected to the office on January 3, 2019.*

The speaker of the United States House of Representatives is the presiding officer of the United States House of Representatives. The office was established in 1789 by Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution. The speaker is the political and parliamentary leader of the House of Representatives, and is simultaneously the House's presiding officer, de facto leader of the body's majority party, and the institution's administrative head. Speakers also perform various other administrative and procedural functions. Given these several roles and responsibilities, the speaker usually does not personally preside over debates. That duty is instead delegated to members of the House from the majority party. Neither does the speaker regularly participate in floor debates.

The Constitution does not require the speaker to be an incumbent member of the House of Representatives, although every speaker thus far has been. The speaker is second in the United States presidential line of succession, after the vice president and ahead of the president pro tempore of the Senate.

The current House speaker, Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California, was elected to the office on January 3, 2019. Pelosi previously served as speaker from January 4, 2007 to January 3, 2011. She has the distinction of being the first woman to serve as speaker, and is also the first former speaker to be returned to office since Sam Rayburn in 1955.

## Selection

- *The House elects its speaker at the beginning of a new Congress (i.e.*
- *Moreover, as the Constitution does not explicitly state that the speaker must be an incumbent member of the House, it is permissible for representatives to vote for someone who is not a member of the House at the time, and non-members have received a few votes in various speaker elections over the past several years.*
- *Upon winning election the new speaker is immediately sworn in by the Dean of the United States House of Representatives, the chamber's longest-serving member.*

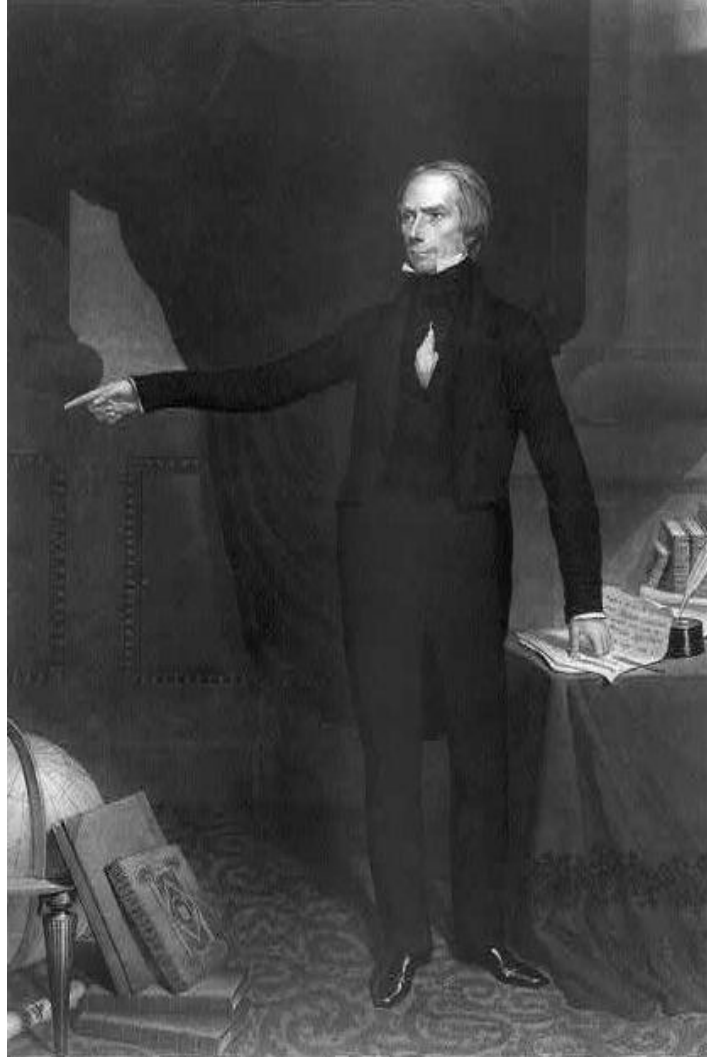
The House elects its speaker at the beginning of a new Congress (i.e. biennially, after a general election) or when a speaker dies, resigns or is removed from the position intra-term. Since 1839, the House has elected speakers by roll call vote. Traditionally, each party's caucus or conference selects a candidate for the speakership from among its senior leaders prior to the roll call. Representatives are not restricted to voting for the candidate nominated by their party, but generally do, as the outcome of the election effectively determines which party has the majority and consequently will organize the House. Moreover, as the Constitution does not explicitly state that the speaker must be an incumbent member of the House, it is permissible for representatives to vote for someone who is not a member of the House at the time, and non-members have received a few votes in various speaker elections over the past several years. Nevertheless, every person elected speaker has been a member.

Representatives that choose to vote for someone other than their party's nominated candidate usually vote for someone else in their party or vote "present". Anyone who votes for the other party's candidate would face serious consequences, as was the case when Democrat Jim Traficant voted for Republican Dennis Hastert in 2001 (107th Congress). In response, the Democrats stripped him of his seniority and he lost all of his committee posts.

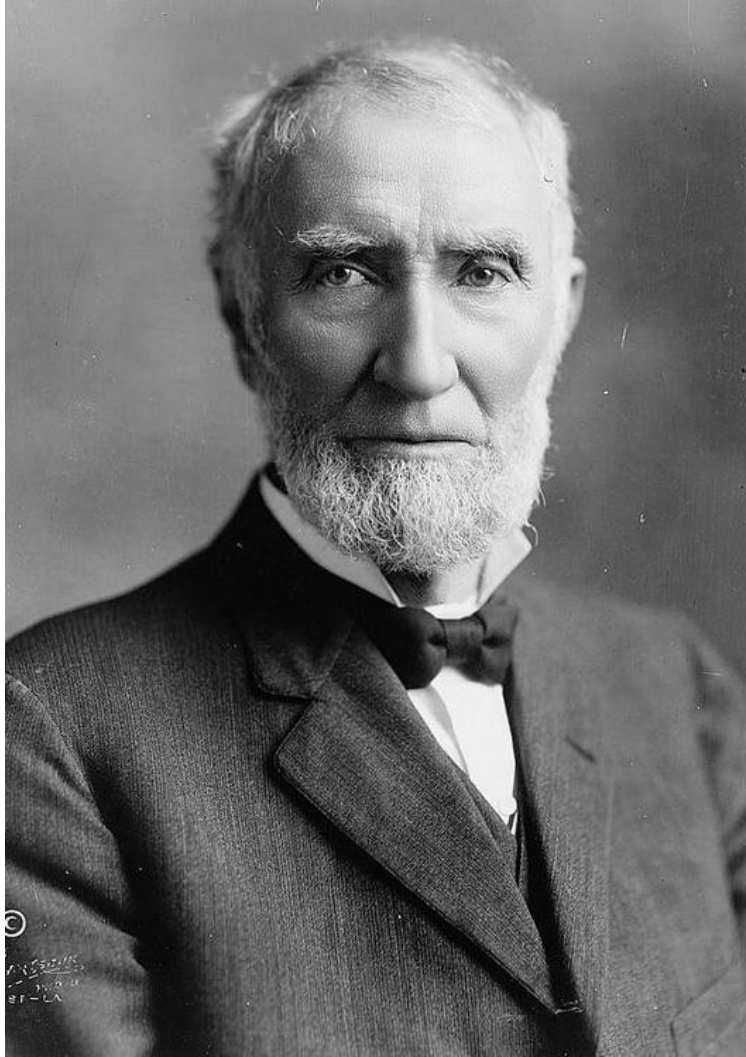
To be elected speaker a candidate must receive an absolute majority of the votes cast, as opposed to an absolute majority of the full membership of the House – presently 218 votes, in a House of 435. There have only been a few instances during the past century where a person received a majority of the votes cast, and thus won the election, while failing to obtain a majority of the full membership. It happened most recently in 2015 (114th Congress), when John Boehner was elected with 216 votes (as opposed to 218). Such a variation in the number of votes necessary to win a given election might arise due to vacancies, absentees, or members being present but not voting. If no candidate wins a majority of the "votes cast for a person by name", then the roll call is repeated until a speaker is elected. Multiple roll calls have been necessary only 14 times (out of 126 speakership elections) since 1789; and not since 1923 (68th Congress), when a closely divided House needed nine ballots to elect Frederick H. Gillett speaker. Upon winning election the new speaker is immediately sworn in by the Dean of the United States House of Representatives, the chamber's longest-serving member.



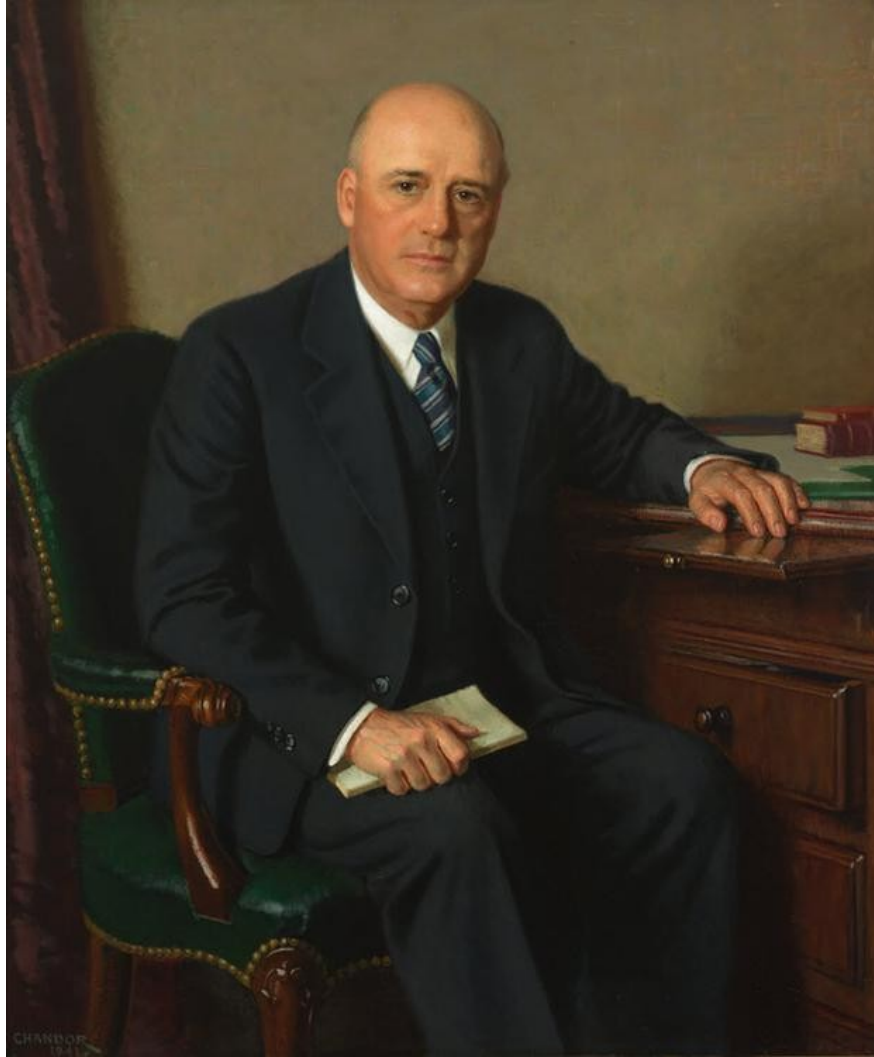
*Frederick Muhlenberg (1789–1791, 1793–1795), was the first speaker.*



*Henry Clay (1811–1814, 1815–1820, 1823–1825) used his influence as speaker to ensure the passage of measures he favored*



*Joseph Gurney Cannon (1838–1925) was one of the most powerful speakers.*



*Sam Rayburn (1940–1947; 1949–1953; and 1955–1961) was the longest serving speaker*

## History

- *The first speaker of the House, Frederick Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania, was elected to office on April 1, 1789, the day the House organized itself at the start of the 1st Congress.*
- *To date, James K. Polk is the only speaker of the House later elected president of the United States.*
- *In the 2006 midterm elections, the Democrats won a majority in the House.*

The first speaker of the House, Frederick Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania, was elected to office on April 1, 1789, the day the House organized itself at the start of the 1st Congress. He served two non-consecutive terms in the speaker's chair, 1789–1791 (1st Congress) and 1793–1795 (3rd Congress).

As the Constitution does not state the duties of the speaker, the speaker's role has largely been shaped by traditions and customs that evolved over time. A partisan position from

early in its existence, the speakership began to gain power in legislative development under Henry Clay (1811–1814, 1815–1820, and 1823–1825). In contrast to many of his predecessors, Clay participated in several debates, and used his influence to procure the passage of measures he supported—for instance, the declaration of the War of 1812, and various laws relating to Clay's "American System" economic plan. Furthermore, when no candidate received an Electoral College majority in the 1824 presidential election causing the president to be elected by the House, Speaker Clay threw his support to John Quincy Adams instead of Andrew Jackson, thereby ensuring Adams' victory. Following Clay's retirement in 1825, the power of the speakership once again began to decline, despite speakership elections becoming increasingly bitter. As the Civil War approached, several sectional factions nominated their own candidates, often making it difficult for any candidate to attain a majority. In 1855 and again in 1859, for example, the contest for speaker lasted for two months before the House achieved a result. During this time, speakers tended to have very short tenures. For example, from 1839 to 1863 there were eleven speakers, only one of whom served for more than one term. To date, James K. Polk is the only speaker of the House later elected president of the United States.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the office of speaker began to develop into a very powerful one. At the time, one of the most important sources of the speaker's power was his position as Chairman of the Committee on Rules, which, after the reorganization of the committee system in 1880, became one of the most powerful standing committees of the House. Furthermore, several speakers became leading figures in their political parties; examples include Democrats Samuel J. Randall, John Griffin Carlisle, and Charles F. Crisp, and Republicans James G. Blaine, Thomas Brackett Reed, and Joseph Gurney Cannon.

The power of the speaker was greatly augmented during the tenure of the Republican Thomas Brackett Reed (1889–1891, 1895–1899). "Czar Reed", as he was called by his opponents, sought to end the obstruction of bills by the minority, in particular by countering the tactic known as the "disappearing quorum". By refusing to vote on a motion, the minority could ensure that a quorum would not be achieved, and that the result would be invalid. Reed, however, declared that members who were in the chamber but refused to vote would still count for the purposes of determining a quorum. Through these and other rulings, Reed ensured that the Democrats could not block the Republican agenda.

The speakership reached its apogee during the term of Republican Joseph Gurney Cannon (1903–1911). Cannon exercised extraordinary control over the legislative process. He determined the agenda of the House, appointed the members of all committees, chose committee chairmen, headed the Rules Committee, and determined which committee heard each bill. He vigorously used his powers to ensure that Republican proposals were passed by the House. In 1910, however, Democrats and several dissatisfied Republicans joined together to strip Cannon of many of his powers, including the ability to name committee members and his chairmanship of the Rules Committee. Fifteen years later, Speaker Nicholas Longworth restored much, but not all, of the lost influence of the position.

One of the most influential speakers in history was Democrat Sam Rayburn. Rayburn was the longest-serving speaker in history, holding office from 1940 to 1947, 1949 to 1953, and 1955 to 1961. He helped shape many bills, working quietly in the background with House committees. He also helped ensure the passage of several domestic measures and foreign assistance programs advocated by Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman.

Rayburn's successor, Democrat John W. McCormack (served 1962–1971), was a somewhat less influential speaker, particularly because of dissent from younger members of the Democratic Party. During the mid-1970s, the power of the speakership once again grew under Democrat Carl Albert. The Committee on Rules ceased to be a semi-independent panel, as it had been since 1910. Instead, it once again became an arm of the party leadership. Moreover, in 1975, the speaker was granted the authority to appoint a majority of the members of the Rules Committee. Meanwhile, the power of committee chairmen was curtailed, further increasing the relative influence of the speaker.

Albert's successor, Democrat Tip O'Neill, was a prominent speaker because of his public opposition to the policies of President Ronald Reagan. O'Neill is the longest continually serving speaker, from 1977 through 1987. He challenged Reagan on domestic programs and on defense expenditures. Republicans made O'Neill the target of their election campaigns in 1980 and 1982 but Democrats managed to retain their majorities in both years.

The roles of the parties reversed in 1994 when, after spending forty years in the minority, the Republicans regained control of the House with the "Contract with America", an idea spearheaded by Minority Whip Newt Gingrich. Speaker Gingrich would regularly clash with Democratic President Bill Clinton, leading to the United States federal government shutdown of 1995 and 1996, in which Clinton was largely seen to have prevailed. Gingrich's hold on the leadership was weakened significantly by that and several other controversies, and he faced a caucus revolt in 1997. After the Republicans lost House seats in 1998 (although retaining a majority) he did not stand for a third term as speaker. His successor, Dennis Hastert, had been chosen as a compromise candidate, since the other Republicans in the leadership were more controversial. Hastert played a much less prominent role than other contemporary speakers, being overshadowed by House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and President George W. Bush. The Republicans came out of the 2000 elections with a further reduced majority but made small gains in 2002 and 2004. The periods of 2001–2002 and 2003–2007 were the first times since 1953–1955 that there was single-party Republican leadership in Washington, interrupted from 2001–2003 as Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont left the Republican Party to become independent and caucused with Senate Democrats to give them a 51–49 majority.

In the 2006 midterm elections, the Democrats won a majority in the House. Nancy Pelosi became speaker when the 110th Congress convened on January 4, 2007, making her the first woman to hold the office. With the election of Barack Obama as president and Democratic gains in both houses of Congress, Pelosi became the first speaker since Tom Foley to hold the office during single-party Democratic leadership in Washington. During the 111th Congress, Pelosi was the driving force behind several of Obama's major initiatives



that proved controversial, and the Republicans campaigned against the Democrats' legislation by staging a "Fire Pelosi" bus tour and regained control of the House in the 2010 midterm elections.

John Boehner was elected speaker when the 112th Congress convened on January 5, 2011, and was subsequently re-elected twice, at the start of the 113th and 114th congresses. On both of those occasions his remaining in office was threatened by the defection of several members from his own party who chose not to vote for him. Boehner's tenure as speaker, which ended when he resigned from Congress in October 2015, was marked by multiple battles with the conservatives in his own party related to "Obama Care," appropriations, among other political issues. This intra-party discord continued under Boehner's successor, Paul Ryan.



*Speaker Nancy Pelosi (right) with Vice President Dick Cheney behind President George W. Bush at the 2007 State of the Union Address making history as the first woman to sit behind the podium at such an address. President Bush acknowledged this by beginning his speech*

*with the words, "Tonight, I have a high privilege and distinct honor of my own — as the first president to begin the State of the Union message with these words: Madam Speaker".*

## Notable elections

- *When the 110th Congress convened on January 4, 2007, she was elected as the 52nd speaker by a vote of 233–202, becoming the first woman elected speaker of the House.*
- *He opted to resign from the House, despite being urged to stay on by House Democratic leader Gephardt.*
- *Pelosi remained speaker through the 111th Congress.*

Historically, there have been several controversial elections to the speakership, such as the contest of 1839. In that case, even though the 26th United States Congress convened on December 2, the House could not begin the speakership election until December 14 because of an election dispute in New Jersey known as the "Broad Seal War". Two rival delegations, one Whig and the other Democrat, had been certified as elected by different branches of the New Jersey government. The problem was compounded by the fact that the result of the dispute would determine whether the Whigs or the Democrats held the majority. Neither party agreed to permit a speakership election with the opposite party's delegation participating. Finally, it was agreed to exclude both delegations from the election and a speaker was finally chosen on December 17.

Another, more prolonged fight occurred in 1855 in the 34th United States Congress. The old Whig Party had collapsed but no single party had emerged to replace it. Candidates opposing the Democrats had run under a bewildering variety of labels, including Whig, Republican, American (Know Nothing), and simply "Opposition". By the time Congress actually met in December 1855, most of the northerners were concentrated together as Republicans, while most of the southerners and a few northerners used the American or Know Nothing label. Opponents of the Democrats held a majority in House, with the party makeup of the 234 representatives being 83 Democrats, 108 Republicans, and 43 Know Nothings (primarily southern oppositionists). The Democratic minority nominated William Alexander Richardson of Illinois as speaker, but because of sectional distrust, the various oppositionists were unable to agree on a single candidate for speaker. The Republicans supported Nathaniel Prentiss Banks of Massachusetts, who had been elected as a Know Nothing but was now largely identified with the Republicans. The southern Know Nothings supported first Humphrey Marshall of Kentucky, and then Henry M. Fuller of Pennsylvania. The voting went on for almost two months with no candidate able to secure a majority, until it was finally agreed to elect the speaker by plurality vote, and Banks was elected. The House found itself in a similar dilemma when the 36th Congress met in December 1859. Although the Republicans held a plurality, the Republican candidate, John Sherman, was unacceptable to southern oppositionists due to his anti-slavery views, and once again the House was unable to elect a speaker. After Democrats allied with southern oppositionists to nearly elect the North Carolina oppositionist William N. H. Smith, Sherman finally withdrew

in favor of compromise candidate William Pennington of New Jersey, a former Whig of unclear partisan loyalties, who was finally elected speaker on February 1, 1860.

The last time that an election for speaker went beyond one ballot was in December 1923 at the start of the 68th Congress, when Republican Frederick H. Gillett needed nine ballots to win reelection. Progressive Republicans had refused to support Gillett in the first eight ballots. Only after winning concessions from Republican conference leaders (a seat on the House Rules Committee and a pledge that requested House rules changes would be considered) did they agree to support him.

In 1997, several Republican congressional leaders tried to force Speaker Newt Gingrich to resign. However, Gingrich refused since that would have required a new election for speaker, which could have led to Democrats along with dissenting Republicans voting for Democrat Dick Gephardt (then minority leader) as speaker. After the 1998 midterm elections where the Republicans lost seats, Gingrich did not stand for re-election. The next two figures in the House Republican leadership hierarchy, Majority Leader Richard Armey and Majority Whip Tom DeLay, chose not to run for the office. The chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Bob Livingston, declared his bid for the speakership, which was unopposed, making him speaker-designate. It was then revealed, by Livingston himself, who had been publicly critical of President Bill Clinton's perjury during his sexual harassment trial, that he had engaged in an extramarital affair. He opted to resign from the House, despite being urged to stay on by House Democratic leader Gephardt. Subsequently, chief deputy whip Dennis Hastert was selected as speaker. The Republicans retained their majorities in the 2000, 2002, and 2004 elections.

The Democrats won a majority of seats in the 2006 midterm elections. On November 16, 2006, Nancy Pelosi, who was then minority leader, was selected as speaker-designate by House Democrats. When the 110th Congress convened on January 4, 2007, she was elected as the 52nd speaker by a vote of 233–202, becoming the first woman elected speaker of the House. Pelosi remained speaker through the 111th Congress.

### Most recent election for speaker (2019)

- *The most recent speakership election took place on January 3, 2019, on the opening day of the 116th United States Congress, two months after the 2018 elections in which the Democrats won a majority of the seats.*
- *Nancy Pelosi, who had been serving as House Minority Leader since relinquishing the speakership in 2011, won the election, securing 220 votes, to House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy's 192 votes, with 18 more going to others.*

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votes, to House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy's 192 votes, with 18 more going to others. As 430 representatives cast a vote, the majority needed to win was 216.



*The former speaker, Paul Ryan, seen taking his oath of office following his election on October 29, 2015*

### Partisan role

- *The speaker is responsible for ensuring that the House passes legislation supported by the majority party.*
- *The speaker in the United States, by tradition, is the head of the majority party in the House of Representatives, outranking the majority leader.*
- *While the speaker is the functioning head of the House majority party, the same is not true of the president pro tempore of the Senate, whose office is primarily ceremonial and honorary.*

The Constitution does not spell out the political role of the speaker. As the office has developed historically, however, it has taken on a clearly partisan cast, very different from the speakership of most Westminster-style legislatures, such as the speaker of the British House of Commons, which is meant to be scrupulously non-partisan. The speaker in the United States, by tradition, is the head of the majority party in the House of Representatives, outranking the majority leader. However, despite having the right to vote, the speaker usually does not participate in debate.

The speaker is responsible for ensuring that the House passes legislation supported by the majority party. In pursuing this goal, the speaker may use their power to determine when

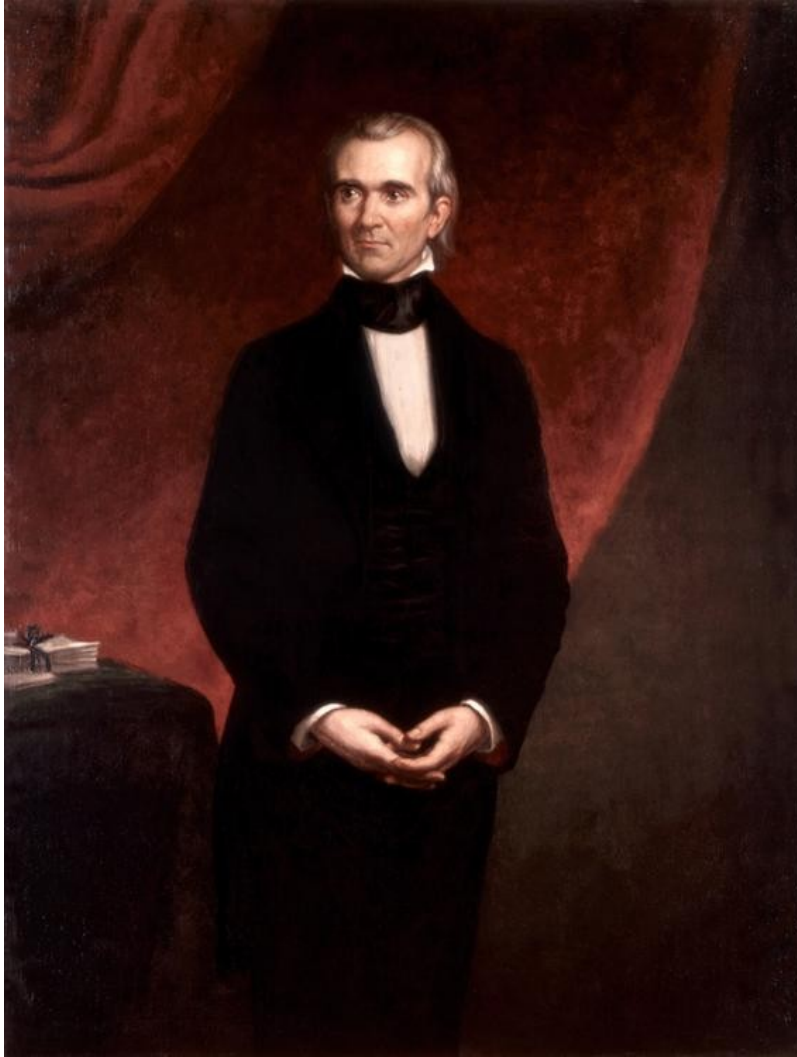
each bill reaches the floor. They also chair the majority party's steering committee in the House. While the speaker is the functioning head of the House majority party, the same is not true of the president pro tempore of the Senate, whose office is primarily ceremonial and honorary.

When the speaker and the president belong to the same party, the speaker tends to play the role in a more ceremonial light, as seen when Dennis Hastert played a very low-key role during the presidency of fellow Republican George W. Bush. Nevertheless, when the speaker and the president belong to the same party, there are also times that the speaker plays a much larger role, and the speaker is tasked, e.g., with pushing through the agenda of the majority party, often at the expense of the minority opposition. This can be seen, most of all, in the speakership of Democratic-Republican Henry Clay, who personally ensured the presidential victory of fellow Democratic-Republican John Quincy Adams. Democrat Sam Rayburn was a key player in the passing of New Deal legislation under the presidency of fellow Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Republican Joseph Gurney Cannon (under Theodore Roosevelt) was particularly infamous for his marginalization of the minority Democrats and centralizing of authority to the speakership. In more recent times, Speaker Nancy Pelosi played a role in continuing the push for health care reform during the presidency of fellow Democrat Barack Obama.

On the other hand, when the speaker and the president belong to opposite parties, the public role and influence of the speaker tend to increase. As the highest-ranking member of the opposition party (and de facto leader of the opposition), the speaker is normally the chief public opponent of the president's agenda. In this scenario, the speaker is known for undercutting the president's agenda by blocking measures by the minority party or rejecting bills by the Senate. One famous instance came in the form of Thomas Brackett Reed (under Grover Cleveland), a speaker notorious for his successful attempt to force the Democrats to vote on measures where the Republicans had clear majorities, which ensured that Cleveland's Democrats were in no position to challenge the Republicans in the House. Joseph Cannon was particularly unique in that he led the conservative "Old Guard" wing of the Republican Party, while his president – Theodore Roosevelt – was of the more progressive clique, and more than just marginalizing the Democrats, Cannon used his power to punish the dissidents in his party and obstruct the progressive wing of the Republican Party.

More modern examples include Tip O'Neill, who was a vocal opponent of President Ronald Reagan's economic and defense policies; Newt Gingrich, who fought a bitter battle with President Bill Clinton for control of domestic policy; Nancy Pelosi, who argued with President George W. Bush over the Iraq War; John Boehner, who clashed with President Barack Obama over budget issues and health care.; Recently, Nancy Pelosi, who refused to support President Donald Trump over funding for a border wall.[citation needed]





*James Polk is the only speaker to also serve as president of the United States.*

### **Presiding officer**

- *The speaker may delegate their powers to a member of the House to act as speaker pro tempore and to preside over the House in the speaker's absence; when this has occurred the delegation has always been to a member of the same party.*
- *The speaker is responsible for maintaining decorum in the House and may order the Sergeant-at-Arms to enforce House rules.*

As presiding officer of the House of Representatives, the speaker holds a variety of powers over the House and is ceremonially the highest-ranking legislative official in the US government. The speaker may delegate their powers to a member of the House to act as speaker pro tempore and to preside over the House in the speaker's absence; when this has occurred the delegation has always been to a member of the same party. During important debates, the speaker pro tempore is ordinarily a senior member of the majority party who may be chosen for his or her skill in presiding. At other times, more junior members may be

assigned to preside to give them experience with the rules and procedures of the House. The speaker may also designate, with approval of the House, a speaker pro tempore for special purposes, such as designating a representative whose district is near Washington, D.C. to sign enrolled bills during long recesses.

Under the rules of the House, the speaker, "as soon as practicable after the election of the speaker and whenever appropriate thereafter", must deliver to the clerk of the House a confidential list of members who are designated to act as speaker in the case of a vacancy or physical inability of the speaker to perform their duties.

On the floor of the House, the presiding officer is always addressed as "Mister Speaker" or "Madam Speaker", even if that person is serving as speaker pro tempore. When the House resolves itself into a Committee of the Whole, the speaker designates a member to preside over the committee, who is addressed as "Mister Chairman" or "Madam Chairwoman". To speak, members must seek the presiding officer's recognition. The presiding officer also rules on all points of order but such rulings may be appealed to the whole House. The speaker is responsible for maintaining decorum in the House and may order the Sergeant-at-Arms to enforce House rules.

The speaker's powers and duties extend beyond presiding in the chamber. In particular, the speaker has great influence over the committee process. The speaker selects nine of the thirteen members of the powerful Committee on Rules, subject to the approval of the entire majority party. The leadership of the minority party chooses the remaining four members. Furthermore, the speaker appoints all members of select committees and conference committees. Moreover, when a bill is introduced, the speaker determines which committee will consider it. As a member of the House, the speaker is entitled to participate in debate and to vote. Ordinarily, the speaker votes only when the speaker's vote would be decisive or on matters of great importance, such as constitutional amendments or major legislation.

## Other functions

- *In addition to being the political and parliamentary leader of the House of Representatives and representing their congressional district, the speaker also perform various other administrative and procedural functions, such as:*
- *Serves as the chairperson of the House Office Building Commission;*
- *Thus, if both the presidency and vice-presidency were vacant simultaneously, then the speaker would become acting president, after resigning from the House and as speaker.*

In addition to being the political and parliamentary leader of the House of Representatives and representing their congressional district, the speaker also perform various other administrative and procedural functions, such as:

Oversees the officers of the House: the clerk, the sergeant-at-arms, the chief administrative officer, and the chaplain;

Serves as the chairperson of the House Office Building Commission;

Appoints the House's parliamentarian, historian, general counsel, and inspector general;

Administers the House audio and video broadcasting system, and, in consultation with the minority leader, devising a system of drug testing in the House.

Receives reports or other communications from the president, government agencies, boards, and commissions.

Receives, along with the president pro tempore of the Senate, written declarations that a U.S. president is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, or is able to resume them, under Sections 3 and 4 of the Twenty-fifth Amendment.

Additionally, the speaker is second in the presidential line of succession under the Presidential Succession Act of 1947, immediately after the vice president and before the president pro tempore of the Senate (who is followed by members of the president's Cabinet). Thus, if both the presidency and vice-presidency were vacant simultaneously, then the speaker would become acting president, after resigning from the House and as speaker.

Ratification of the Twenty-fifth Amendment in 1967, with its mechanism for filling an intra-term vice presidential vacancy, has made calling on the speaker, president pro tempore, or a cabinet member to serve as acting president unlikely to happen, except in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. However, only a few years after it went into effect, in October 1973, at the height of Watergate, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned. With Agnew's unexpected departure, and the state of Richard Nixon's presidency, Speaker of the House Carl Albert was suddenly first in line to become acting president. The vacancy continued until Gerald Ford was sworn in as vice president on December 6, 1973. Albert was also next in line from the time Ford assumed the presidency on August 9, 1974, following Nixon's resignation from office, until Ford's choice to succeed him as vice president, Nelson Rockefeller, was confirmed by Congress four months later.

## See also

- *Party leaders of the United States House of Representatives*
- *Party leaders of the United States Senate*

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