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House Leadership

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LEADERSHIP. [*The following entry discusses leadership in two separate articles:*

House Leadership
Senate Leadership

For related discussions, see Caucus, *article on* Party Caucus; *Committees, article on* Assignment of Members; *Discipline of Members*; *Floor Leader*; *Majority and Minority*; *Managers*; *Minority Rights*; *Political Parties*; *Seniority*; *Whips*; *and biographies of particular members of Congress.*]

House Leadership

In 1959, political scientist David Truman described the complexity of congressional leadership: "Everyone knows something of leaders and leadership of various sorts, but no one knows very much. Leadership, especially in the political realm, unavoidably or by design often is suffused by an atmosphere of the mystic and the magical, and these have been little penetrated by systematic observation" (Truman, 1959, p. 94). House leadership remains a complex concept, but it has been defined more clearly and more systematically in the years since Truman's observation.

An explanation and evaluation of House leadership should incorporate at least four key elements: (1) the functions of the House of Representatives;

(2) the context, or conditions under which those functions are performed; (3) a description of the various formal and informal leadership positions; and (4) the individual leaders themselves.

General Considerations. A general concept of House leadership can be developed with reference to the functions of the House, the conditions that affect House politics, and the role of individual leaders. After taking a look at these overarching considerations, the remaining sections of this article describe the tasks, styles, and strategies pursued by three types of House leaders: party, committee, and informal leaders.

Functions. All institutions are designed to perform certain functions, and leaders are expected to assist in those functions. The primary functions of the House of Representatives are lawmaking and representation; leadership can be defined in terms of those functions. "Leadership is an organizational condition facilitating the expression [i.e., representation] and integration [i.e., lawmaking] of opinions, facts, and conclusions among the extended membership (to include staff) at different stages of the lawmaking process" (Charles O. Jones, "House Leadership in an Age of Reform," in Mackaman, 1981, p. 119). Thus, a conception of House leadership should identify the specific tasks, strategies, and styles that leaders pursue as they attempt to facilitate lawmaking and representation.

Context. The actions of House leaders are influenced partly by the context, or the conditions under which the House attempts to make laws and represent interests. Ideally, leaders seek to facilitate both representation and lawmaking, but circumstances often limit their capacity to do so. Some conditions are conducive to lawmaking, while others favor representation. Under some circumstances neither representation nor lawmaking is easily served, making leadership extremely difficult. Political scientists are interested in understanding how the particular set of conditions at any given time affects the tasks, styles, and strategies of House leaders.

Context is defined by three categories of factors: institutional, political, and issue-agenda factors. Institutional factors include the organization, rules, and procedures of the House and the constitutional arrangements (bicameralism, separation of powers, and checks and balances) that define the House's role in the political system. Political factors include the outcomes of elections and the strength of political parties. Elections determine the relative numbers of Democrats and Republicans in the House

and Senate as well as the party represented by the president. House leadership also depends on the strength of party organizations—specifically, their capacity to nominate candidates for office—and party unity within the Congress. The issue agenda consists of the policy issues debated and deliberated in the committees and on the floor of the House.

The variety of conditions that affect how leaders attempt to facilitate lawmaking and representation confirms the notion that House leadership is a complex phenomenon. While some conditions are very stable (e.g., bicameralism), others change occasionally with institutional reforms (e.g., reforms of the committee system) and still others change periodically (e.g., electoral outcomes). Thus, leadership depends on the enduring conditions that shape the general patterns of lawmaking and representation as well as the changing conditions that alter leadership tasks, styles, and strategies.

Enduring conditions support at least three general, complementary propositions about House leadership. Each proposition will necessarily be refined to fit specific leadership positions and particular circumstances, but together they provide a general framework for the concept of House leadership.

First, since leaders are elected by House members, leadership requires the leaders to pay attention to members' goals. The most difficult questions are determining what the members want and how their preferences relate to those of the leaders—questions that can be answered only by reference to specific leadership positions under a given set of conditions.

Second, there are limitations to strong, centralized leadership in the House of Representatives. Speaker of the House Joseph G. Cannon (R-Ill.) and Rules Committee Chairman Howard W. Smith (D-Va.) both exceeded the acceptable bounds of authority in the eyes of most members (see Jones, 1968). Although the degree of centralized power in the House has varied over time, there are always limitations to the power a leader can exercise.

Finally, leadership style typically, though not always, involves bargaining with other members and accommodating their preferences. With few exceptions, House leaders have lacked the power to dictate policy or procedure to the members.

These general tendencies of leadership stem from three relatively stable conditions that have defined representation and lawmaking in the House: constituency representation, weak parties, and a fragmented committee system. Perhaps the most enduring feature of House politics from the stand-

point of leadership is that members are obliged to pursue the interests of their constituents. A second important condition for understanding party leadership is that, with the exception of a brief period at the turn of the twentieth century, congressional parties generally have been weak, and party leaders have lacked the power to discipline members. The combination of strong constituency representation and weak parties normally gives members a certain degree of autonomy from leaders. And since leaders are ultimately selected by the members, they must be responsive to the members' goals and preferences. A third prevailing feature of House politics is its decentralized committee system. Except for the period of strong parties (1890–1910), power in the House has traditionally been dispersed among numerous committees. There have been circumstances under which members have tolerated centralized party leadership, but members accept such leadership only if it helps them satisfy their political and policy goals.

Personality. A third critical aspect of House leadership is the individual leader. Whereas political scientists tend to emphasize the context within which leaders operate, journalists and the leaders themselves tend to view leadership from the perspective of individual personalities. Biographies by journalists (e.g., John Barry's book on Speaker James C. Wright, Jr. [D-Tex.], *The Ambition and the Power*, 1989) and autobiographies by political leaders (e.g., Speaker Thomas P. [Tip] O'Neill, Jr.'s book, *Man of the House*, 1987) furnish rich insights into the personalities of individual leaders. These studies describe a leader's upbringing and personal experiences as they relate to leadership style. By definition, biographical studies furnish the least general theoretical claims about House leadership, since their central purpose is to account for the peculiarities of individuals and their influence on the House. Most biographies of House leaders have focused on Speakers, and they are too numerous to list here (see Donald Kennon's *Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives: A Bibliography, 1789–1984*, 1986). Perhaps the most thoroughly developed biography of a Speaker is *Rayburn: A Biography* by D. B. Hardeman and Donald C. Bacon (1987).

Some studies conceptualize leadership in terms of both context and personal factors (see Peters, 1990; Rohde, 1991; and Palazzolo, 1992). These studies argue that institutional, political, and issue-agenda conditions set the constraints within which leaders operate, but leaders can define their styles

within those constraints. For example, both Speakers Tip O'Neill and Jim Wright acted under roughly similar conditions during the 1980s, but Wright pursued a more aggressive leadership style.

In sum, institutional functions, context, and individual personalities are all essential to understanding House leadership. In general, leaders operate within a context that places limitations on power, demands responsiveness to House members, and typically requires leaders to bargain with members and accommodate their preferences. Yet these general propositions take us only so far in understanding the complex phenomenon of House leadership: even relatively stable conditions are subject to change, which in turn may create new opportunities for leadership or place greater constraints on leaders. Institutional reforms have occasionally altered the committee system, legislative procedures, and the formal powers of leaders. Changes in the party system have at times strengthened and at other times weakened the powers of party leaders. Furthermore, individual leaders have made special contributions to House leadership. The general conception of leadership will be elaborated here by assessing the evolution of specific leadership positions in the House.

Party Leaders. House leadership by party differs according to whether the party is in the majority or the minority. Also, the styles and strategies employed by party leaders in the House have changed over time.

Majority party leadership. The majority party leadership is headed by the Speaker of the House, who fills the only constitutionally mandated leadership position in the House. In addition to representing a congressional district, the Speaker essentially performs two leadership roles: leader of the majority party and presiding officer of the House. As presiding officer, the Speaker is expected to administer the rules and procedures of the House in a fair, impartial, and consistent manner. The Speaker also refers bills to committees and is in charge of allocating office space to members. As party leader, the Speaker aims to advance the priorities of the majority party in the House. His role depends partly on the president. If the president is of the same party, the Speaker's primary task is to build coalitions in support of the president's legislative priorities. If the president is of the opposing party, the Speaker acts as the leading spokesperson of the majority party and will more likely be involved in setting the party's legislative priorities. In both roles—presiding officer and party leader—the

Speaker is responsible for managing conflict in the House. Conflict can be managed in a variety of ways: from helping to draft fair rules for floor debate, to appointing members to special committees or task forces, to building camaraderie among members.

The Speaker's role as party leader is shared by several other party leaders. Barbara Sinclair (1983) divides the party leadership into two groups: the core leadership and the extended leadership. The core leadership includes the majority leader (who assists the Speaker with scheduling legislation, conducting business on the floor, and mediating intraparty conflict) and the majority whip (who is in charge of collecting and distributing information about member preferences and plotting strategy to build coalitions in support of the leadership). From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, the chief deputy whip and the chairman of the Democratic Caucus were also considered part of the core leadership. The extended leadership refers to the auxiliary resources the party leadership uses to carry out its basic functions: the whip system, the party's steering and policy committee, and the House Rules Committee.

Minority party leadership. The House minority party is headed by the minority leader, the minority whip, the party caucus (or conference) chairman, and the steering and policy committee chairman. Like majority leaders, minority leaders seek to manage intraparty conflict and to build coalitions, a task that includes attempting to win the support of some members in the majority party. Minority party leadership may also involve obstructing the majority party from advancing its agenda, though obstructive tactics became less common after the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the late twentieth century, minority party leaders were more likely to offer alternative programs to the majority party or to help members of their party initiate programs. A common strategy of Republican minority leaders in the 1980s was to blame the Democratic party for policy failures and procedural unfairness.

History of party leadership. The styles and strategies of party leadership have varied with conditions and the individuals occupying formal positions. At least five conceptions of party leadership have evolved over time: (1) parliamentary, (2) centralized party leadership, (3) leadership by commission, (4) middleman leadership, and (5) conditional party leadership. In her 1896 work *The Speaker of the House*, Mary Parker Follett found that the Speaker had always been a parliamentary and party leader.

The Speaker had the power to appoint committees and committee chairmen and to recognize members on the floor. Yet, as Ronald Peters (1990) argues, conditions before the Civil War prevented Speakers from exercising strong party leadership. The federal government had a limited role in American society, the nation was divided over the slavery issue, and the House was just beginning to develop as a representative and lawmaking institution. Under those conditions, the Speaker concentrated primarily on the tasks associated with the presiding officer role. The speakership was not a highly sought-after position and was generally occupied by "second rate men," according to Follett.

Henry Clay of Kentucky (Speaker, 1811–1814, 1815–1820, and 1823–1825) represented the one major exception to the parliamentary leadership model of the pre-Civil War era. Clay made several unique contributions to the status and power of the Speaker's office. He added a third component to the Speaker's theretofore twofold role of party leader and presiding officer—that of exercising the privileges of a House member (specifically, participating in floor debate and regularly casting roll-call votes). As Peters points out, Clay was popular and famous for his oratory skills; he was one of the only Speakers in history to be elected on the basis of the programs he advocated; and he was instrumental in developing the committee system in the House.

After the Civil War, the Speaker's office developed into a strong party leadership position. By the end of the nineteenth century, House leadership was virtually defined by the centralized power wielded by the Speaker. From 1890 to 1910, the House saw the rise of "boss," or "czar," Speakers. Two notable Republican Speakers of this period—Thomas B. Reed (R-Maine, 1899–1891 and 1895–1899) and Joseph G. Cannon (R-Ill., 1903–1911)—epitomized strong, centralized party leadership. In addition to appointing committees, the Speaker chaired a five-person Rules Committee, which controlled the scheduling of bills for debate on the floor and the length of floor debate. The Speaker also had unprecedented power on the House floor, including the ability to recognize members and suspend House rules.

The Speaker's vast power was supported by conditions that encouraged strong, centralized party leadership. A stable and cohesive party system enabled the Speaker to set the congressional agenda and discipline members. State and local party organizations controlled nominations for office and encouraged party loyalty and conformity to the Speaker's demands. Most important, the members

within each party were unified on most issues because they represented similar constituencies and therefore shared many interests (Cooper and Brady, 1981). Finally, the seniority rule had not yet developed as the standard for career development. Thus, the Speaker could use committee assignments to sanction or reward members, depending on their loyalty to the party's position on issues that came to the House for a vote.

Although centralized party leadership expedited lawmaking, it limited representation in the House. Ultimately, members concluded that Speaker Cannon had abused his powers and too greatly restricted their ability to participate in the process. The period of centralized party leadership ended in 1910 with the famous revolt against Speaker Cannon. A faction of progressive Republicans coalesced with Democrats to pass a resolution that called for enlarging the Rules Committee from five to fifteen members, electing the Rules Committee's members by House vote, removing the Speaker from the committee, and having the members of the committee select its chairman. The revolt against Cannon demonstrated the limitations to centralized leadership in the House (see Jones, 1968).

After 1910, centralized party leadership was never fully restored to the Speaker. The concept of leadership evolved in important ways, however, as conditions changed and new leaders defined their roles. For a brief period, until 1916, party leadership continued under the auspices of a highly disciplined party caucus. As Chang-wei Chiu observed (*The Speaker of the House of Representatives since 1896*, 1928), in contrast to the strong centralized leadership exercised by the czar Speakers, caucus government relied more on leadership by "commission"—a group of leaders who collaborated on strategy. The commission typically included the Speaker, majority floor leader, chairmen of the Rules and Appropriations committees, and the chairman and members of the Ways and Means Committee. The Democrats were the majority party during the period of caucus government, and Oscar W. Underwood (D-Ala.), floor leader and chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, emerged as a prominent figure.

After only a few years, though, party factionalism undermined the binding caucus and the House proceeded through a long period of "committee government." Powerful, autonomous committee chairmen, protected by seniority, emerged as the leaders of a fragmented committee structure. As noted in the following section, committee chairmen wielded most of the lawmaking power and exercised con-

straints on representation. While party leadership was not totally ineffectual, it was undermined by weak parties and the dispersion of power among the committees. The Speaker continued to exercise scheduling powers, participated in committee assignments, and could extend small favors to members, but his primary function was to act as a mediator of the various factions within the majority party.

According to Truman (1959) the conditions of the committee government era were conducive to a "middleman" concept of party leadership. The middleman concept comes from the nature of the congressional party itself, which lacked sufficient cohesion to formulate and enact a party program. Party leaders were expected to be ideological moderates who avoided siding with any factions in the party and acted as brokers of competing interests within the party. Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the House for eighteen years during the committee government era (1940–1947, 1949–1953, and 1955–1961), skillfully implemented the middleman style of leadership. Lacking the formal powers of the czar Speakers, Rayburn developed informal relationships with committee chairmen and led by bargaining, compromise, and persuasion.

Finally, "conditional party leadership," a term developed by David Rohde (1991), reflected the role of party leaders in the period following the extensive reforms passed by the House in the 1970s. Although party leaders in the late twentieth century lacked the power of the czar Speakers, they did have the resources to exercise strong leadership on issues that enjoyed a consensus among party members. In fact, the key condition of "conditional" party leadership was consensus among party members: when members of the majority party agreed on an issue, they wanted leaders to exercise the authority to advance the party's interests.

Conditional party leadership is rooted in the peculiar mix of institutional reforms passed during the 1970s, which seemed to serve contradictory purposes. Some reforms aimed toward decentralization—weakening the power of committee chairmen and enhancing opportunities for all members to participate in the policy process. Others sought to centralize power in the Speaker, who was given the authority to refer bills to more than one committee, appoint members to the Rules Committee, and chair the party's steering and policy committee, which has responsibility for nominating members to appointments on standing committees.

The reforms make sense from the perspective of members who wanted to improve Congress's capac-

ity to perform the functions of lawmaking and representation. The reforms created a context within which members of the majority party could pursue their individual interests but also bind together when they agreed on specific issues. The first impulse of party leaders in the reform period was to involve members in the policy process as much as possible and to accommodate the diverse preferences of party members (Sinclair, 1983). In the 1980s, members continued to participate actively in the policy process, but with increased party unity. House Democrats enjoyed a greater consensus—greater than at any other time since the turn of the twentieth century—on many issues because the preferences of their constituents were more alike. Strong party unity combined with the reforms that strengthened the party leadership enabled party leaders to exert strong leadership when members thought it was necessary for collective action.

Committee Leaders. Committee chairmen also hold important leadership positions in the House. The workload of the House is divided up by standing committees, which have traditionally served as the primary source of deliberation and lawmaking in the House of Representatives. Each committee has jurisdiction over a particular set of policy issues: agricultural, armed services, foreign affairs, and the like. Almost all committees further divide up their work by subcommittees. Committee leadership involves the actions taken by the chairman of each committee and each subcommittee. Conceptions of committee leadership evolved as the committee system developed and as political scientists conducted more systematic study of committees.

Woodrow Wilson gave the first description of committee leadership in *Congressional Government* (1885). He argued that if Congress possessed any leadership at all, it resided in the standing committees. House leadership reflected the incoherent, fragmented committee system, which produced a "multiplicity of leaders"—the committee chairmen.

There are in Congress no authoritative leaders who are recognized spokesmen of their parties. Power is nowhere concentrated; it is rather deliberately and of set policy scattered amongst many small chiefs. It is divided up, as it were, into forty-seven seigniories, in each of which a Standing Committee is the court-baron and its chairman lord-proprietor. (Wilson, p. 92)

The feudal nature of this initial conception of committee leadership suggested a general lack of leadership in the House as a whole. The committee

chairmen were “petty barons,” despotic in their narrow spheres of policy-making but incapable of acting responsibly on behalf of the House as an institution. The committees were autonomous and unconnected, and their leaders were generally selfish, unruly, and uncooperative. In Wilson’s view, the committee system’s supposed virtues of limiting centralized power and permitting members to become experts on specific policies were outweighed by the “irresponsible” leadership that inevitably surfaces when power is divided. The emergence of seniority in the post-World War I period reinforced the general conception of the narrow-minded, all-powerful, despotic committee chairmen described in Wilson’s account of the late 1800s. Seniority made committee chairmen even more powerful, enshrining them as the permanent leaders of their respective committees and giving them a sense of invincibility.

Analysts eventually challenged the generalizations about committee politics and refined the concept of committee leadership. Later studies found that committees and committee chairmen were not all alike. Those studies also drew distinctions between “power” and “influence” in the exercise of committee leadership. A description of Chairman Wilbur D. Mills (D-Ark.) of the Ways and Means Committee (1958–1974) underscores the notion that committee leadership encompasses far more than the simplified conception of chairmen as “petty barons” (Manley, 1969). While formal power was indeed centralized in the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, Mills’s personal leadership style was very informal. Mills was not a dictator who sought to advance a particular policy agenda but was, in fact, an ideological moderate who worked to build consensus on the committee and to ensure that the committee’s bills would be approved by large margins on the House floor. Such leadership required compromise and bargaining. Thus, belying the notion that committee chairmen ruled by intimidation and coercion, members of Ways and Means praised Mills as a cooperative, fair, and persuasive leader.

Richard F. Fenno (*Congressmen in Committees*, 1978) develops a broader theoretical context for committee leadership in his comparative study of six House committees (Appropriations, Education and Labor, Foreign Affairs, Interior and Insular Affairs, Post Office and Civil Service, and Ways and Means) from the 84th through the 89th Congresses (1955–1967). Fenno argues that committee leadership, as with committee decision making, will differ according to several variables: member goals,

external constraints (the expectations of external groups), and strategies for pursuing member goals within the context of external constraints.

Committee leadership has also changed as a result of institutional reforms. Reforms passed in the 1970s further decentralized committee power and encouraged wider participation by junior members. Specifically, reforms increased the number of subcommittees and enhanced their autonomy, opened committee hearings to the public, facilitated floor amendments to committee bills, and empowered the party caucus to elect committee chairmen. Of course, Fenno’s central argument still held in the 1990s—leadership continued to vary from one committee to the next. But committee chairmen generally had less control over subcommittees; the chairmen were more responsive to members’ preferences; and they depended more upon party leaders to pass bills on the floor.

Informal Leadership. Besides the formally designated party and committee leaders, House leadership includes “informal leaders”—leaders who lack formal authority in the House. Informal leaders typically are characterized as independent, hard-working policy experts. Yet, as Roger H. Davidson indicates, informal leaders perform a wide variety of roles: as “procedural experts,” who are skillful at facilitating or delaying action with parliamentary tactics; as “brokers,” or mediators, among competing interests; as ideologues or publicists, who use the media to try to build external support; as leaders of regions or special caucuses; and as “policy entrepreneurs,” who formulate and build support for specific issues (“Congressional Leaders as Agents of Change,” in Mackaman, 1981). Susan Hammond divides informal leaders into two categories: leaders with portfolio and leaders without portfolio (“Committee and Informal Leaders in the U.S. House of Representatives,” in Kornacki, 1990). Leaders with portfolio include all formal leaders plus informal leaders who act on behalf of an informal organization (a caucus or discussion group). Leaders without portfolio are members who act individually or without any organizational base.

The number and type of informal leaders increased under the conditions of the House prevailing in the late twentieth century. Informal leadership was promoted by the expanded subcommittee system, changes in rules and informal norms that encouraged members to participate more actively in the policy process, and increases in staff and information sources (the Congressional Budget Office, the Congressional Research Service, and the Office of Technology Assessment). As Burdett

Loomis illustrates in *The New American Politician* (1988), many members who came to the House in the 1970s exercised informal leadership. Unwilling to wait patiently for a formal leadership position in order to affect policy decisions, these members built their own informal enterprises through caucuses or personal staffs. Eventually, many informal leaders expanded their influence through formal subcommittee chairmanships, and came to constitute the group from which committee chairmen and party leaders were recruited.

Of course, in any institution there are clear limitations to influence without a formal position of power. Still, the ambitious, independent, entrepreneurial style of informal leaders broadened the concept of House leadership and placed particular emphasis on representation. As Loomis warns, however, the rise of the new American politician may undermine prospects of collective leadership and lawmaking with respect to the nation's most pressing problems. Since the informal leaders of yesterday and today are the formal leaders of tomorrow, the future of House leadership—specifically, the capacity of leaders to balance lawmaking and representation—will depend on how the self-styled politicians of the 1990s respond to the conditions of the future.

[See also Cannon Revolt; Clerk of the House; Speaker of the House; *table under* Floor Leader.]

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