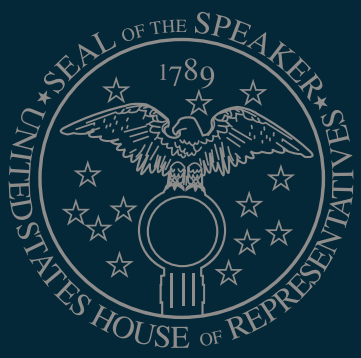
"A Chair Made Illustrious"

A Concise History of the U.S. House Speakership



Foreword by Speaker Mike Johnson

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A Concise History of the U.S. House Speakership

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History, Art & Archives
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Image courtesy of the Speaker

FOREWORD

The first thing that most visitors notice as they enter the Chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives is the display of large gold letters above the Speaker's rostrum proclaiming our national motto: *In God We Trust*. Along the ceiling line, they see 23 marble relief portraits depicting history's great lawgivers, from Moses and Maimonides to Sir William Blackstone and Thomas Jefferson.

The motto and the portraits remind the Speaker, and every Member of Congress, that all our actions, debates, and votes are being measured by history as well as by our Creator. Indeed, the symbols and the grandeur of the House Chamber were seemingly designed to remind us of the profound responsibility we have to keep our republic so that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Our grand experiment in self-governance has endured every challenge thus far because it is rooted in timeless principles, and it is those principles that have made us the freest, most powerful, most successful, and most benevolent nation in the history of the world.

Unlike other countries, where the top officer of each parliament or legislative body holds only a ceremonial role, the Speaker of the U.S. House is a constitutional office vested with immense power and responsibilities. In our system, the Speaker is, importantly, a primary steward of the foundational principles of our republic.

This book recounts how the office of Speaker developed, how its responsibility has been wielded for more than two centuries, and how our history has been forged as a result.

America has been blessed over the years with great leaders and legendary contributions. For example, the first House Speaker, Frederick Muhlenberg, was a minister, a leader of the American Revolution, a member of the Continental Congress, and the first signer of the Bill of Rights. Our 25th Speaker, Schuyler Colfax, led the House to pass the Thirteenth Amendment and promoted human dignity and the rule of law during and after the Civil War. Our 50th Speaker, Newt Gingrich, advanced key reforms and returned his party to control of the House with the epic "Contract with America," authored 30 years ago this year.

It would take volumes to record all the landmark achievements by all the remarkable individuals who have held the Speaker's post since 1789, but this book offers a fine summary.

Reviewing the cycles of congressional history reminds us that in our constitutional republic, political power is fleeting and diligently kept in proper check. The Speaker is first, foremost, and by design the chief *servant* of his colleagues and the people. It is the *People's* House, after all.

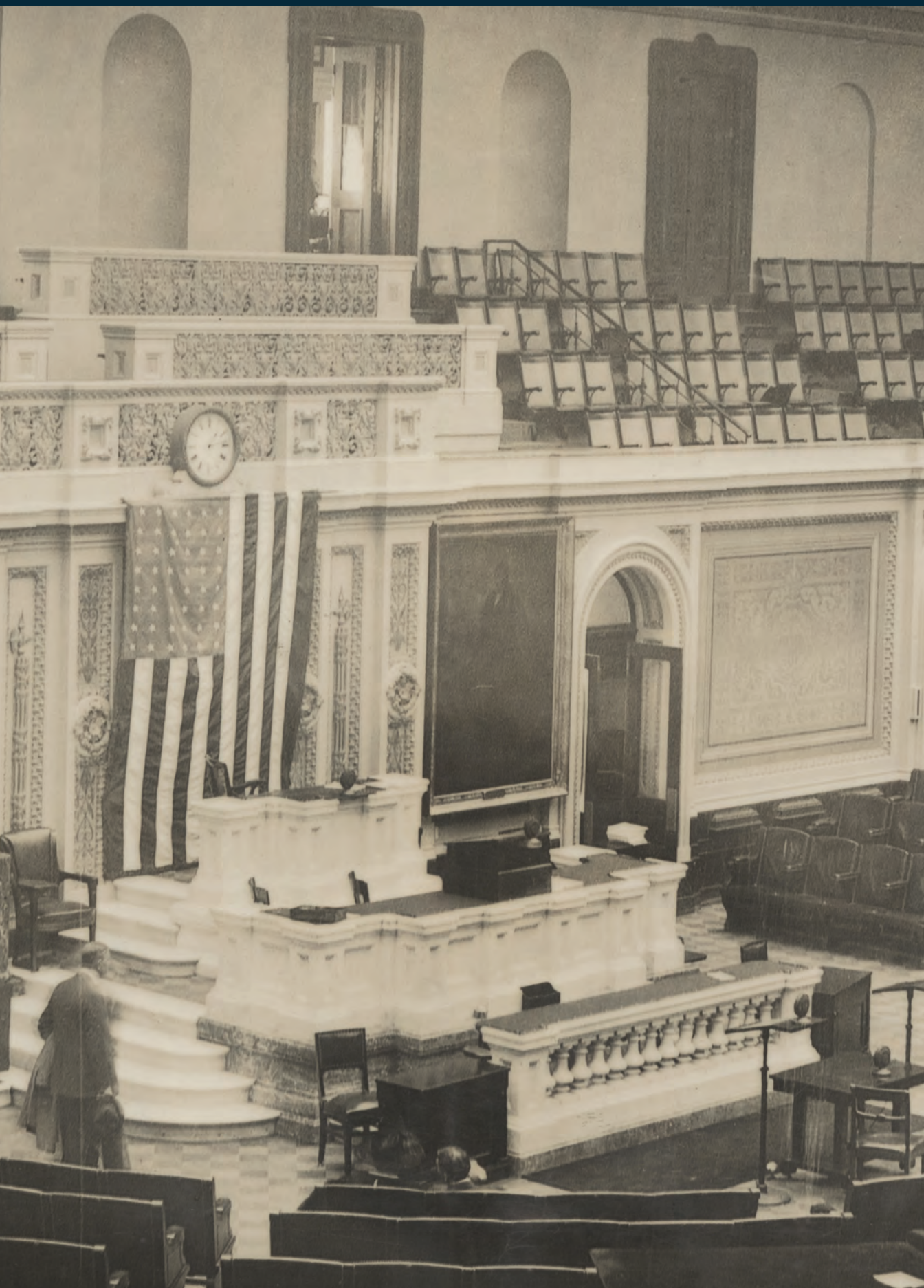
In *Federalist* 57, James Madison defended the idea of the House against the anti-Federalists by arguing that popular elections would ensure Members of Congress have a "habitual recollection of their dependence on the people" and would compel them to "anticipate the moment when their power is to cease, [and] when their exercise of it is to be reviewed."

Our “habitual recollection” prevents any Speaker from holding the gavel too tightly and likewise encourages us to understand our humble place and to be faithful in our awesome responsibility. As former President and Congressman John Quincy Adams so aptly summarized in a quotation widely attributed to him, “Duty is ours. Results are God’s.”

I am grateful that on my watch in the 118th Congress, the House has worked together and taken steps to reform the broken budgetary process, scale back the size and scope of government, protect the rights of Americans against illegal government surveillance, increase price transparency in health care, support all Jewish people in the face of rising antisemitism, and stand with our partners in Eastern Europe, the Near East, and the Indo-Pacific during what may be the most dangerous era since World War II. We did all this with one of the smallest House majorities in U.S. history (for many months, we worked with only a one-vote margin), and we helped hold our country together and defend freedom in very challenging, unprecedented times.

We have given every effort to fulfill our duty, and we must leave it to future generations to evaluate the results. When the work of the 56th Speaker is reviewed, I only hope it will be noted that I upheld the dignity of my office, wielded the gavel carefully and fairly, and helped defend and preserve those timeless principles and self-evident truths that have made us the extraordinary nation that we are. This great American republic is, as Abraham Lincoln recognized in his 1862 message to Congress, “the last best hope of earth.” May that hope spring eternal.

Mike Johnson
56th Speaker of the House
September 14, 2024



PROLOGUE

Around 12:40 in the afternoon, on March 4, 1911, Joseph G. Cannon of Illinois looked out over the chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives from the grand marble rostrum for the final time as Speaker.

For the previous eight years, Cannon, a Republican from eastern Illinois, had been a singularly powerful lawmaker. Cannon was the first person to serve four consecutive terms as Speaker, and he wielded his authority like few of his predecessors. He made every committee assignment. He decided who could speak during debate. And he served simultaneously as chairman of the Rules Committee, giving him the power to decide which bills went to the House Floor for consideration.

His critics called him a "tyrant" and "Czar Cannon." But most lawmakers, regardless of party, had real affection for him and appreciated his bonhomie. "While they hated him in the chair, they loved him in the lobby," a journalist once observed. After he had spent nearly four decades on Capitol Hill, pretty much everyone called him "Uncle Joe."[1]

Five months earlier, in the fall of 1910, Democrats had swept the midterm elections, winning the majority for the upcoming 62nd Congress (1911–1913). Cannon had won re-election, but his party had lost the House. And with it, Cannon lost the Speakership.[2]

Onlookers packed the Visitors' Gallery and crowds spilled into the hallways on March 4 to witness Cannon's final time in the Speaker's chair. The House had stayed in session throughout the night, and by morning exhausted lawmakers struggled to finish a few final items of business. The Constitution required the House to adjourn by noon that day. But as debate ran over, a doorkeeper in the gallery was forced on more than one occasion to set the clock back into the eleven a.m. hour. Elsewhere in Washington, DC, time kept on its forward march. But in the House, where the Speaker controlled even the clocks, time worked in reverse until Joe Cannon said otherwise.[3]

It was well past noon by the time Champ Clark of Missouri, the Democratic Leader, offered one last resolution in keeping with a 120-year-old tradition. At the close of the First Congress in 1791, the House had thanked Speaker Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania for "his conduct in the chair, and in the execution of the difficult and important trust reposed in him," beginning a custom that lasted throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Clark prepared a similar sendoff for his longtime Illinois colleague: "That the thanks of the House are due to the Hon. Joseph G. Cannon, its honored and distinguished Speaker, for the intelligent, constant, courteous manner in which he has presided over its important deliberations, and we wish him continued health and happiness."[4]

Clark waited for the applause to stop before continuing. "I offer this resolution because the Hon. Joseph G. Cannon becomes this day a historic personage," he said. "It does not make a particle of difference whether we like him or dislike him, whether we indorse [*sic*] what he has done in whole or in part, or not at all, he is a man with whom the historian will deal in days to come, and he will occupy a large space."[5]

This 1922 image of the House Chamber shows the original marble rostrum used from 1857 to 1949. Here, Speakers Thomas Brackett Reed of Maine, Joseph G. Cannon of Illinois, Champ Clark of Missouri, Nicholas Longworth of Ohio, and Sam Rayburn of Texas presided.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

WE the People of the States of New-Hampſhire, Maſſachuſetts, Rhode-Iſland and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jerſey, Pennſylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, South-Carolina, and Georgia, do ordain, declare and eſtabliſh the following Conſtitution for the Government of Ourſelves and our Poſterity.

ARTICLE I.

The ſtile of this Government ſhall be, "The United States of America."

II.

The Government ſhall conſiſt of ſupreme legiſlative, executive and judicial powers.

III.

The legiſlative power ſhall be veſted in a Congreſs, to conſiſt of two ſeparate and diſtinct bodies of men, a Houſe of Repreſentatives, and a Senate; ~~each of which ſhall, in all caſes, have a negative on the other. The Legiſlature ſhall meet on the firſt Monday in December in every year.~~ *

* The Legislature shall meet at least once in every year and that meeting shall be on the first Monday in December unless a different day shall be appointed by Law.

IV.

Sect. 1. The Members of the Houſe of Repreſentatives ſhall be choſen every ſecond year, by the people of the ſeveral States comprehended within this Union. The qualifications of the electors ſhall be the ſame, from time to time, as thoſe of the electors in the ſeveral States, of the moſt numerous branch of their own legiſlatures.

Sect. 2. Every Member of the Houſe of Repreſentatives ſhall be of the age of twenty-five years at leaſt; ſhall have been a citizen ~~in~~ of the United States for at leaſt ~~two~~ seven years before his election; and ſhall be, at the time of his election, ~~a citizen~~ an inhabitant of the State in which he ſhall be choſen.

Sect. 3. The Houſe of Repreſentatives ſhall, at its firſt formation, and until the number of citizens and inhabitants ſhall be taken in the manner herein after deſcribed, conſiſt of ſixty-five Members, of whom three ſhall be choſen in New-Hampſhire, eight in Maſſachuſetts, one in Rhode-Iſland and Providence Plantations, five in Connecticut, ſix in New-York, four in New-Jerſey, eight in Pennſylvania, one in Delaware, ſix in Maryland, ten in Virginia, five in North-Carolina, five in South-Carolina, and three in Georgia.

Sect. 4. As the proportions of numbers in the different States will alter from time to time; as ſome of the States may hereafter be divided; as others may be enlarged by addition of territory; as two or more States may be united; as new States will be erected within the limits of the United States, the Legiſlature ſhall, in each of theſe caſes, regulate the number of repreſentatives by the number of inhabitants, according to the [redacted] the rate of one for every forty thouſand. Provided that every State shall have at least One Representative.

exceeds the

Sect. 5. All bills for raiſing or appropriating money, and for fixing the ſalaries of the officers of government, ſhall originate in the Houſe of Repreſentatives, and ſhall not be altered or amended by the Senate. No money ſhall be drawn from the public Treaſury, but in purſuance of appropriations that ſhall originate in the Houſe of Repreſentatives.

Sect. 6. The Houſe of Repreſentatives ſhall have the ſole power of impeachment. It ſhall chooſe its Speaker and other officers.

Sect. 7. Vacancies in the Houſe of Repreſentatives ſhall be ſupplied by writs of election from the executive authority of the State, in the repreſentation from which they ſhall happen.

V.

THE SPEAKERSHIP: AN INTRODUCTION

This publication offers a concise history of the large space the Speakership has occupied in the development of America's democracy and its government.

The Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives was the first federal office created in the Constitution and has been at the forefront of America's nation-building for more than two centuries. As the head of America's popularly elected branch of government, the Office of the Speaker has shaped and has been shaped by the democratic forces coursing through the country. It is impossible to separate the Speakership from the people it serves and the history they share.

The Constitution says only that "the House of Representatives shall chuse their Speaker." The Framers made the Speakership independent of any other governmental authority and left it to the American people and their Representatives to determine the powers and prerogatives of the office. It would be the responsibility of future generations to decide what role the Speaker would fill.

The American Speakership was, and remains, an office in a constant state of evolution. Because the House reconstitutes itself every two years at the start of each new Congress, lawmakers have regularly molded the office to fit their needs and those of the voters to whom they are accountable. "There was nothing so sacred about our procedures, however old and however entrenched, that they could not be altered to make us more representative," Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma once said about the reforms he instituted in the House in the early 1970s. Congress has seen its share of ambitious Speakers, but each could only wield the power the House—by a majority vote—allowed them to have. As a result, no two Speakerships have been the same.[6]

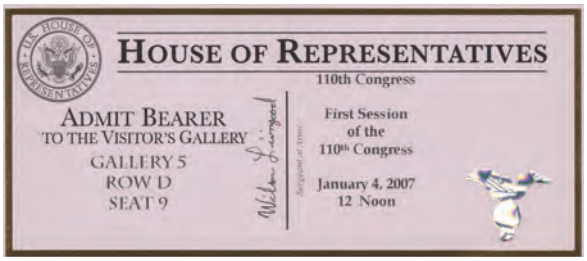
Almost every lawmaker who has occupied the Speakership has left his or her mark on the office in one way or another. Some, like Henry Clay of Kentucky, greatly expanded the role and influence of the Speaker. Certain Speakers, especially Thomas Brackett Reed of Maine, used the gavel to facilitate the agenda of the majority. And others, particularly Joe Cannon, used the Speakership to dictate the legislative prospects of the House. Regardless of their individual ambitions, new Speakers inherited an office shaped by their predecessors. When James G. Blaine of Maine won election as Speaker on March 4, 1869, he acknowledged that he now sat in what he called "a chair made illustrious by the services of such eminent statesmen and skilled parliamentarians."[7]

Despite its changing nature, the Speakership has remained static and unrepresentative in a crucial way: over many decades, even as American society opened to greater political participation among women and people of color, the Speakership remains the lone constitutional office to have not yet fully realized these changes. As of 2022, every lawmaker to hold the Speakership has been White.

Furthermore, until 2007 they had all been men. But around 12:40 p.m. on January 4, 2007, exactly 95 years and 10 months after Cannon laid down the gavel, the Members-elect of the 110th Congress (2007–2009) began the process of changing the Speakership again. Since 1839, the House had elected its Speaker at the beginning of each Congress by voice vote, with each Member-elect, one-by-one in alphabetical order, calling out the name of a candidate. By the early afternoon, Nancy Pelosi of California had been elected Speaker of the House for the 110th Congress. She was the first woman to

This August 1787 draft of the Constitution belonged to George Washington and includes his own annotations. In this version, the Speaker of the House is created in Article I, Clause 4, Section 6. "The House of Representatives … shall choose its Speaker and other officers."

Official Records of the Constitutional Convention of 1787; Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, Record Group 360, National Archives and Records Administration


HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
110th Congress
ADMIT BEARER
TO THE VISITOR'S GALLERY
GALLERY 5
ROW D
SEAT 9
First Session
of the
110th Congress
January 4, 2007
12 Noon

Ninety years after the first Congresswoman was sworn into office, Nancy Pelosi of California became the first woman elected Speaker when the 110th Congress (2007–2009) convened. This pass allowed guests to view the proceedings on Opening Day.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

serve as Speaker and at the time the highest-ranking woman in American political history.

This brief history of the Speakership—which is told in five parts that correspond to major moments in American history—foregrounds the people, events, and political forces that have driven two-and-a-half centuries of change. The first section follows the history of the Speakership from its roots in England to the pivotal role the colonial speakership played in the quest for American independence. The second section follows the experiences of the earliest generations of U.S. House Speakers, from the opening of Congress in 1789 to the cataclysm of the Civil War in 1861. In particular, it explores the changes to the office brought about by the national policy ambitions of Speaker Henry Clay, who served six nonconsecutive terms in the House from 1811 to 1825. The third section looks at the Speakership amid the rise of America's modern two-party system and efforts to remove obstacles that kept the House majority from working its will in the decades after the Civil War. Two Speakers dominated the era: Thomas Brackett Reed and Joe Cannon. The fourth section examines the Speakership after significant reforms restrained the Speaker's powers starting in 1910. During the five decades between World War I and the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, Speakers—including Nicholas Longworth of Ohio and Sam Rayburn of Texas—reckoned with an office that was forced to share much of its influence with party leaders and committee chairs. The fifth and final section traces the path of the Speakership to the modern era and focuses on the careers of Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. of Massachusetts and Newt Gingrich of Georgia.

The story told here is about the individuals who served as Speaker and the contours and rhythms of their office. It is a story about the constellation of political movements, lawmakers, aides, and everyday people who have shaped the Speakership in myriad ways. In large measure, the history of the Speakership is also a history of the U.S. House of Representatives. But it is ultimately a history of America and its experiment in democratic self-government.

PART 1: THE ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN SPEAKERSHIP

English Parliament and Colonial Legislatures

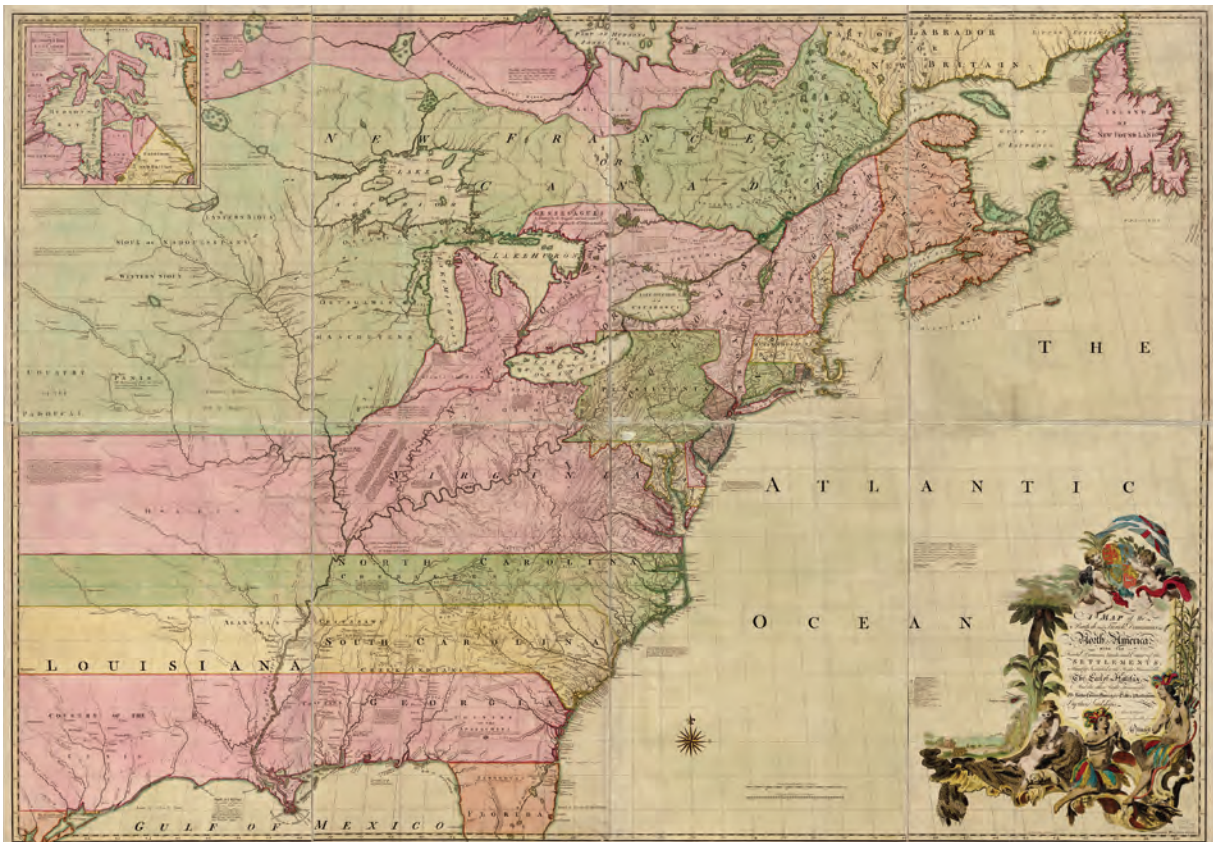
Like many parts of America's governing system, the office that became the U.S. House Speakership developed over hundreds of years in England before being transplanted in British North America during the seventeenth century.

The office originated in the House of Commons in the thirteenth century, primarily to communicate messages between Parliament and the crown. At the time, English monarchs reserved the right to appoint the earliest Commons speakers, making them largely subservient to royal authorities. Eventually, however, the House of Commons won more control over its proceedings, including the ability to elect its own presiding officer. But even that power came with conditions, and the crown retained the right to reject the speaker selected by Parliament. As a result, the English speakership remained closely connected to the monarchy for much of the next 400 years.[8]

By the seventeenth century, however, speakers in the House of Commons had begun to assert their autonomy, gradually setting the office apart from the crown and defending the interests of Parliament.[9]

This 1755 hand-colored map of British and French colonies depicts the pre-Revolutionary War boundaries of North America.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division



On the other side of the Atlantic, Britain's North American colonies began to establish legislatures of their own. Beginning with Virginia's house of burgesses in 1619, colonists along the eastern seaboard created governments modeled on what they had known back in England. There were key differences, of course, and no two colonies did everything alike. But, overall, colonial officials replicated much of England's governing structure in North America.

To preside over their assemblies, the colonial legislatures created speakerships reflective of the office in the House of Commons. While the crown remained a real if somewhat distant concern in the colonies, it was the king's men in America—the royal governors appointed to supervise England's overseas territories—who became the chief antagonists of the colonial legislatures and their speakers. Much like earlier English monarchs, many appointed royal governors had the power to name colonial speakers; others held the right to veto the speaker elected by the legislature. In New England, however, voters in Rhode Island and Connecticut elected the governor, which greatly curbed his influence over the colonial speaker.[10]

A printer by trade, Benjamin Franklin started the *Pennsylvania Gazette* before beginning his political career in the Pennsylvania colonial assembly and later the Continental Congress.

Image courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation

Over time, colonial legislatures worked to limit the power of royal authorities. They demanded and won more freedom to control their affairs. By the mid-eighteenth century, colonial speakers had grown powerful and some wielded significant influence over policy and spending—a few even determined when, or if, the royal governor would be paid.[11]

The Albany Plan of Union

By the early 1750s, Britain's colonies faced looming conflict with allied French and American Indian forces over contested territory west of the Appalachian Mountains. As the saber-rattling intensified in the buildup to what would become the Seven Years' War, officials from Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, gathered in Albany, New York, in the summer of 1754 to discuss their shared security concerns. Among the delegates at what became known as the Albany Congress was 48-year-old Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania.[12]

Franklin had drafted what he called "a plan for the union of all the colonies under one government," cautioning that if the colonies remained divided, French forces would have the advantage. Franklin's Albany Plan of Union proposed a two-pronged administrative system. In lieu of a royal governor, the plan called on the crown to appoint a "President General" to head the new coalition government. It also established a unicameral legislature called the "Grand Council," comprising 48 representatives elected by the individual colonial assemblies.

To preside over the Grand Council, the Albany Plan empowered lawmakers to elect a speaker. On

the surface, this was an entirely conventional and reasonable decision: by 1754, colonial legislatures in British North America had been electing speakers for more than a century. But the specific nature of the speakership articulated in the Albany Plan shattered years of tradition. Unlike most colonial assemblies, where meddling royal governors often had sway over the choice of speaker, the Grand Council's speaker would answer to the Grand Council alone. In just one 11-word clause, the Albany Plan established a revolutionary model for a centralized government that effectively insulated the speaker from outside influence: "That the Grand Council have Power to Chuse their Speaker."[13]

Delegates to the Albany Congress also built into this new union a remarkable line of succession. In the event of the President General's death, the speaker would assume all the powers of the government until the king appointed a new president.[14]

The Albany Congress approved Franklin's plan in July 1754. But the union failed to win the support of either Parliament or the colonial governments, making the Grand Council speaker perhaps the most radical presiding officer never to serve in British North America. In his autobiography, Franklin lamented the plan's demise. The colonial assemblies balked, he said, because "they all thought there was too much *prerogative* in it, and in England it was judg'd to have too much of the *democratic*." In a world of kings and queens and ancient hereditary monarchies, perhaps no part of the Albany Plan was as democratic as Franklin's Grand Council speakership: an office elected by council representatives, who themselves were elected by the colonial assemblies, and accountable to the council alone.[15]

A full generation would pass and a war for independence would be fought and won before Franklin again helped shape a stronger, bolder plan of union—one in which the Speaker of the House held a central role and one very much infused with "the *democratic*."

Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey was the only Speaker to sign the Constitution. He later served as a Representative and Senator.

Image courtesy of the New York Public Library

American Independence

Many years later, in 1815, John Adams, the Massachusetts revolutionary who served as the second President of the United States, reflected on the period leading up to America's war for independence from the perspective of a man who had lived it all. The seven years of war with France in the 1750s and 1760s had severely tested the colonists. But it was at that point, Adams recalled, that the spirit of independence took root in North America. Before the fateful summer of 1776, "the Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and in the Union of the Colonies, both of which were accomplished, before Hostilities commenced," Adams wrote. "This Revolution and Union were gradually forming from the year 1760 to 1775."[16]

Modern observers have identified a parallel arc in the early development of what would become the U.S. Speakership. The office "evolved initially under circumstances that fostered independence," the political scientist Ronald M. Peters Jr. observed. "In the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries, the Speakers of the colonial assemblies emerged as leaders of colonial opposition to the policies of royal governors."[17]

When that opposition became a fully fledged resistance movement, many colonial speakers attended the First Continental Congress, where the colonies coordinated their response to Britain's new restrictions. Many of the 56 Delegates to the First Continental Congress in 1774 had at one point served as speaker of their colonial assemblies. The Second Continental Congress featured others including Benjamin Franklin, who had spent one year as speaker of the Pennsylvania assembly in 1764.[18]

The roster of Delegates to the Second Continental Congress featured additional colonial speakers, including Noble Wimberly Jones and Archibald Bulloch, both of Georgia. In the years after the publication of the Declaration of Independence in July 1776, the Continental Congress welcomed Delegates who had served as speaker in one of the 13 new state legislatures. Still other speakers served in the Confederation Congress during the latter 1780s. Following the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war in 1783, numerous alumni of the Continental Congresses went on to win election to state houses where many also served as speaker. Three of these Delegates were among the first four individuals elected Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives—Frederick Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania, Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey, and Theodore Sedgwick of Massachusetts.

Despite the number of former and future state speakers who served as Delegates, the Continental and Confederation Congresses used a president to supervise their deliberations. The president was something of an amalgam, a legislative official who was also, as the scholar Mary P. Follett observed more than a century ago, "the highest officer of the united colonies and as such possessed executive and diplomatic functions." While the president handled parliamentary inquiries and could very well influence the course of legislation, he lacked the authority to name Delegates to committees and set the voting schedule—powers that would later come to define the U.S. Speakership.[19]

Six men served as president of the Continental Congress between 1774 and 1781. Of those six, Peyton Randolph of Virginia and Henry Middleton of South Carolina had previously served as speaker of their colonial assemblies. Two others had led their states' provincial legislatures early in the Revolutionary period.

Following the ratification of the Articles of Confederation, nine men served as president during the Confederation Congresses, which existed from 1781 until 1789. The Articles of Confederation had created a central government with limited powers, what it called "a firm league of friendship" held together by the barest of federal scaffolding. Most of America's governing responsibilities instead went to the individual states. With few legislative responsibilities, the Confederation president—aside from handling official communications—held largely ceremonial and symbolic duties.[20]

In fact, much of the Confederation Congress's work fell to a separate office entirely: the chairman of the Committee of the Whole. The Committee of the Whole enabled the Congress to function much as the name suggests: as a committee to which every Member belonged. It descended from a similar practice in England which, beginning in the 1600s, had allowed the House of Commons to debate issues behind closed doors, shielded from the prying influence of its speaker, who often served the interests of the monarchy. In America, lawmakers had less need for privacy. But by going into the Committee of the Whole—and electing a chairman to run the proceedings—legislators facilitated day-to-day debate.[21]

The Constitutional Convention

More than three decades after he traveled to Albany to unify the colonies ahead of war with France, Benjamin Franklin made a far shorter

commute during peacetime to Pennsylvania's state house in his adopted hometown of Philadelphia to argue in favor of a plan to unite America's 13 newly independent states.[22]

Franklin was one of 55 Delegates to the Constitutional Convention who, over the course of the spring and summer of 1787, debated, critiqued, drafted, and revised their way to the creation of a new system of governance. Because the decentralized administrative state of the Articles of Confederation proved too weak to manage the affairs of the growing nation, the Delegates to the Constitutional Convention outlined a federal framework supported by three robust branches of government—legislative, executive, and judicial—each designed to check and balance the other. The legislative branch would comprise two houses of Congress: the Senate, and the popularly elected House of Representatives. And it was the House, Delegate George Mason of Virginia said early in the Convention, that would in theory "be the grand depository of the democratic principle of the Govt."[23]

By late July 1787, Convention Delegates had agreed in principle to the general structure of the new government and appointed a five-member Committee of Detail to fill in its finer points. On August 6, after two weeks of private discussion, the committee reported its draft of the U.S. Constitution to the full Convention for debate and amendment. Only three days later, on Thursday, August 9, Convention Delegates unanimously approved the clause in the committee's draft creating the Speaker of the House: "The House of Representatives shall have the sole power of impeachment. It shall choose its Speaker and other officers." Because the Delegates to the Constitutional Convention famously agreed to keep their deliberations secret, however, historians know frustratingly little about what the Convention envisioned for the Speakership.[24]

Following another month of debate and markup, the exhausted Delegates assigned the job of compiling a final version of the Constitution to the "Committee of Stile and Arrangement," which condensed the number of articles and attached a brief preamble.[25]

The Style Committee placed all the powers of the legislative branch in Article I of the Constitution, a testament to the importance of what would become known as the first branch of government. The committee moved the Speaker clause to Article I, Section 2, and in the process made it the first federal office mentioned in the Constitution. As approved by the Convention on September 17, 1787, the Constitution read: "The House of Representatives shall chuse their Speaker and other Officers."

After a century in which the colonial speakers were often subject to the whims of royal governors, the Constitution's Framers established a federal office free from any outside influence and imbued with what Franklin called "the *democratic*." "The House of Representatives shall chuse their Speaker" was unambiguous in its intent. The House would be responsible for electing its presiding officer, and the House answered directly to the American people.

In a sense, the Speakership created at the Constitutional Convention straddled multiple eras. It was familiar in the sense that it was laden with years of colonial and state precedent and echoed what Franklin had proposed in the Albany Plan of Union. But because the Framers left no other guidelines or instructions for the office, the fate of the office remained largely open-ended. Future generations would be free to mold and shape it as they saw fit.[26]

PART 2: THE SPEAKERSHIP FROM UNION TO DISUNION

On the day the First Congress was scheduled to open—March 4, 1789—only 13 Members-elect from five states had arrived in New York City, then the seat of America's new government. Without a quorum, the legislators from Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and South Carolina simply adjourned. They waited for a month until enough lawmakers arrived in Lower Manhattan to begin America's inaugural congressional term.

Among the 13 who had made it on time to New York in March 1789 was 39-year-old Frederick Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania, a Lutheran minister from Trappe, a town northwest of Philadelphia. Muhlenberg, the son of a German immigrant who helped establish the Lutheran Church in Pennsylvania, was born on New Year's Day in 1750. As a young man, he completed his religious training in Germany, and after being ordained in October 1770, he preached in Pennsylvania before moving to New York City in 1774 to begin a new ministry. He spent two years in New York until he fled when the British invaded the city in 1776. After heading back to Pennsylvania, he ministered in towns south of the Lehigh Valley, and in 1779 began the first of two years in the Continental Congress. In 1780, Muhlenberg began serving in the Pennsylvania house of representatives and was promptly elected speaker. Muhlenberg, in fact, served as speaker during all three of his years in the state house. In 1787, he capped his early political career by presiding over the state convention that ratified the United States Constitution.

A Member of the Continental Congress and Pennsylvania state legislature, Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania served as the first Speaker of the House.

Image courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania, University Archives Image Collection

A year later, on November 26, 1788, Muhlenberg won election to the First Congress (1789–1791) as one of eight At-Large Representatives from Pennsylvania. His 8,707 votes topped the entire Pennsylvania delegation and made him one of the highest vote-getters in the House.[27]

When the First Congress finally opened on Wednesday, April 1, the House elected a Speaker as its first order of business. Given Muhlenberg's extensive experience as a presiding officer, it is perhaps little surprise that he was also elected the first U.S. House Speaker.

That Muhlenberg was from Pennsylvania also worked in his favor. At the time, regional balance was key to ensuring that Americans bought into the new framework. The South had claimed the presidency following the election of Virginia's most famous resident, George Washington. With John Adams of Massachusetts as runner-up, New England held the vice presidency. New York's John Jay served as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. And with Muhlenberg in the Speaker's chair, Pennsylvania and the Mid-Atlantic sat atop the House of Representatives.[28]

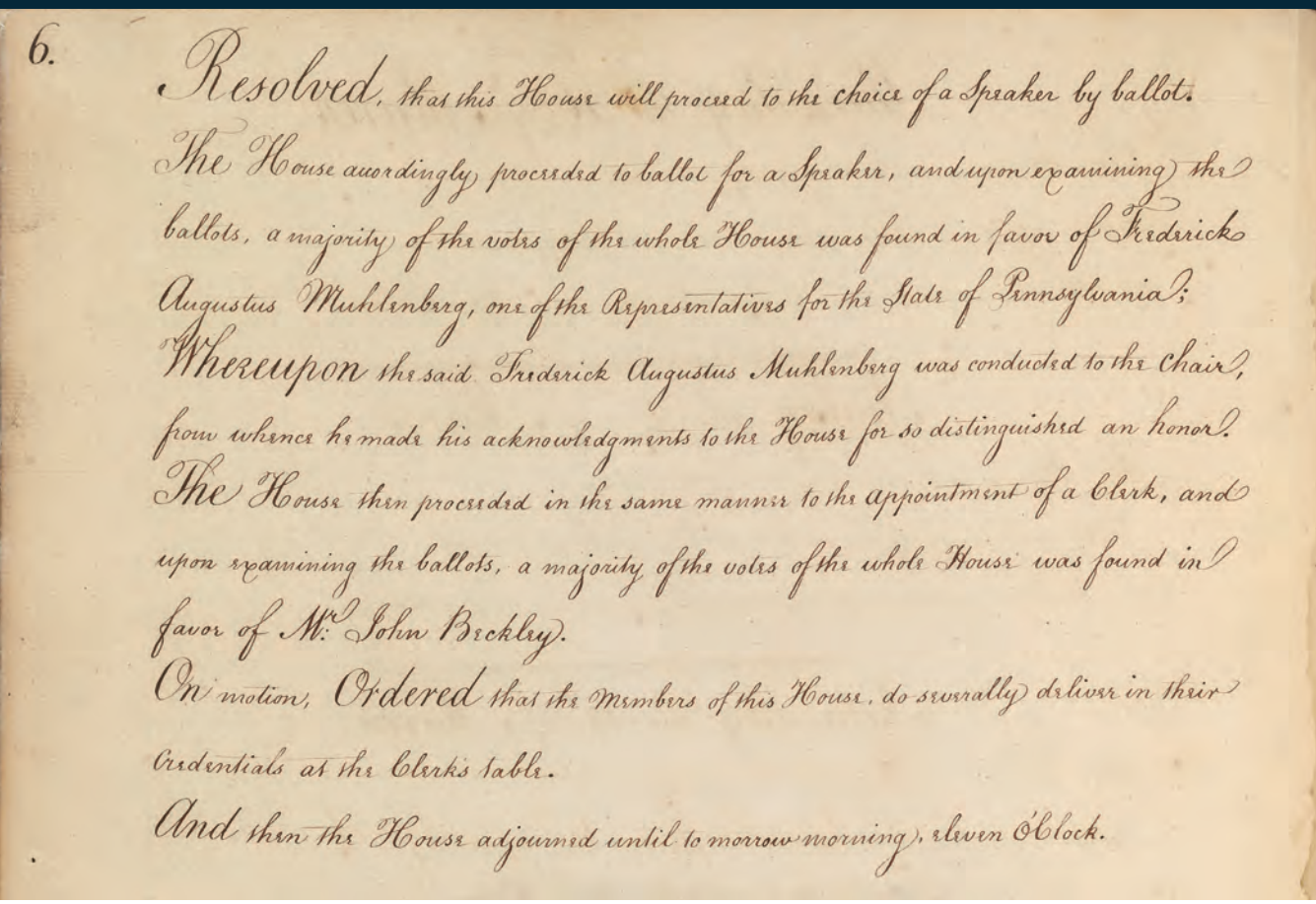
The First Congress was scheduled to convene at Federal Hall in New York City (seen here in the middle of the image) on March 4, 1789, but primitive modes of transportation—horseback, stagecoach, and sailing ship—made the journey arduous for many of the House's 65 Members as they trekked toward the capital. The opening was delayed for days, then weeks. The House finally achieved a quorum nearly a month later, on April 1.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

The Constitution placed few barriers to serving in the House. Members had to be at least 25 years old, residents of the state from which they were elected, and U.S. citizens for a minimum of seven years. Convention Delegates set no requirements on who could serve as Speaker. The Framers left it to the House to decide what credentials, traits, and characteristics it wanted in its Speakers.

Most Speakers who served between 1789 and 1861 entered Congress with a college education. Some of the first Speakers received private instruction before attending some of America's earliest colleges, including Princeton, Yale, and Harvard. Three of the four Speakers from Virginia—Philip P. Barbour, Andrew Stevenson, and John W. Jones—graduated from the College of William and Mary, and the fourth, Robert M.T. Hunter, attended the University of Virginia. Many Speakers in the first half of the nineteenth century took advantage of America's growing educational opportunities, staying close to home to attend regional schools. Still others, including Joseph B. Varnum of Massachusetts and John White of Kentucky, were largely self-taught.

Varnum was a farmer who later became a judge, but White, like most Speakers before the Civil War, was a lawyer. As was customary at the time, many Speakers clerked for a lawyer while studying the law in preparation for the bar examination. After he graduated from Harvard in 1828, for instance,



6.

Resolved, that this House will proceed to the choice of a Speaker by ballot.

The House accordingly proceeded to ballot for a Speaker, and upon examining the ballots, a majority of the votes of the whole House was found in favor of Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg, one of the Representatives for the State of Pennsylvania;

Whereupon the said Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg was conducted to the Chair, from whence he made his acknowledgments to the House for so distinguished an honor.

The House then proceeded in the same manner to the appointment of a Clerk, and upon examining the ballots, a majority of the votes of the whole House was found in favor of Mr. John Beckley.

On motion, Ordered that the Members of this House, do severally deliver in their Credentials at the Clerk's table.

And then the House adjourned until to morrow morning, eleven O'Clock.

The *House Journal* on April 1, 1789, recorded the election of the first Speaker.
Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Robert C. Winthrop held an apprenticeship in the law office of his home-state Senator, Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, before setting off on his own career. In something of a rarity, John W. Davis of Indiana graduated from the Baltimore Medical College in Maryland in 1821 and worked as a doctor before entering politics.

All but a few Speakers during this era served in their state legislatures before winning a seat in the U.S. House. Importantly, nine served as speaker of their state assemblies before coming to Capitol Hill. John Jones was unique in that he served as speaker of the Virginia house of delegates after retiring from Congress.

Between 1789 and 1861, Speakers were on average about 43 years old at the time of their first election to the chair. Many were in their mid- to late 30s. The youngest was Hunter, who was elected Speaker at just 30 years old, making him the first Speaker to have been born in the nineteenth century. Henry Clay was also young (only 34) when he was elected Speaker on his first day in the House in November 1811; Clay, however, had years of political experience by the time he was elected to the House. Not counting Muhlenberg, only one other Speaker aside from Clay won election to the chair in his first term: William Pennington, a former New Jersey governor, who served in the House during the 36th Congress (1859–1861). Otherwise, lawmakers before the Civil War served three terms on average before being elected Speaker.[29]

Twelve antebellum Speakers chaired one or more House committees before their time on the

rostrum, and a few served as committee chairmen following their Speakerships. Langdon Cheves of South Carolina, John Jones, and James K. Polk of Tennessee all chaired the House Ways and Means Committee, giving them immense power over the federal treasury and an up-close view of America's tariff and revenue policies—experience they then brought to the Speakership.

If the regional balance of the First Congress ensured broad support for the new government, the balance that Congress pursued throughout the antebellum era weighed the interests of southern slaveholding states against those of northern states, where slavery was gradually outlawed. The Speakership was a key part of that process; during the 1840s and 1850s, turnover was high, and most Speakers were seen as compromise candidates elected to appease the House's different regional factions. Over the course of 11 terms, from the 26th Congress to the 36th Congress (1839–1861), the House elected 10 different Speakers; only Linn Boyd of Kentucky served in consecutive Congresses.

It eventually became clear, however, that the South held an advantage as far as the Speakership was concerned. From 1789 to 1861, 13 of 23 Speakers came from southern slave states and numerous antebellum Speakers, including Clay and Polk, were slaveholders. Northerners controlled the gavel for the first six Congresses, at a time when slavery had not yet been abolished in many northern states. But with the election of Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina in 1801, southerners largely dominated the office for the next 60 years. Ultimately, southern Speakers controlled the House for part or all of 23 of the first 36 Congresses—despite the fact that by 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, the population of the 11 states that would secede to form the Confederacy totaled less than a third of the overall U.S. population.[30]

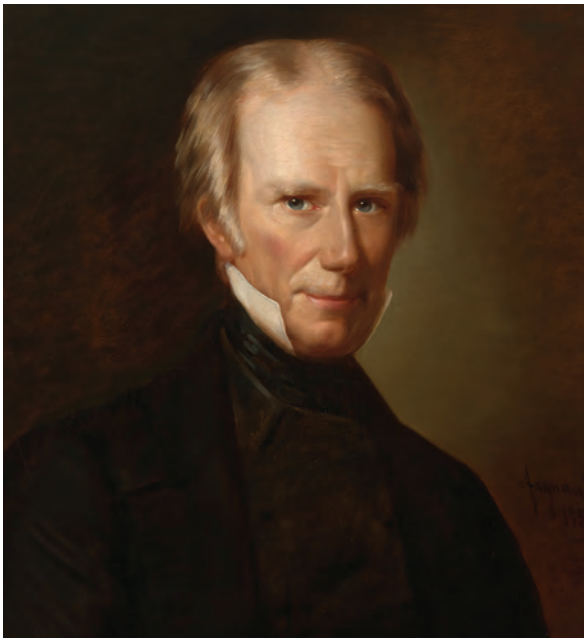
The start of the Civil War saw numerous former Speakers join the fight. Nathaniel P. Banks of Massachusetts, who had served as Speaker in the 34th Congress (1855–1857) and who by then was out of the House and living in Chicago, joined the Union Army and served for four years. After the war, Banks returned to the House, where he served seven nonconsecutive terms out of leadership during the next 25 years. On the other side, three antebellum southern Speakers—Robert Hunter, James L. Orr of South Carolina, and Howell Cobb of Georgia—helped found the Confederacy that sought to destroy the very government they had once led.

The powers and prerogatives of the Speakership underwent tremendous change during the antebellum period, largely thanks to one man, a southern slaveholder, who shaped the office in profound new ways. When Henry Clay won election as Speaker on November 4, 1811, the Speakership, the House of Representatives, and by extension the country itself entered a new era.

Speaker Henry Clay

During Congress's first two decades, Speakers largely professed to exist above the churn of debate, serving as impartial presiding officers and dispassionate arbiters of the rules. The earliest Speakers oversaw House proceedings but participated sparingly. They had the right to vote but mostly passed on the opportunity unless they needed to break a tie. They had the power to name committees but usually demurred and avoided using committees for personal or partisan gain, or to concentrate power. As recent studies have shown, not every Speaker heeded these expectations, and some served more actively than others. But, ultimately, more than a few Speakers during Congress's first 15 years aspired to manage the House with what Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut, the House's second Speaker, once called "that impartiality, integrity, and assiduity, which become the conspicuous station" of the Speakership.[31]

The first six Speakers had come of age in British North America and lived through the Revolution—Trumbull had served as George Washington's aide-de-camp and personal secretary during the war's later stages. Afterward, they



An experienced debater and veteran politician, Speaker Henry Clay of Kentucky was a formidable opponent during House Floor debate.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

created a new national government: 13 united states, bound not to a distant monarch but to the aspirations of the Declaration of Independence and the federal commitments articulated in the Constitution. Many believed that for the new government to work, the sober neutrality of the Speaker must temper the partisanship and factionalism that would inevitably arise. It was perhaps an unreasonable expectation, but the earliest Speakers professed to try.[32]

That began to change in 1811 with the election of the seventh Speaker, Henry Clay of Kentucky. Clay belonged to a different generation. He had been born during the Revolution, and he and his peers inherited a young and impatient nation. Clay grew up about a day's ride from Richmond, Virginia. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, he moved west to Kentucky to begin his legal career. By the time he was in his mid-20s, America's geopolitical boundary, at least on paper, had nearly doubled with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. That same year, Clay won election to the Kentucky state house of representatives and quickly advanced in state politics. He was elected by the Kentucky legislature to the U.S. Senate in 1806—even though he was not yet 30 years old, the minimum age set by the Constitution—and served until 1807. A year later he rejoined the Kentucky statehouse and led the chamber as speaker in 1809. In 1810, he began another short stint in the U.S. Senate, but opted to pursue a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives that fall. When he entered the race, his competition wilted, and Clay ran unopposed. Clay's service in the Kentucky state house, he said in a letter to future President James Monroe in November 1810, had left him "accustomed to the popular branch of a Legislature, and preferring the turbulence … of a numerous body to the solemn stillness of the Senate Chamber."[33]

Clay arrived in Washington for the start of the 12th Congress (1811–1813) amid a tense moment in America's diplomatic relations. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, the tenuous peace between the United States and England had started to fray as Britain's larger war with France began to spill across the Atlantic. Hoping to deny its French enemies access to American goods, the British navy began interfering with American commercial vessels. Meanwhile, years of westward migration of White settlers into American Indian homelands and the refusal of the U.S. government to honor various treaties with Native peoples displaced American Indian nations throughout Appalachia and the Midwest. In response, many of these nations formed alliances with foreign powers to resist further encroachment, including the British along the Canadian border. By 1811, skirmishes and battles between White settlers and American Indians began erupting across the Great Lakes region.[34]

Against that backdrop, Clay won election as Speaker on his first day in the House. Unlike his predecessors, he made no commitment to impartiality.[35]

As Speaker, Clay wasted little time establishing himself as both presiding officer and partisan leader. Clay was the most prominent member of a group of ambitious lawmakers called the War Hawks, who sought conflict with Great Britain both to establish America's place on the world's stage and to ensure continued western expansion. From 1789 to 1815, the population of the United States had essentially doubled. Like many of his contemporaries, Clay saw America as a restless land of untapped potential, and he sought investments in the country's infrastructure to spur the economy. As Speaker, he took over an office that also seemed to him to contain great possibilities and he exploited the gavel to turn his policy vision into reality.[36]

The "Western Star," as Clay was known, brought to the Speakership a unique sense of entitlement shaped by a personal history in which the rules were often whatever he wanted them to be. And as he entered the public spotlight, he embellished stories about his life that he used to impress voters.

The son of a wealthy planter and slaveholder, Clay had grown up wanting for very little. His family owned two plantations in Virginia, including the 500 acres where he spent much of his childhood and where at least 20 enslaved men and women labored in bondage. He had served in the U.S. Senate before he was constitutionally old enough to do so. He was elected from a region of the country that had, within his lifetime, seen the displacement of its indigenous inhabitants. And, like many others, he believed that the rest of the frontier was unquestionably America's for the taking. Early in his career, Clay occasionally parroted tepid antislavery positions, but he remained a slaveholder who profited from the labor and lives of other people. He enjoyed card games and gambling, and over the course of his career

This drawing, made sometime before 1814, depicts the Capitol before the center dome was added.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

saw his financial outlook fluctuate. In April 1820, U.S. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams offered a frank assessment of the Kentuckian. "In this country, politicians of desperate private fortunes always find the means of keeping themselves above water as public men," Adams wrote. "In politics, as in private life, Clay is essentially a gamester, and, with a vigorous intellect, an ardent spirit, a handsome elocution, though with a mind very defective in elementary knowledge, and a very undigested system of ethics, he has all the qualities which belong to that class of human characters."[37]

Clay saw the House Speakership as another position he could game to his advantage. Clay often had little reverence for the House's limited parliamentary procedure and "found the rules of his governance more frequently in his own instinctive sense of what was practicable and proper," the Speaker Robert Winthrop observed years later. Clay was an active presiding officer who recognized that so long as he had the support among the Members, he could shape the course of debate. Clay was immensely popular in the House, and, during his six full and partial terms as Speaker, lawmakers never voted to overrule any of his decisions from the chair. It was a lesson in subtlety and control he tried to pass on to his successors. When Winthrop became Speaker in the 30th Congress (1847–1849), Clay, who by then was soon to serve in the Senate again, let him in on a secret. "I have attentively observed your course as Speaker," Clay said, "and I have heartily approved it. But let me give you one hint from the experience of the oldest survivor of your predecessors. *Decide—decide promptly—and never give your reasons for the decision*. The House will sustain your decisions, but there will always be men to cavil and quarrel about your reasons."[38]

Unlike some of his predecessors, Clay regularly participated in debate when the chamber considered bills in the Committee of the Whole, which operated under a different set of less formal rules and was led by a chairman rather than the Speaker. As presiding officer during normal business, Clay's responsibilities as Speaker outweighed his urge to participate. But in the Committee of the Whole, Clay was prohibited from presiding, allowing him to forge a role as party leader who could steer policy debates.[39]

Clay entered the House as he and others banged the drums of war, and as Speaker he pushed both Congress and President James Madison to confront Great Britain. When the House finally declared war in early June 1812, Clay solidified his status as one of the most powerful officeholders in America. Even his congressional nemesis, John Randolph of Virginia, supposedly admitted in the summer of 1812 that the "Speaker of the Ho[use] of Representatives was the second man in the Nation," behind only the President. Writing 90 years later, the scholar Mary P. Follett went a step farther: "It is not too much to say … that Clay was the most powerful man in the nation from 1811 to 1825," during his time as Speaker.[40]

Clay resigned from the House in 1814 to help negotiate the end of the war with England, but he returned to Congress and was immediately re-elected Speaker. Clay worked to translate his ardent nationalism into concrete policy, and as Speaker he engineered a new sectional balance to appease slaveholding states with the Missouri Compromise of 1820, setting expectations regarding the admission of slave and free states in Congress for the next 30 years. With his "American System," Clay sought to use the sale of public lands to fund major federal investments in roads, canals, and harbors in order to link America's regional economies. And he pursued a high tariff which he argued would limit imports and protect American industry from overseas competition. Previous Speakers may have shied away from debate, but Clay embraced it. In March 1824, during his final term in the chair, Clay held the House Floor for two straight days during a speech on the tariff. The revenue bill became law two months later.[41]

In February 1825, Clay helped orchestrate the election of John Quincy Adams as President.

Andrew Jackson had won more votes than Adams in the Electoral College, but because neither candidate had received a majority, the presidential contest fell to the House for only the second time in American history. Before the vote, Clay had whipped support for Adams, who, like the Speaker, sought to build a strong federal state committed to growing the country's economy. The House elected Adams on the first ballot, and when Adams later offered Clay the post as U.S. Secretary of State—at the time, the steppingstone to the presidency—Jackson and his supporters erupted in indignation. Despite their accusations that Clay and Adams had engaged in "corrupt bargain" to put Adams in the White House, modern historians have rejected the claim.[42]

When Clay left the House for good in March 1825 to become Secretary of State, the changes he brought to the Speakership lived on. Speakers had forever ceased being only procedural referees; going forward they would serve and drive the interests of the House majority as well.

As a result of Clay's tenure, Speakers seeking to advance the majority's agenda used one of the most powerful tools at their disposal: the ability to appoint lawmakers to the House's standing committees. During and after Clay's Speakership, the House overhauled its committee system. Lawmakers had begun to specialize in distinct policies, and the House moved away from the use of ad hoc panels and toward a standing committee structure that allowed the majority party to prioritize its favored issues. Clay assigned likeminded lawmakers to key committees and privately met with his chairmen to discuss the issues. When Clay first assumed the chair in 1811, the House had nine standing committees; by his final term in the 18th Congress (1823–1825), the House had increased the number to 25. The effect of his reforms meant the House processed more and more legislation to serve the needs of a growing country. It also meant Speakers now had the high-stakes and delicate job of assigning each lawmaker to committee.[43]

Committee Assignments during the Antebellum Era

Committees have long been the engine of America's legislative process. They have held hearings to gather information and take testimony from witnesses on proposed legislation. They have conducted oversight and investigated issues of concern. They have debated amendments and marked up bills. It was in committee that the future of America's economy took shape, where Members decided which harbors to dredge, which foreign missions to staff, and which tariffs to levy.

Nineteenth-century Speakers derived their power to make committee assignments from the first set of rules approved by the First Congress on April 7, 1789, which stated plainly that "the Speaker shall appoint committees." Early on, lawmakers feared giving any one committee exclusive control over any single policy. Because the House initially rejected a formal standing committee system, the Speaker assigned lawmakers to consider legislation on a case-by-case basis. These early committees tended to be small, often five Members or fewer, and usually disbanded once they had finished their work.[44]

But within the House's first few decades, lawmakers began building a standing committee system, enabling the House to group legislation by jurisdiction. The rise of the standing committee system—and, as a result, policy specialization in Congress—accompanied the gradual increase in House membership. From a total of 65 Representatives in the First Congress, the House grew to 230 by the start of the 30th Congress in 1847 and to 391 by the 60th Congress in 1907. Over that same 118-year period the number of committees boomed: from 37 in the 30th Congress to 61 in the 60th Congress (not counting two select committees). Despite this sixfold increase in the size of the House and the explosive growth in the committee system, there remained just one Speaker responsible for assigning each committee seat.[45]

The committee system in the House evolved under the assumption that the committees would,

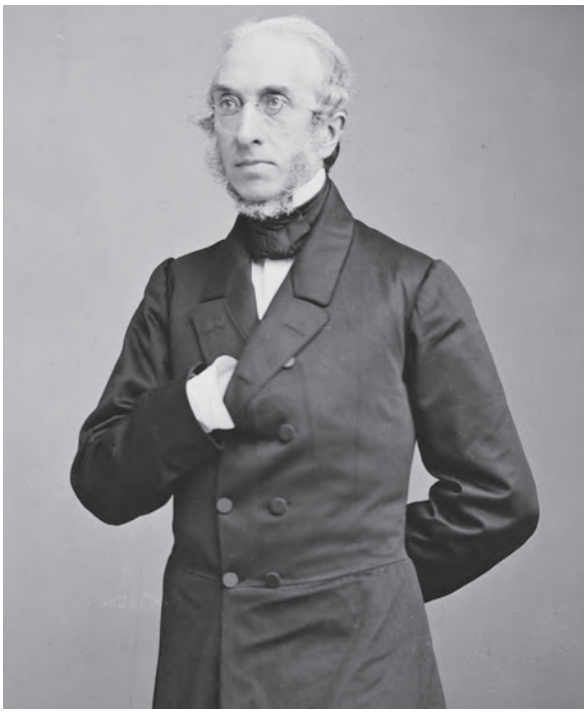
in the words of political scientist Mary P. Follett, "form impartial boards of investigation." Almost immediately, however, that nonpartisan ambition proved unrealistic. Committee membership quickly came to reflect the size and makeup of the majority and minority parties in the House.[46]

Making committee assignments required Speakers to balance numerous—and often conflicting—considerations. Speakers weighed a lawmaker's party affiliation, fidelity, and reliability; length of service; professional and policy experience; the needs of urban, rural, inland, and coastal districts and their regional economies; the ambitions of incumbent presidential administrations; and—before the Civil War—a legislator's position on slavery.

It also required Speakers to weather efforts by persistent Members who lobbied for committee seats and chairmanships. For most lawmakers, it was important to serve on a panel with jurisdiction over matters of interest to voters back home. Many Members often made those preferences clear in letters to the Speaker before the start of a new session. On November 10, 1824, for instance, John Barney of Maryland, who just a month earlier had won election to the 19th Congress (1825–1827) from the city of Baltimore, wrote a letter to John W. Taylor of New York, the incoming House Speaker, imploring Taylor for a seat on the Ways and Means Committee. Barney called Ways and Means "the only Committee which I feel myself qualified to be useful on." He reminded Taylor that because Baltimore Members represented a burgeoning commercial port it was customary to assign them to the powerful revenue committee, given that the federal treasury relied on tariffs. Moreover, Barney worried that if he failed to secure a seat on Ways and Means he would lose clout with voters and hurt his chance at re-election. But his plea failed. Barney served on the Post Office and Post Roads Committee in the 19th Congress and, after winning re-election in 1826, on the Commerce Committee in the 20th Congress (1827–1829).[47]

The eighteenth Speaker, Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts presided over the chamber for one term before accepting an appointment to the Senate.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress



Before the Civil War, Speakers sought to finalize committee rosters quickly, usually within the first few days of the opening of the new Congress. When Robert Winthrop was elected Speaker on December 6, 1847, for instance, he suddenly found himself on the clock and in a rush to outline his list of committees. He submitted his rosters to the House seven days later. The whole process left him utterly exhausted. "In order to get through with it in season, I more than once locked myself into my study with a confidential clerk from noon till midnight, and now that I have fairly thrown off the mountain, I have the discomfort of knowing that I have dissatisfied not a few of my friends and probably all my enemies. Indeed, there is no such thing as fully satisfying one's self in the solution of such a problem," he said.[48]

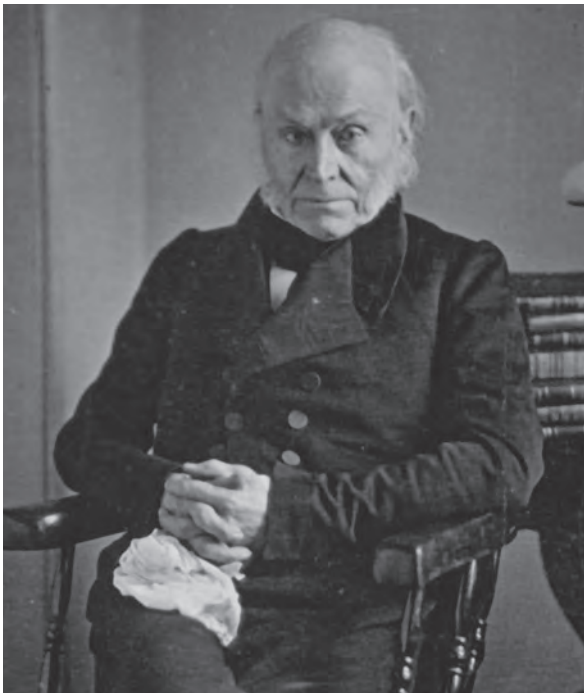
As Winthrop drafted the committees for the 30th Congress in December 1847, he confronted what he called "the difficulty of reconciling

geographical claims." Most standing committees at the time had only nine members. The small size meant Winthrop struggled to accommodate the wishes of every lawmaker, especially Members from the same state who wanted to serve on the same committee. Like Speaker John Taylor many years earlier, Winthrop found Ways and Means to be a particularly nettlesome committee to fill. In 1847, Hugh White of New York, a Whig, coveted a seat on Ways and Means. But White represented a district in upstate New York and Winthrop confessed he "could not leave the city of New York unrepresented on a committee which deals with such great financial and commercial interests." It would have been politically expedient for Winthrop to name a fellow Whig to the revenue committee, but he ultimately gave the seat to first-term Democrat Henry Nicoll, who represented Wall Street and the southernmost district in Manhattan. As a consolation, Winthrop named Hugh White chairman of the Committee on Agriculture.[49]

For Winthrop, naming his committee chairmen was just as complicated as filling out the larger committee rosters, and he lamented that he experienced some "personal embarrassments" during the process. At the time, the chairmen of powerful committees possessed a notable amount of legislative freedom, and Winthrop agonized over giving the right gavel to the right lawmaker. Ways and Means bedeviled him yet again. In the previous Congress, Joseph Reed Ingersoll of Pennsylvania had been the ranking Whig on Ways and Means. This made Ingersoll the reasonable choice to chair the powerful committee now that the Whigs held the House majority. When Winthrop became Speaker, however, America was at war with Mexico—a war prosecuted by Democratic President James K. Polk in the hope of securing western territory in which to extend the system of slavery. Like most Whigs, including the Speaker, Ingersoll opposed the war. But as the conflict continued, Ingersoll supported large defense appropriations "upon principles of patriotism," he said, to ensure America's troops had sufficient resources. According to Winthrop, however, Ingersoll's "views as to the duty of sustaining the war are so unqualified that, if I had made him Chairman, I should have seemed to favor further invasion of Mexico." Instead, Winthrop named the influential veteran lawmaker Samuel Finley Vinton of Ohio as chairman of Ways and Means. "I have given this post to Vinton, and I think wisely," he recalled with more than a little relief. But when Winthrop named Ingersoll chair of the Judiciary Committee, the Speaker dashed the hopes of Jacob Collamer of Vermont, who also wanted the Judiciary gavel. Winthrop eventually tried to solve this problem by naming Collamer chairman of the Public Lands Committee.[50]

"The whole business has been as intricate as a Chinese puzzle," Winthrop confessed, comparing the committee assignment process in the winter of 1847 to the popular geometric game today known as tangram, in which players form different shapes out of seven unique polygonal pieces. To even attempt to explain why he divvied up committees the way he did for the 30th Congress, he said, "would require many sheets of foolscap to give you half my reasons."[51]

Like most Speakers during the 1830s and 1840s, Winthrop also wondered about what to do with John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, the former U.S. Secretary of State and the sixth President of the United States, who had won election to the House in 1830 only a year and a half into what had been his retirement from politics. Given his background, Adams—who remains the only person to have served in the House after serving as President—was a natural fit to chair the House Foreign Affairs Committee. But Winthrop noted that Adams's withering dissent against the war with Mexico made his chairmanship of Foreign Affairs all but impossible. "The only place adequate to his dignity and experience was the Chairmanship of Foreign Affairs," Winthrop admitted, "but his views are so peculiar that, in the existing condition of the country, I was afraid to risk it."[52]



The only President to later serve in the House, John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts earned the moniker "Old Man Eloquent" for his oratorical skills.

Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of I.N. Phelps Stokes, Edward S. Hawes, Alice Mary Hawes, and Marion Augusta Hawes, 1937

By 1847, being passed over for the Foreign Affairs chair had become a regular tradition for Adams. Over the course of Adams's 17 years in the House, no Speaker ever named him chair of Foreign Affairs to start the Congress. On more than one occasion Speakers bypassed Adams at the behest of the incumbent presidential administration. In 1831, Adams learned that he had been denied the Foreign Affairs gavel because he was an ardent opponent of President Andrew Jackson. And in 1841, Adams had been led to believe by Speaker John White that he would finally chair the committee. But U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster intervened at the last minute to make sure the Speaker instead appointed Caleb Cushing of Massachusetts as chairman. When Cushing moved over to chair a special committee on banking issues for the second session of the 27th Congress (1841–1843) in late 1841, Adams finally took over the Foreign Affairs gavel for the remainder of the term.[53]

Adams spent the bulk of his career on the Committee on Manufactures, which handled industrial policy and certain tariff issues. He was named chair in his first term by Speaker Andrew Stevenson. Given Adams's status as a former head of state, Speakers regularly re-appointed him even when he belonged to the opposition party. But Adams struggled to understand how he was in any way qualified to serve. The seat was "a station of high responsibility, and, perhaps, of labor more burdensome than any other in the House," he said. The brilliant if ornery Adams saw it as a waste of his talents. The committee was "far from the line of occupation in which all my life has been passed, and for which I feel myself not to be well qualified. I know not even enough of it to form an estimate of its difficulties. I only know that it is not the place suited to my acquirements and capacities, such as they are."[54]

Adams had the rare perspective of seeing Speakers tackle the committee assignment process from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. In a sense, it was a process that could determine the fate of entire presidential administrations. During Adams's presidency, his party lost the House majority following the 1826 midterm elections. With the Jacksonians in power, Stevenson became Speaker. Adams expected the new Speaker to structure the committees to his disadvantage while professing to maintain what Adams called "an appearance of impartiality." Days later, Adams confirmed these fears in his diary. Calling the Speaker "a mere instrument in the hands of a caucus," Adams wrote that "Mr. Stevenson has just fulfilled my expectations—four opposition to three Administration men on all the committees."[55]

In the House, Adams saw numerous Speakers appease Presidents by naming committees and chairmen sympathetic to the administration's goals. During Andrew Jackson's second term, as Congress debated whether to kill the national bank, Adams—who supported the bank—fretted over Stevenson's choice to chair the Ways and Means Committee. A short while later when the

Speaker gave James K. Polk the Ways and Means gavel, Adams could hardly feign surprise. "Polk is the leader of the Administration in the House, and is just qualified for an eminent County Court lawyer," he said with more than a little contempt. "No doubt all the bank concerns are to be referred to that committee," he worried. Similarly, in 1839, Adams complained that Speaker Hunter's committee assignments served only the interests of President Martin Van Buren. "The whole organization as subservient to the Executive Administration as if the appointments had been made in the President's Cabinet," a disgusted Adams wrote in his diary. "So much for Mr. Robert M.T. Hunter's independent position."[56]

Even if Speakers during Adams's House career opposed him on many issues, they on occasion consulted his opinion when making committee assignments. In 1838, Polk ran into Adams at the War Department and asked him if he had any reservations about serving with the same committee members he had in the previous Congress. Adams said he did not, and Polk promised to "give" him what Adams called "a committee favorable to the" manufacturing legislation he would soon mark up in the new session. Two years later, despite widespread policy disagreements, Speaker Hunter also sought Adams's advice on appointments to a select committee.[57]

After Adams died in 1848, his replacement in the House, Representative Horace Mann, an abolitionist and Massachusetts Whig, saw immediately the effect the Speaker had on the committee system and, by extension, the House's entire legislative program. Although Zachary Taylor, the Whig nominee for President, had captured the White House in the 1848 election, Democrats had taken the House of Representatives for the 31st Congress (1849–1851). When Democrats elected 34-year-old Howell Cobb of Georgia as Speaker, Mann saw the writing on the wall. "Now we shall have pro-slavery committees," Mann observed. "All the power and patronage of the Speaker, and it is great, will be on the wrong side." Only a decade later, Cobb helped establish the Confederacy before serving as a general in the Confederate Army.[58]

Many northern lawmakers shared Mann's frustration in the years before the Civil War. And with slaveholders like Cobb in the Speaker's chair, it was little surprise when they used their influence to protect the interests of the South in committee. In 1837, for instance, as abolitionists worked to end slavery in the nation's capital, Adams noted they were unlikely to succeed given how the Speaker structured the committee that oversaw the capital city's affairs. "There are six slave-holders upon the Committee upon the District of Columbia, with [James Wood] Bouldin, of Virginia, at their head," Adams observed.[59]

Twenty years later, in the 35th Congress (1857–1859), Speaker James Orr of South Carolina used his power to keep abolitionist Joshua Reed Giddings of Ohio off the Committee on Territories. As the nation expanded westward and Congress debated the extension of slavery,

Speaker James K. Polk served in the House during the period of the "gag rule," which prevented lawmakers from discussing antislavery and abolitionist petitions on the floor.
Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

the Committee on Territories came to reflect the regional tensions gripping the House. When Democrats like Orr held the Speakership, for instance, the committee had a notable southern lean. Giddings had served on the Territories Committee for much of the period since the 31st Congress convened in December 1849 and was perhaps the most prominent antislavery lawmaker in Congress. He would later lament that the 35th Congress had been tarnished by the fact that "a majority of members of the House were now obedient to the dictates of the slave power." That session, the Territories Committee was set to consider a bill regarding Kansas statehood that included a clause in its proposed constitution allowing residents to decide whether to permit slavery. Rather than allow Giddings to influence the bill in committee, Orr simply removed him. Kansas was later admitted as a free state, but Orr had sought to ensure proslavery supporters in the territory had every possible advantage.[60]

In the nineteenth century, Speakers alone shouldered committee-making duties, which they often juggled with other responsibilities at the start of each Congress. Not long after the start of the 30th Congress, Speaker Winthrop marveled at the demands of a new congressional term. A seemingly endless queue of visitors and jobseekers sought an audience with him. It was all a bit overwhelming for the new Speaker. "Nobody can exaggerate the labor and anxiety to which I have been subjected," he confessed. "If I had been invested with the entire patronage of the Presidency, I could not have been teased and solicited more incessantly. Boys who want to be pages, women who want to sell apples, men who want to be clerks, have surrounded me at every turn. Orphans and widows have clustered around me like bees, and where they could extract no honey, have left a sting. But the assignment of committees has been the hardest work I ever did in my life."[61]

In actuality, the hard work was just getting started. It certainly helped that Speakers could call on a rotating cast of presiding officers to share the burden.

Presiding Officers and Speaker Pro Tempores

After making it through the exhausting first few weeks of a new term, Speakers had little relief in the day-to-day rhythms of the job during the antebellum era. The House was a restless, confrontational, and often hostile environment in the three decades before the Civil War. One historian of the period has documented dozens of instances of Member-on-Member violence, intimidation, and bullying. It fell to the Speaker in his role as the House's main presiding officer to try to maintain order.[62]

Sitting in the chair day in and day out was an act of stamina, and for Winthrop one term as Speaker seemed like enough. By the time he served in the late 1840s, Congress had become extraordinarily volatile. Looking to the next Congress, Winthrop was agnostic about serving as Speaker again. "Our majority (if we have one)," he wrote after the close of the 30th Congress, "will be so narrow that a slight defection would turn the balance. For myself, I care little. I suppose I may say without vanity that I have made some figure in the chair, but I could hardly hope to increase my reputation by presiding for a second term over such a hornet's nest as the House has now become."[63]

Winthrop was a veteran presiding officer; before Congress he had served as speaker of the Massachusetts state house. But for less experienced lawmakers, the demands of the Speakership seemed even more overwhelming. In February 1840, Representative Aaron Venable Brown of Tennessee wrote to former Speaker and then Tennessee governor James K. Polk about conditions on Capitol Hill. Two months earlier, in just his second term, 30-year-old Robert M.T. Hunter had been elected the youngest Speaker in American history. Brown, a Democrat, criticized Hunter's performance but largely sympathized with his plight. "This house is a perfect chaos of confusion & disorder," Brown said. "The Speaker was neither born nor tutord. [*sic*] to command.

But no matter, Jupiter himself could not controul [*sic*] such a rebellious host."[64]

After four years as Speaker, Polk knew better than most what the job required. In his final term in Congress, he offered a brief summation of the Speaker's main responsibility: "Whilst in the chair, and during the sitting of the House," he observed in 1839, "it is the duty of the Speaker, to decide all questions of Parliamentary law, or of construction of the rules of the House, which may be raised in the course of its proceedings, and his decision is subject to an appeal to the House, and may be reversed, or overruled, if he be in error."[65]

Speakers were not always in the chair, however. They had lives and families and interests and commitments beyond Congress; occasionally, those responsibilities, or even a sudden illness, called them away from the House. Regardless of the reason, if the Speaker was unable to attend a session, a presiding officer—a Speaker pro tempore—was either appointed by the Speaker or, as was occasionally the case in the nineteenth century, elected by the full House to oversee the scheduled legislative business. The Speaker was also responsible for appointing a presiding officer when the House resolved itself into the Committee of the Whole to consider legislation using a different set of rules. While slightly more than 50 lawmakers have served as Speaker, hundreds of Members have presided over debate since 1789.

The provision giving the Speaker the power to appoint a chair to serve in the Committee of the Whole dates to the original rules of the House approved in the spring of 1789. The clause was clear and simple: "In forming a Committee of the Whole House, the Speaker shall leave his chair, and a Chairman to preside in committee shall be appointed." The House Rule governing the appointment of a Speaker pro tempore, on the other hand, is a bit younger. In late December 1811, during the first few weeks of Henry Clay's Speakership, the House considered a change to the rules to enable the Speaker, "when pressing occasion calls him from the chair," to "have the right to name any Member to substitute him and to perform the duties of the Chair temporarily." When the House finally approved its rules package for the 12th Congress, the amended clause gave the Speaker "the right to name any Member to perform the duties of the Chair." Each temporary Speaker could serve only until the House adjourned. Lawmakers later removed the restriction on serving more than one day, so long as the House approved the extension.[66]

Over the years, the House has routinely relied on temporary Speakers to keep the legislative calendar on schedule. Sometimes, however, the House has opted not to transfer that responsibility at all. Clay's prominence as Speaker was such that when he missed back-to-back sessions in May 1812 the House did not bother to find a presiding officer and instead simply adjourned until he returned. But, more often than not, if the Speaker was ill or had been called away, a presiding officer took the chair and directed the day's proceedings.[67]

Usually, Speakers entrusted the task of presiding to Members of the majority party. But during the nineteenth century, especially before the Civil War, Speakers occasionally called Members of the minority to preside. When Whig Robert Hunter was Speaker during the 26th Congress (1839–1841), for example, he often relied on his Virginia colleague, Democrat Linn Banks, to lead the House in the Committee of the Whole. Hunter and Banks belonged to different parties, and Banks had voted against Hunter for Speaker in 1839. But Banks had decades of parliamentary experience, having served as speaker of the Virginia house of delegates for 21 years before his election to the U.S. House in 1838. He and Hunter had also served together briefly in the state legislature.[68]

Hunter and Banks also saw eye to eye on the most consequential issue of their era: both were wealthy slaveowners who wanted to protect the South's interests in Congress. During Hunter's Speakership, the House maintained a "gag rule,"

first put into place in 1836, which prohibited lawmakers from considering antislavery petitions. Not every Member supported the rule. For much of his House career, John Quincy Adams challenged the gag by routinely offering petitions sent to him from abolitionists across the North. Each time, however, the House tabled the petitions without debate. When Adams tried to end the gag rule in January 1840, Hunter used his Speakership to stifle him. On the day the House considered Adams's amendment, Hunter had named Banks as presiding officer, and Banks quickly quashed Adams's measure. Adams later wrote that Banks "had been put by the Speaker into his chair expressly for the occasion."[69]

There were moments, however, when House Speakers sought experienced presiding officers even though they disagreed fundamentally on the major issues of the day. In 1850, Georgia Democrat Howell Cobb—a slaveholder who later helped establish the Confederacy—announced that he would be absent for a brief period and sought permission from the House to appoint a Speaker pro tempore. Rather than name a fellow Democrat to the chair, Cobb selected Robert Winthrop, the Massachusetts Whig who had served as House Speaker in the previous Congress, to preside while he was away. Winthrop was no abolitionist, but he supported efforts to prevent the extension of slavery to Oregon and Texas.[70]

Andrew Stevenson of Virginia, who served almost four full terms as Speaker, resigned from the House to become Minister to Great Britain.

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If an experienced presiding officer like Winthrop was expected to keep the House on schedule in the Speaker's absence, the opposite was true for presiding officers unversed in parliamentary processes. Such was the case in late April 1834 when Speaker Andrew Stevenson missed a few days of debate. With Jesse Speight of North Carolina and Henry Hubbard of New Hampshire taking turns in the chair during debate on a general spending bill, the situation on the floor descended into what John Quincy Adams described as borderline chaos as Jacksonian Democrats tried to expedite passage of the appropriations package. Eventually the House adjourned for a lack of quorum. "In these proceedings every thing was disorder and confusion, all owing to the absence of the Speaker from the chair and a dogged determination of the Administration majority to force the bill through the committee of the whole," Adams observed.[71]

When Stevenson returned, Adams laid the blame directly at his feet for failing to ensure the House maintained a semblance of orderliness. "The Speaker, whose absence from the House yesterday was the primary cause of all the disorder, had not the spirit or the candor to acknowledge the wrong of his substitutes, and attempted … to defend their arbitrary proceedings as conformable to the 'Lex Parliamentaria.' "[72]

The situation in 1834 was enough for Adams to call for the end of the House's frequent reliance on presiding officers. The way he saw it, the House chose the Speaker—not a friend of the Speaker or an old colleague from the state legislature—to preside. "The Speaker of the British House of Commons has no power to call to the chair a substitute to take his place,"

Adams noted in his diary two days after the messy appropriations debate. "This privilege of placing a counterfeit Speaker is an abuse here, and ought not to be tolerated. The mock Speaker is under no responsibility whatever, and has continual temptation to disorder."[73]

Even Adams sometimes found himself being drafted to preside over the House—but not for his exceptional parliamentary skill. Because presiding officers could not take part in debate, Speakers in the antebellum era occasionally named an opponent to the chair to limit his influence during consideration of a particular bill. In 1836, Speaker James K. Polk called the reluctant former President to the chair during debate on a constitutional amendment regarding presidential elections. Adams—who had won the contested presidential election of 1824—took the gavel begrudgingly and was left with the impression that Polk had tapped him to oversee the session simply "so that I could not enter into any of the debates on the resolutions."[74]

But presiding officers remained key to the everyday operation of the House and, on occasion, held great symbolic significance. After the Civil War, the practice became a poignant reminder of the promises of emancipation and the effort by Republicans to extend civil and political rights to millions of formerly enslaved people living in the South. In December 1870, Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina became the first Black lawmaker seated in the U.S. House of Representatives. In a career that spanned nine years, Rainey left his mark on the House in one brilliant speech after another. By 1874, he was widely respected among Republicans and had developed an insider's knowledge of House procedure. During debate on a government funding bill on April 29, 1874, Rainey—who had been born enslaved and later became a prosperous businessowner—became the first Black Member to preside over the House when he wielded the gavel during the morning session. Rainey's time presiding made newspaper headlines across the country.[75]

Born into slavery, Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina was the first African-American lawmaker to serve in the House and to preside over the chamber; he also was the longest-serving Black Member during the Reconstruction period.

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Nine years later, Robert Smalls of South Carolina became the second Black legislator to preside over debate in the House. Unlike Rainey's stint in the chair, however, the press largely overlooked Smalls's time with the gavel. A short while later, however, Smalls found himself in a conversation with a passenger on a Washington streetcar who complimented his skill overseeing debate in the House and praised him for having kept lawmakers in line. Smalls replied that the White lawmakers had maintained decorum in the House because they did not want to be reprimanded by a Black presiding officer. "That is why they kept quiet," he said.[76]

After the Civil War, as the two-party system in America began to solidify, Speakers saw their national profile rise. The new demands of the job required extensive travel to party meetings and stops along the campaign trail. As a result, Speakers continued to appoint presiding officers, but they relied less on Members of the opposition to

Florida Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen's 1989 election made her the first Hispanic-American woman in Congress. In the 112th Congress (2011–2013), she served as chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

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preside. There were a handful of exceptions, such as when Republican Speaker James Blaine called Democrats to the chair either in the Committee of the Whole or as Speaker pro tempore.[77]

As the House has grown more diverse so too have the House's presiding officers. During her long career on Capitol Hill, from 1989 to 2019, Republican Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, the first Latina to serve in Congress, regularly served as presiding officer. "It really is such a moment of pride and humility at the same time, and a sense of wonder and awe, because this institution has such a rich history," she said of serving in the chair. "And in my case, I came to the United States when I was eight. I was born in Cuba, lost my homeland to communism. And to think that a little Cuban political refugee is presiding over the U.S. House of Representatives is totally an awesome experience." Ros-Lehtinen recalled the pride her parents felt every time she presided over the House. "Because they thought, 'Wow! Sure you're a Member of Congress, but look it, they've trusted you with the gavel. And you get to control debate, and who gets recognized.' It's a heady experience," she said.[78]

Representative Donna Edwards, who in 2008 became the first Black woman elected from Maryland, also frequently presided over the House during her career and remembered feeling the weight of the responsibility during her first few times in the chair. "My first recollection is that it's really daunting because I think when you're down on the floor and in the chamber, you don't realize, one, how elevated, physically elevated the rostrum and the Speaker's desk is. And then, two, you don't realize the breadth of the chamber the same way until you are in that position. And so that took me by surprise, and I felt very small. The chair was huge. The Speaker's desk is huge. The gavel was big. And I felt really small, physically small in that circumstance. It made me stand up straighter, and sit up straighter. And I remember the first time that I picked up a gavel, I felt also that it was heavier than I expected it to be."[79]

In recent decades, the Speaker's Office and the House Parliamentarian have recruited an experienced group of lawmakers, like Ros-Lehtinen and Edwards, to preside over the House. Because the House has accumulated centuries of precedent, the attorneys and clerks in the Parliamentarian's Office now handle most of the House's procedural issues. But as the demands on the Speakership continue to grow, the efforts of the House's presiding officers remain vital to the operation of Congress.

PART 3: THE SPEAKERSHIP DURING RECONSTRUCTION AND THE GILDED AGE

By the end of his nearly half-century in politics, Henry Clay had become known as the "Great Compromiser." Over the course of his career, Clay negotiated two major accords between proslavery and antislavery forces in America. As Speaker, he had engineered the Missouri Compromise, which sought to maintain the balance of states in the federal union where slavery was permitted and where it was outlawed. Thirty years later, as a U.S. Senator, Clay orchestrated the Compromise of 1850 as lawmakers continued to debate whether to allow slavery to expand with the nation.

As a measure of his stature, Clay was first person to lie in state in the U.S. Capitol when he died in 1852. Less than a decade later, however, the Union he had worked to preserve was threatened when southern slaveholding states seceded following the election of President Abraham Lincoln in 1860. During the Civil War, between 1861 and 1865, hundreds of thousands of Americans died. Ultimately, the United States' victory over the Confederacy gave rise to what Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, called "a new birth of freedom."[80]

This December 1859 *Harper's Weekly* print depicts the multi-ballot election of William Pennington of New Jersey as Speaker in his first and only term in the House. Pennington lost re-election to Congress in 1860.

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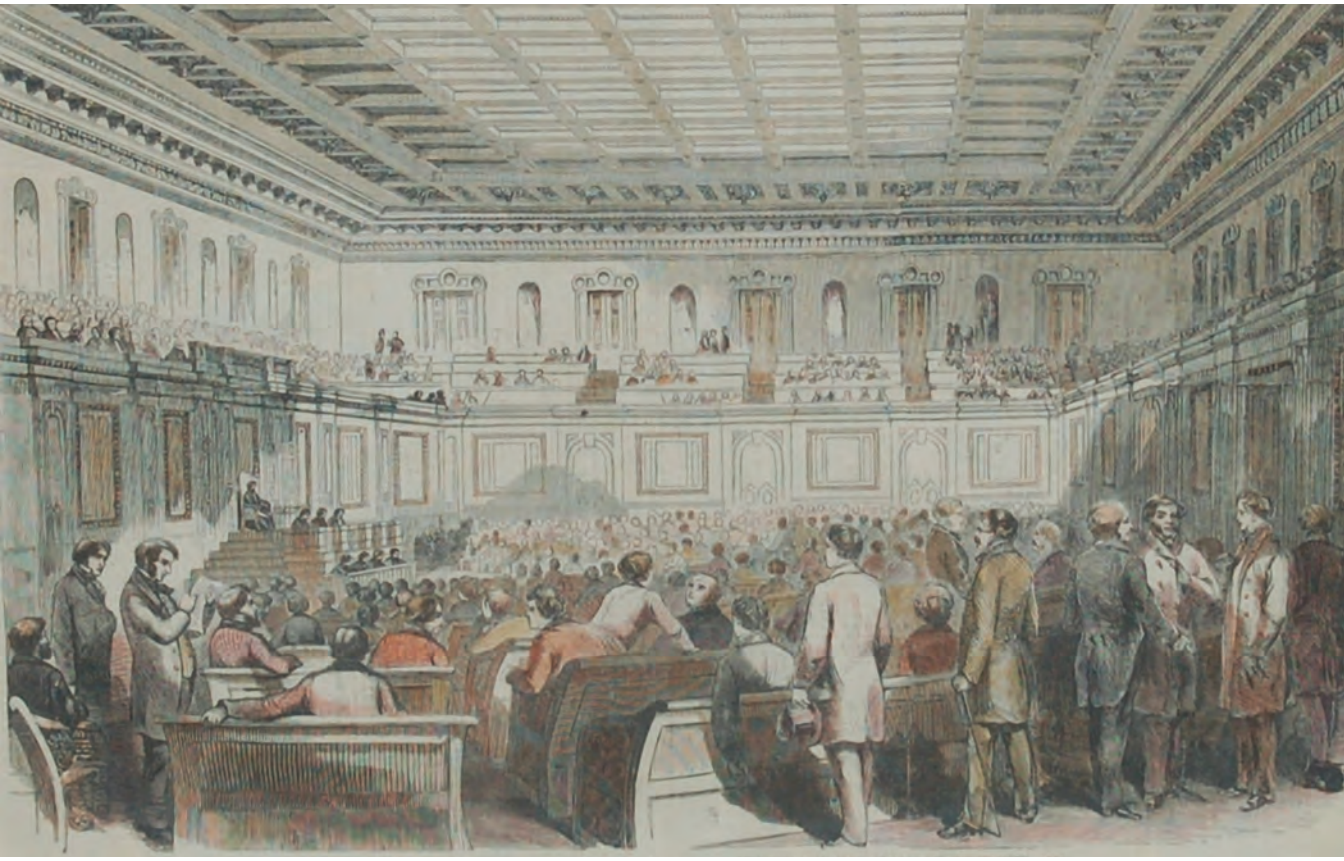

Four years of Civil War and the destruction of slavery ushered in a series of profound changes in America. During the war years and in the decade of postwar reconstruction, Congress passed some of the most sweeping legislation in the nation's history.

During the 1860s and 1870s, the House often seemed like a place of immense possibility. Out of the horrors of the Civil War, Republicans in Congress established a new future for the country. A transcontinental railroad moved goods and people from one coast to the other. Land grant colleges opened access to higher education. And a modern financial system, including a national currency, was beginning to boost America's postwar economy. Amid an age of expanding freedom and national ambition, lawmakers worked to reconstruct the South. In less than a decade, Congress abolished slavery, established birthright citizenship, and guaranteed male voting rights. But Reconstruction's opponents ultimately refused to accept democratic equality for Black Americans and regained political control, often through violent means. By the end of the nineteenth century, many of Congress's egalitarian promises had been systematically hollowed out or had atrophied after years of neglect.[81]

This image of Speaker John G. Carlisle of Kentucky presiding over the House appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in June 1888. The accompanying article declared Carlisle "by far the ablest Democrat who has appeared in Congress for a generation."

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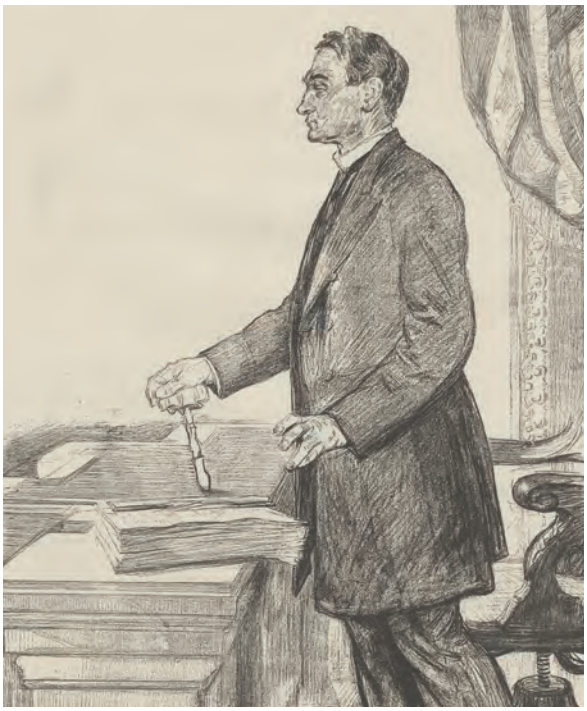


The 50-year period between the Civil War and the first decade of the twentieth century also saw the rise of the country's modern two-party system. The national reach of both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party had an immediate and lasting effect on the Speakership. In the years before the Civil War, legislative coalitions and temporary alliances among lawmakers from different parties and different regions often determined who served as Speaker. But after the war, as party agendas grew increasingly inflexible, Speakers were usually elected along clear party lines. From 1861 to 1911, eight Republicans and four Democrats served as Speaker.[82]

The Speakers who served in the five decades following the Civil War had similar educational and professional backgrounds. Many pursued legal careers, while others started out as journalists, editors, and merchants. In 1899, David B. Henderson of Iowa—who had been born in Scotland and had immigrated to America with his family as a child—became the first Speaker elected from a state west of the Mississippi River.

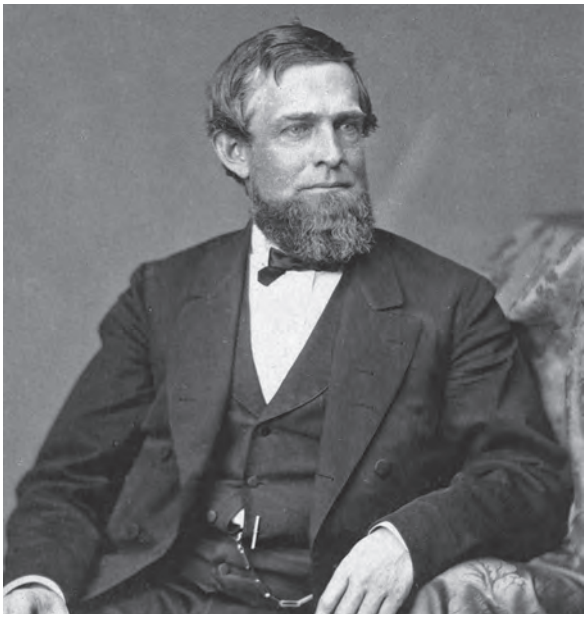
Most Speakers who served in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came from northern districts, including James Blaine and Thomas Brackett Reed, both of Maine. Only two southern Speakers served during this era: John G. Carlisle of Kentucky and Charles F. Crisp of Georgia. More than a few were veterans of the Civil War. Henderson, for instance, enlisted as a private in the Union Army when he was 21 years old and was eventually promoted to first lieutenant. He was wounded so severely during fighting at Corinth, Mississippi, that doctors eventually amputated part

This 1888 *Harper's Weekly* print illustrates the Appropriations Committee in session with Chair Samuel Jackson Randall of Pennsylvania at the head of the table, on the left. Joe Cannon is seen standing in the top right corner, second from the right.
Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

of his leg. J. Warren Keifer of Ohio and Samuel J. Randall of Pennsylvania also served in the Union Army, and Thomas Brackett Reed sailed in the U.S. Navy between 1864 and 1865.[83]

Seven Speakers spent at least one year in their state legislature before serving in the House. But Blaine was the only one who served as speaker at the state level before his election to Capitol Hill. Eight had chaired House committees before becoming Speaker, including Joe Cannon of Illinois and Samuel Randall, both of whom held the gavel of the powerful Appropriations Committee, where they exercised enormous power over federal spending. Speakers who led the House between 1861 and 1911 served on average five terms before being elected to the institution's highest office. They were also slightly older than their antebellum predecessors, with an average age of around 48 at the time of their election as Speaker.

Cannon was unique in that his congressional career spanned almost the entire 50 years after the Civil War. First elected to Congress during Reconstruction, Cannon served 23 nonconsecutive terms in the House, from 1873 to 1891, from 1893 to 1913, and again from 1915 to 1923. In addition to chairing the Appropriations Committee, Cannon sat on the Rules Committee, making him one of the most influential lawmakers on Capitol Hill even before his own time on the Speaker's rostrum. Cannon held the Speakership from 1903 to 1911 and was the first Speaker to serve four full consecutive terms.



Schuyler Colfax of Indiana started his career as a journalist reporting on legislation and retired as Vice President of the United States amid public corruption charges. He served three terms as Speaker.

Image courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Three-term Speaker James G. Blaine of Maine simultaneously served as chair of the Rules Committee from the 41st through the 43rd Congress (1869–1875).

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Reconstruction

Republicans held immense majorities on Capitol Hill for much of the Reconstruction era, and two Republican Speakers dominated the period: Schuyler Colfax of Indiana and James Blaine. Colfax, a former Whig who first took his seat in the House in 1855, was an early supporter of the Republican Party and chaired the House Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads before and during the Civil War. He served as Speaker from 1863 to 1869, when he was elected Vice President in the Ulysses S. Grant administration. Blaine, a former newspaper editor and speaker of the Maine house of representatives, succeeded Colfax and served in the chair from 1869 to 1875. He later ran for President twice and spent five years in the Senate before serving as U.S. Secretary of State under Presidents James A. Garfield and Benjamin Harrison. In the House, Blaine was an active presiding officer, who often combined his institutional responsibilities as Speaker with his ambitions as the Republican leader.[84]

Reconstruction was a transitional moment in the House. As the antebellum generation exited, a new crop of lawmakers began to leave its mark on American history. By the early 1870s, congressional giants such as Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, who had led the abolitionist cause and steered the ship of state during the war, had died or moved to the Senate or were otherwise out of Congress. Of the 206 House Republicans who served for part or all of Blaine's final term as Speaker in the 43rd Congress (1873–1875), more than half were in their first term. The 43rd Congress featured seven Black lawmakers, including first-term Members Richard H. Cain of South Carolina, John R. Lynch of Mississippi, Alonzo J. Ransier of South Carolina, and James T. Rapier of Alabama—it would be nearly a century before as many Black Members served again on Capitol Hill.[85]

Among other first-term lawmakers in the 43rd Congress was a 37-year-old lawyer named Joe Cannon of Illinois. Cannon was born in North Carolina and at the age of four moved with his

family to western Indiana, where they settled with other Quakers who had moved out of the South in protest of slavery. He studied law in Cincinnati, passed the bar, and moved to Illinois. In the fall of 1870, Cannon ran for the House and lost. Two years later, in November 1872, he took a healthy 57 percent of the vote to earn a seat in Congress that he would hold for most of the next 50 years.[86]

After two terms, Cannon was joined in the House by another lawyer in his late 30s—a Maine Republican named Thomas Brackett Reed. Reed held seats in both the state house and state senate before serving as the Maine attorney general. In 1874, he became the solicitor for the coastal city of Portland, and on September 11, 1876, he narrowly won election to the U.S. House with 51 percent of the vote. A large man with an even larger intellect, Reed quickly established a reputation in Congress for his dexterity and humor during debate. "I have known no other man in public life who had his power of sarcasm or sardonic wit," Cannon later said about Reed, "who in half-a-dozen words could annihilate an opponent or, what was worse, make him appear ridiculous."[87]

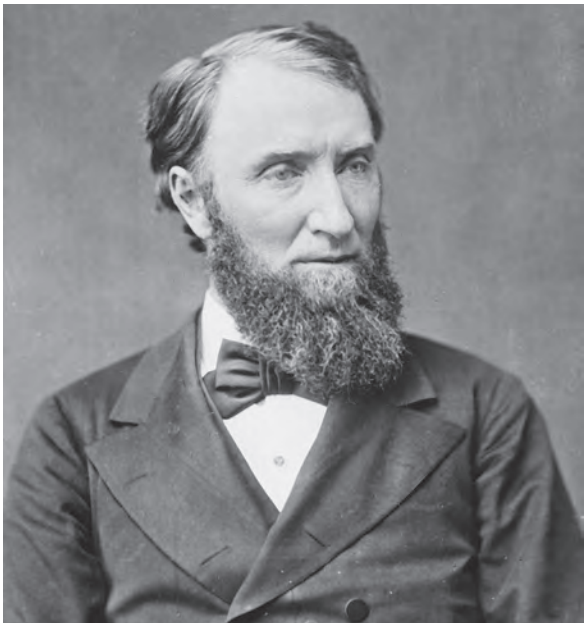
The early careers of both Cannon and Reed saw more than just generational change. By the time Reed entered the House, the era of Republican dominance had largely ended. During Cannon's first term, the country's economy cratered amid a painful financial panic in 1873. The resulting political backlash swept Democrats to a huge House majority in the 1874 midterm elections. Two years later, the disputed presidential contest of 1876 signaled the end of Reconstruction. Democrats captured control of Congress, and new Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes turned the government's attention away from the freedom struggle still being waged in the South by millions of formerly enslaved men and women.[88]

Instead, Congress largely shifted its focus to the economy: tariff rates, domestic market growth, monetary concerns, and imperial expansion to secure raw materials. In the decades after Reconstruction, millions of immigrants settled in America, labor unions struggled for rights in the workplace, cities grew, and new reform movements shaped American society and its natural environment. Amid rampant public corruption, wages increased, the economy industrialized, and standards of living for many improved. But across the South, a system of rigid segregation called Jim Crow enforced the existence of two separate and unequal societies, one Black and the other White. Congress operated in and helped shape a world of extremes in which striking amounts of wealth existed alongside severe poverty. It was, as the author Mark Twain wrote in 1873, a Gilded Age.[89]

From 1875 to 1889, Cannon, and then Reed, served in the House minority for all but one term. It was a period of sharp partisanship in which Republicans and Democrats in Congress—aside from forming occasional regional alliances on economic issues—articulated distinct party agendas and mostly shaped policy independently of the White House.[90]

The namesake of the Cannon House Office Building, Joe Cannon served in Congress for 46 nonconsecutive years, making him one of the institution's longest-serving Members.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress



But it was also an era in which the minority wielded outsized influence in the legislative process, especially when thin margins separated the parties. In the nineteenth century, House precedent empowered even a small number of Members to grind business to a halt. Such tactics included dilatory motions as well as a parliamentary maneuver called the "disappearing quorum," which John Quincy Adams first developed in the early 1830s when he refused to vote on a measure to censure another Member. In order for the House to conduct business, a quorum—half the membership of the House plus one—needed to be present. To determine whether the House had a quorum, the Speaker, at the request of another lawmaker, directed a clerk to call the roll. If a bill came up for debate that the minority party opposed—or that a sizeable enough bipartisan coalition opposed—its members could simply refuse to answer a quorum call. If that happened when there were not enough members of the majority party in attendance, the House would be short of the number it needed to proceed, and debate would end. The practice was such that even if a lawmaker was physically at his desk in the chamber, he was considered not present so long as he stayed silent during the call of the roll.[91]

Reed saw obstructionist procedures like the disappearing quorum as a holdover from an America that no longer existed. He believed they had no place in a modern, industrial country. "Ever since the slavery question came to trouble the peace of the country the rules of the House have been framed with the view of rendering legislation difficult," he wrote in 1889. "The South was anxious that there should be ample means at its disposal to stop any measure detrimental to its cherished institution."[92]

After the Civil War and the destruction of slavery, southern lawmakers continued to obstruct the legislative process and block efforts to guarantee civil rights. During Blaine's Speakership in the 1870s, some Republicans had tried to end the

This 1870s stereoview depicts the Speaker's Lobby adjacent to the House Chamber. The room became a gathering place for Members off the House Floor.

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use of the disappearing quorum after opponents leveraged it to derail a bill to protect and enforce the rights of millions of formerly enslaved people in the South. But Blaine refused the change on the grounds that the existing rules remained the surest way to establish a quorum. The Democratic Speakers who followed Blaine also largely kept intact the often disruptive powers of the minority.[93]

Reed and Cannon both spent their early careers legislating under this system. And while Reed initially supported dilatory tactics as a check on the ambitions of the majority, he eventually saw things differently—so differently, in fact, that even when he served in the minority, he sought ways to make it easier for the majority to govern, knowing full well that policies he opposed could more easily become law. "The system of avoiding action on important measures by means of these clogging rules has done much to demoralize the House," Reed wrote in the late 1880s. As he moved into Republican leadership as both a member of the Ways and Means Committee and as a member of the Rules Committee, which controlled the flow of legislation to the House Floor, Reed formulated a governing philosophy that put the needs and ambitions of the majority first and foremost.[94]

Speaker Thomas Brackett Reed

In November 1888, Republicans captured a slim majority in the House, and when Congress assembled in December 1889, Reed was elected Speaker. The margin was small enough that Democrats expected little problem stymying the Republican agenda simply by using the rules and legislative procedures at their disposal. But Reed quickly targeted the tactics both parties had employed over the years to stifle each other. In January 1890, Reed struck the first blow when he refused to entertain a Democratic call to vote on a motion to adjourn—a ploy the minority party often used to slow the day's proceedings.[95]

A short while later, as the House prepared to hear a contested election case, Reed took aim at the disappearing quorum. As the Speaker readied to call the issue before the House, Democrats, led by future Speaker Charles Crisp, demanded a vote on whether to bring the contested election up for debate. Reed put the consideration before the House, which determined in a voice vote that the "ayes," or yes votes, had it. Crisp then asked for a division vote, which the ayes carried again. Finally, Crisp demanded the "yeas" and "nays," which the yeas won again.[96]

As the clerk went over the tally from the yeas and nays, however, a handful of Members changed their votes to deny the House the quorum it needed to proceed. At that point, Reed made his move. The Speaker decided to count as present each lawmaker he saw in the chamber regardless of whether they had voted. "The Chair directs the Clerk to record the following names of members present and refusing to vote," Reed ordered. As the Republican side of the chamber erupted in applause, Crisp sought recognition. "I appeal from the decision of the Chair," he shouted. Meanwhile, Reed made his way down an alphabetical list of Democrats in attendance that day, stopping occasionally amid boisterous interruptions. "I deny the power of the Speaker and denounce it as revolutionary," complained Democrat William Campbell Preston Breckinridge of Kentucky, a former colonel in the Confederate army. But on and on Reed went: "Mr. Holman, Mr. Lawler, Mr. Lee, Mr. McAdoo, Mr. McCreary." "I deny your right, Mr. Speaker, to count me as present," protested James Bennet McCreary, also of Kentucky. "The Chair is making a statement of the fact that the gentleman from Kentucky is present. Does he deny it?" Reed asked. At one point, as Democrats tried to leave the chamber to avoid being seen, Reed had the chamber doors closed and locked. Meanwhile, other lawmakers, hoping to orchestrate a final disappearing act, slunk down behind their desks on the floor.[97]

After Crisp offered lengthy remarks on what he said was Reed's unconstitutional abuse of power, Joe Cannon offered a rebuttal in support of

While he was Speaker, Thomas Brackett Reed of Maine also served as chair of the Rules Committee.

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Reed's ruling. "Mr. Speaker, the very foundation of the Republic rests upon the control of the policy of the Government and the enactment of legislation by a majority, and the Constitution says what shall constitute that majority in the two Houses of Congress to do business." Cannon was referencing Article I, Section 5, of the Constitution which states that "a Majority … shall constitute a Quorum to do Business."[98]

Cannon continued:

> That majority is present now in fact, as ascertained by the record, but a minority of that majority says, 'Yes, we are present, but we will compel the majority to say we are not present, unless the majority will assent to do only such business as we, the minority, choose to designate.' In other words, legislation shall not proceed unless the majority will allow the minority to rule. And when the majority proceeds to note the actual presence of the minority according to the fact, there is a pandemonium of outcry from the minority that a noting of the actual fact is revolutionary. In reply, I say that a majority under the Constitution is entitled to legislate, and that, if a contrary practice has grown up, such practice is unrepublican, undemocratic, against sound public policy, and contrary to the Constitution. And I am here to assist in upholding the Constitution. If the minority is to rule, the Republic has ceased to exist and in its place is an aristocracy.[99]

Reed had staked his Speakership on reforming the rules of the House to end obstruction. Although lawmakers debated the issue for another few days, Reed ultimately had the support of House Republicans and there was little Democrats could do. Reed later said that he would have "simply … left the Chair, resigning the Speakership, and left the House" had his plan failed. "I had made up my mind that if political life consisted in sitting helplessly in the Speaker's chair, and seeing the majority powerless to pass legislation, I had had enough of it and was ready to step down and out."[100]

Reed had not tried to hide his ambitions. Writing in *The Century Magazine* in 1889, he had explained that the longstanding accommodations for the minority had prevented the House from reaching its full potential. "Our government is founded on the doctrine that if 100 citizens think one way and 101 think the other, the 101 are right," he said. "It is the old doctrine that the majority must govern. Indeed, you have no choice. If the majority do not govern, the minority will; and if the tyranny of the majority is hard, the tyranny of the minority is simply unendurable. The rules, then, ought to be so arranged as to facilitate the action of the majority." It was a point Reed repeated for emphasis. The rules, he said, "are not made to protect those who are wrong, but to facilitate the proceedings of those whose action when it takes place becomes the law of the land."[101]

When the Rules Committee, led by Reed and Cannon, reported a new set of parliamentary procedures for the House in the 51st Congress (1889–1891), the text largely reflected Reed's push to empower the majority to govern. The new rulebook set a quorum in the Committee of

the Whole at 100 Members and gave the Speaker more control over the flow of legislation in the House. Most importantly, the Speaker now had the power to determine the presence of a quorum during regular business and possessed the right to bypass dilatory motions meant either to slow the day's proceedings or to draw attention to issues of interest to the minority.[102]

Unencumbered by the old ways, Reed's rules in the 51st Congress allowed the House to act on more legislation than it had in decades. It approved so much federal spending that it was called the "Billion Dollar Congress." In the 1870s, the disappearing quorum had enabled opponents to filibuster passage of vital civil rights legislation. But in 1890, with Reed in the Speaker's chair and with a newly empowered Republican majority, the House passed a bill to protect African-American voting rights and give the federal government oversight of congressional elections in the South. As was the fate of so much legislation, however, the bill died in the Senate.[103]

"Reed was an iconoclast," Cannon observed years later. "He had reverence for the past, but he was not hampered by the straightjacket of tradition. Single-handed he carried through a revolution."[104]

Speaker Thomas Brackett Reed is featured in a cartoon destroying the disappearing quorum with a gavel labeled "Power of the Speaker."

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

If it was a revolution, it unfolded in fits and starts. Republicans lost the House in the 52nd Congress (1891–1893), and even Joe Cannon lost re-election in the 1890 election. Rather than continue with Reed's reforms, the new Democratic majority reinstated the minority's disruptive powers. The GOP wasted little time using its leverage. Cannon, who had been momentarily relegated to the political sidelines as an observer, later remembered that House Republicans "were such hardened sinners that we filibustered without shame, Reed leading us." Democrats kept the House for the 53rd Congress (1893–1895), but with a much smaller majority they reinstituted Reed's rules to facilitate their legislative agenda—a decision Reed supported. When Republicans flipped the House in the 54th Congress (1895–1897), picking up 125 seats amid the onset of another deep economic depression, Reed was re-elected Speaker and his rules became permanent.[105]

Reed had fundamentally changed how the House worked. Going forward, its rules and regulations placed in the hands of the majority the right to govern because in Reed's opinion the opposite was untenable. "The danger in a free country is not that power will be exercised too freely, but that it will be exercised too sparingly," Reed once observed, "for it so happens that the noise made by a small but loud minority in the wrong is too often mistaken for the voice of the people and the voice of God."[106]

A Scottish immigrant and Civil War veteran, David B. Henderson of Iowa served as Speaker in the 56th and 57th Congresses (1899–1903).

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Speaker Joseph G. Cannon

After three nonconsecutive terms as Speaker, Reed resigned from the House in September 1899, just a few months before the opening of the 56th Congress (1899–1901). Reed disagreed with his party's ambitions to expand America's geopolitical footprint overseas and fiercely opposed the Spanish-American War, which would eventually see the United States take possession of Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. Unwilling to abide by the GOP's imperial ambitions, Reed decided he could no longer lead the party in the House. "I have tried, perhaps not always successfully, to make the acts of my public life accord with my conscience, and I cannot now do this thing," he reportedly told his friend Asher Crosby Hinds, the House Parliamentarian.[107]

With Reed gone, the Speakership fell to his second on the Rules Committee, David B. Henderson of Iowa. Gray haired and mustachioed, Henderson was something of a compromise candidate for Speaker in 1899 and attracted the support of a growing bloc of western state lawmakers who appreciated Henderson's Iowa roots. Henderson also took a much more collegial approach to the Speakership following Reed's tenure and referred to his committee chairmen as his "Cabinet." He served as Speaker for two terms before he retired from politics at the end of the 57th Congress (1901–1903).[108]

As the start of the 58th Congress (1903–1905) approached, all eyes in Washington turned to a man known across the country as "Uncle Joe." At the age of 67, Joe Cannon had spent almost half his life in Congress. He had seen the fortunes of his Republican Party rise and fall many times over.

At the start of the 61st Congress (1909–1911), Henry Harrison Bingham of Pennsylvania was the Father of the House (now called the Dean of the House), the longest-serving Member at the time. Bingham, seen standing in front of the rostrum, administers the oath of office to Speaker Joe Cannon.

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During his nearly three decades in the House, Cannon's Lincolnesque beard had gone white, but he remained a tireless politician. Famous for his card games, Cannon built relationships around the poker table. When asked how he spent his time on Capitol Hill, Cannon would reply by "raising the tariff in the afternoon and the ante at night." He may have been a gambler, but he was not a prolific legislator. He preferred instead to work the back channels, using his powerful committee assignments to shape the House's agenda.[109]

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, Cannon had served on the Rules Committee for two terms alongside the GOP leader, and then Speaker, Thomas Brackett Reed. Cannon would later boast that he "had more experience in parliamentary contests than Reed. He drew on my knowledge and often deferred to my judgement." In the 54th Congress, Cannon began an eight-year stint as chair of the House Appropriations Committee, where he earned a reputation for tightly managing federal spending.[110]

Cannon was finally elected Speaker on November 9, 1903, at the opening of the 58th Congress."After twenty-eight years' service in the House such an expression of your confidence touches me profoundly," he said in brief remarks before taking the oath of office. But he made it clear that the House would continue the reforms he helped shape during Reed's Speakership. "The contests on the floor touching policies that abound in partisanship will be spirited and earnest," he said. "The majority determines." It is perhaps more accurate to state, however, that over the eight years of Cannon's Speakership, Cannon himself—rather than the majority—determined which contests and which policies made it to the floor.[111]

Cannon had inherited a Speakership flush with power and privilege. He did not so much invent new rules as exploit the ones that already existed. He monopolized the legislative process by leveraging the powers Reed had won while consolidating the Speaker's other prerogatives. Cannon possessed the

right to make every committee assignment and had unilateral control over who could participate in debate. As Speaker, Cannon also served simultaneously as chair of the Rules Committee, which controlled the flow of legislation to the House Floor. And it was from the Rules Committee that Cannon—who once described himself as a humble Illinois hayseed—dictated national political debate for nearly a decade.[112]

By the early twentieth century, the Rules Committee was without a doubt the most consequential legislative panel in America. One of the chamber's oldest committees, Rules was for years a temporary select committee responsible for developing the regulations and procedures that governed each new Congress. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, it became more influential. Beginning in 1841, the House enabled the Rules Committee to report legislation "from time to time." The Speaker became chairman of the committee in 1858, and Rules finally became a standing committee in 1880.[113]

By the time Cannon became Speaker in 1903, Rules had become responsible for far more than its original administrative duties. Each bill that made it to the floor first had to make it past the Rules Committee. Either Rules approved the bill and sent it before the full House with guidelines for debate and the number of admissible amendments, or it did not—consigning the bill to a quiet death. Beginning in 1891, the Rules Committee could report a bill at any moment and the House would be obligated to bring it up for debate. The committee had five members: two from the minority and three from the majority, including the Speaker. According to a study from 1911, that simple one-vote advantage made the Speaker and his two loyal allies on the Rules Committee "the most powerful triumvirate known to parliamentary history."[114]

Lawmakers had long complained that the Speaker's position on the Rules Committee gave the office too much power. In 1899, well before Cannon assumed the gavel, Democratic Representative Joseph Weldon Bailey of Texas argued that the Speaker's right to assign time in debate and appoint each committee was influence enough. "But to add to those powers, great almost to the point of being dangerous, the absolute control of the House through its Committee on Rules is giving greater power to the Speaker of this House than any one man in this free Republic ought to possess."[115]

"Technically speaking," another writer observed years later during Cannon's Speakership, "legislation in the House is in the hands of the three majority members of the Committee on Rules, the controlling influence naturally being that of the Speaker." Cannon was popular among his colleagues, but he used his powers to such an extent that calling him the "controlling influence" was putting it mildly. One lawmaker reportedly answered a constituent's request for a copy of the House Rules manual by sending a picture of Speaker Cannon.[116]

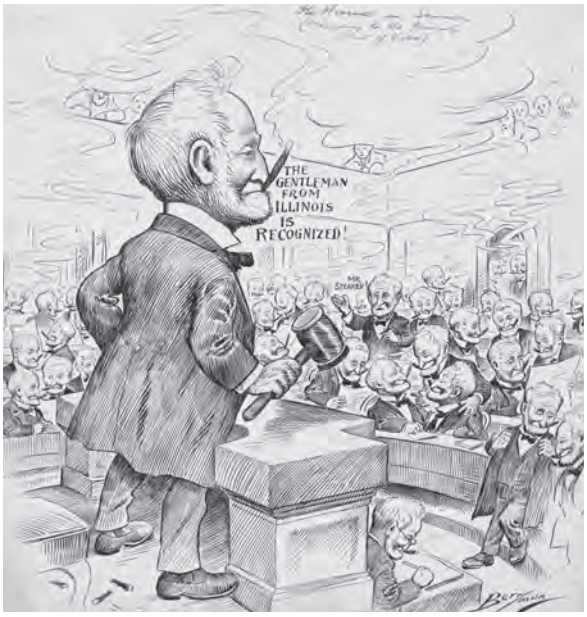
In a larger sense, Cannon was a throwback to another time—a tradition-bound conservative in an age of progressive upheaval. "It has often been said … that we are a radical people, always experimenting and always seeking after novelty," Cannon once told his longtime secretary. "In truth, we are conservative; we shrink from change until we are driven to it. We like our traditions, and it is because we have so few of them that we cling to those we have." Cannon's world was one of well-to-do comfort, and when he looked out from his office windows in the Capitol, he saw a nation that had also done well for itself. But many others did not see it that way, and across the country everyday Americans pushed back against the old ways. Campaigns for women's suffrage, environmental conservation, labor protection, and trust busting found footholds everywhere from town councils to the White House. As the country entered the twentieth century, the Progressive movement worked to reform American society to meet the demands of a new era.[117]

In the House, Speaker Cannon had little patience for change. As chairman of the Appropriations

Committee, he had once bragged that his job was to limit federal spending rather than approve it. As Speaker—and chairman of the Rules Committee—Cannon subscribed to a similar philosophy in which less was more. The House did pass some progressive legislation during Cannon's Speakership—notably the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Antiquities Act, the latter of which empowered the President to designate natural landmarks of historical and cultural importance as national monuments. But as Cannon said in 1904, he preferred to "apply the brakes" to the reform ethos in American politics.[118]

In addition to Cannon's near-unilateral control over the legislative process, the Speaker used committee assignments to keep his party conference in line. Cannon made committee assignments in much the same way his nineteenth-century predecessors did. He weighed a Member's party loyalty, seniority, experience, district economy, and the needs of the majority's agenda on Capitol Hill. Party leaders expected new lawmakers to put in the time and wait their turn before seeking a seat on more powerful committees. Even if a first-term lawmaker had "great ability and high character," Cannon once observed, he had to "prove it" first. "And until he does prove it he must serve his probation and be put, not on the Ways and Means Committee to frame a tariff bill or on the Appropriations Committee, but on an unimportant committee, where he can show what he has in him and learn the business of government; for there is much to learn here."[119]

With the rise of America's modern two-party system in the late nineteenth century, Speakers, including Cannon, dealt with far more cohesive party caucuses. In the prewar period, it was not uncommon for Speakers to appoint pedigreed committee chairs like John Quincy Adams, despite their belonging to the opposite party. But the last time that occurred was in 1855. By the turn of the twentieth century, the newly created position of House Minority Leader had also taken on a larger role in the committee assignment process, drawing up his party's committee rosters, which the Speaker usually accepted.[120]



This 1908 Clifford Berryman cartoon "The House in Session (According to the Minority Point of View)" features Joe Cannon presiding over the House Chamber filled with other Joe Cannons.

Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Cannon dealt with endless requests from legislators eager to secure powerful seats. By the time of Cannon's Speakership, the practice of lobbying for plum assignments had grown to include both lawmakers and their allies in the business world. Just days after the midterm elections in 1906, Republican Asle Jorgenson Gronna of North Dakota wrote to Cannon about securing a seat on the Agriculture Committee because he lived in what he called "one of the greatest agricultural states in the Union." Gronna, who also served on the Public Lands Committee, worried about what he called the "democratic landslide" in North Dakota during the recent election, leaving it unsaid that a seat on the Agriculture Committee would bolster his own chance at re-election in two years. "I believe I could do more good in the interest of substantial legislation, as I have the practical experience and believe I know what the agricultural

people of this state and country require." Gronna's pitch ultimately failed and Cannon stacked the Agriculture Committee with Republican lawmakers from New York, Indiana, Kansas, and Illinois. But Gronna's case also underscores the reality that missing out on a preferred assignment was not the end of the world. Even without a seat on the Agriculture Committee, Gronna went on to win re-election to the House before serving 10 years in the Senate.[121]

In the early 1900s, Cannon also faced pressure from businesses that wanted their local Representative assigned to committees that would serve their commercial interests. In 1905, Cannon received a letter from a Wilmington, Delaware, shipbuilder hoping that Delaware's lone lawmaker, Representative Hiram Rodney Burton, would be assigned to the Rivers and Harbors Committee. The company was transparent in its motivations: "Our interest is direct and is pressing for the reason that each year sees the channel between this plant and the open sea becoming shallower." With Burton on the committee, the company believed it would have an ally when it needed federal assistance to dredge the region's shipping lanes. Only a week later, Cannon received a similar letter from a Chicago, Illinois-based lumber company with a division in Vicksburg, Mississippi, asking the Speaker to make sure Mississippi Democrat Benjamin Grubb Humphreys kept his seat on the Rivers and Harbors Committee. Humphreys represented much of the Mississippi Delta, a region threaded by major rivers that provided access to key ports along the Gulf Coast. Mississippi was "just on the threshold of industrial development," the lumber company wrote, and "has great and urgent need of representation on that Committee." Humphreys ultimately kept his seat.[122]

Republican George William Norris of Nebraska successfully crafted a plan to remove the Speaker from the Rules Committee in 1910.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

A loyal Republican could expect favorable treatment when the Speaker put together his committee rosters. But lawmakers who voted against Cannon's wishes suffered a different fate. When a number of progressive Republicans complicated Cannon's plans during consideration of a major tariff bill in 1909, Cannon retaliated by targeting their committee assignments. He sacked the chairmen of both the Banking and Currency Committee and the Insular Affairs Committee, stripped other lawmakers of their seats, and reassigned others.[123]

Over the years, Cannon accommodated a handful of rules changes that ever so slightly opened the legislative process. But for three and a half terms, his reign went largely unchallenged, and Cannon maintained the support of most of his party. Among certain middle and western state progressive Republicans, however, frustration with Cannon's obstinacy and seemingly arbitrary rulings from the chair began to boil over. Things came to a head after Cannon strong-armed the House during consideration of the tariff bill in 1909, forcing the Ways and Means Committee to make last minute revisions, and then championing the high, protectionist rates proposed by the Senate. By early 1910, on the heels of the tariff debate, a number of progressive Republicans—who became known as the Insurgents—had formed a loose alliance with House Democrats to challenge the Speaker.[124]

This photo, likely taken after 1919, features three Representatives who all served as Speaker. Standing on the Capitol steps, left to right: Joe Cannon, Champ Clark, and Frederick H. Gillett of Massachusetts.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

In mid-March 1910, George William Norris of Nebraska, one of the Insurgent Republicans bent on reining in the Speaker's powers, offered an amendment to the House Rules. Cannon, having been caught off guard, allowed it to be brought up for consideration. Norris's privileged resolution not only increased the size of the Rules Committee, it also removed the Speaker from the committee entirely. Norris's proposal set off two days of frenzied activity as Cannon's supporters worked to defuse the situation by quietly suggesting alternative reforms. Because so many Republicans had gone to attend St. Patrick's Day festivities elsewhere, Cannon and his lieutenants worked to delay a vote on Norris's resolution in the hope that enough supporters would return to Capitol Hill to rebuff the Insurgents and their Democratic co-conspirators. Ultimately, however, Norris had the votes and Cannon did not. When Norris's measure finally came before the House, 43 Insurgent Republicans broke with their party to vote alongside House Democrats, 191 to 156, to remove the Speaker from the Rules Committee and expand its membership to 10.[125]

Having just lost a major source of his influence, Cannon sought to reaffirm his position as Speaker. He challenged the Insurgent-Democratic alliance to remove him from the chair, anticipating that the coalition would fall apart. When a Texas Democrat accepted Cannon's offer and moved to vacate the chair, the Speaker was proved right. The coalition dissolved. Norris, the Insurgent leader who had sparked the whole conflagration, voted to keep Cannon on as Speaker. Fewer than 10 Insurgent Republicans voted to replace him.[126]

Cannon did not have to live with the consequences of his removal from the Rules Committee for long. Eight months later, Democrats swept Republicans out of power, winning a resounding majority heading into the 62nd Congress. Meanwhile, House Democrats, led by Champ Clark of Missouri, continued to overhaul the Speakership. In addition to keeping the Speaker off the Rules Committee, the Democratic Caucus took the Speaker's power to make committee assignments and gave it to the Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee. The decentralizing effect of the Democratic Party's reforms to the Speakership—having transferred much of the power and influence that Cannon had consolidated to the committees—defined the House for the next 60 years.

PART 4: THE SPEAKERSHIP FROM WORLD WAR I TO WATERGATE

After losing the Speakership in 1911, Joe Cannon remained in the House for another five nonconsecutive terms. By the time he decided to retire in 1923, he had spent nearly 50 years in Washington. He had lived through the Civil War and, as a new lawmaker in the early 1870s, had helped shape the government's Reconstruction policies. During the Gilded Age, he became a party leader and the powerful chairman of the Appropriations Committee. He served during an era of American imperialism and saw the government annex island nations in the Caribbean and Pacific. He voted to send America to war in 1917 and survived a global flu pandemic in 1918 that killed tens of millions around the world. He served alongside Jeannette Rankin of Montana, the first woman elected to Congress, and voted for the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing women's voting rights. As a boy, Cannon rode a wagon from North Carolina to Indiana when his family's antislavery beliefs made it impossible for them to remain in the South. As an elder statesman, he often made part of the trip home from the Capitol behind the wheel of an automobile. When Cannon entered politics, newspapers relied on woodcuts and cartoons to capture the likenesses of America's lawmakers. By 1918, Cannon was giving interviews in front of film cameras.[127]

This circa 1918 photo of Joe Cannon as an elder statesman showcases his popularity with the press and his public profile, even after his Speakership.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

When Cannon died in November 1926 at the remarkable age of 90, another Republican Speaker—Nick Longworth of Ohio—sat in the chair. Longworth had entered the House in 1903 during Cannon's Speakership and the two served in Congress together for 18 years. They had both attended Cincinnati Law School, and while Longworth was 33 years younger than Cannon, they shared more than an alma mater. They had both sought to concentrate the powers of the Speakership, albeit in their own ways. Ultimately, Longworth would do much to try to reclaim the powers Cannon had lost in 1910.

But it would fall to another of their House colleagues to master the Speakership in the wake of the reforms instituted after Cannon's tenure. Democrat Sam Rayburn of Texas entered the House in 1913 as the parties were still in the process of configuring the post-Cannon Speakership. It left an impression on the young Texan. Later in his career, Rayburn said he thought the House had gone too far in stripping Cannon of so many of the Speaker's powers. But Rayburn learned the House's folkways during this unsettled era at the elbow of powerful legislators, including Speaker Longworth, who regularly invited Rayburn to his exclusive Capitol retreat to unwind after the day's session with other Members. When Rayburn won election as Speaker in 1940 that Capitol hideaway became his, as did a position that would test his ability to lead both his party and the House for nearly two decades.[128]

Rise of New Party Leaders

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Speakership sat atop a clearly defined leadership ladder in the House. Around 1899, both the Republican Conference and Democratic Caucus had created structured party leadership positions in Congress, facilitating the rise of the offices of the Majority and Minority Leader. Unlike the Speakership, these were not constitutional offices. Rather, in an age of often divided government, they developed because the parties sought ways to better coordinate and advance their legislative programs on Capitol Hill.

For many decades, the role of party leader fell to the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. In the 1860s, for instance, Republicans Galusha Grow and Schuyler Colfax held the Speakership, but Thaddeus Stevens, the "Great Commoner," drove the Republican agenda in the House and often led debate on the floor. At separate points, Stevens chaired both the Ways and Means and Appropriations Committees, but he never served as Speaker.[129]

With the development of the Majority and Minority Leader offices, however, the pipeline to the Speakership became much more predictable: Of the 11 Speakers elected between World War I and the early 1970s, all but one served his party as either Majority Leader or Minority Leader. Frederick H. Gillett of Massachusetts was the lone exception.

By the mid-twentieth century, politics had professionalized and had become a career for many. As a result, the Members who served as Speaker in the decades after the Great War often had lengthy tenures. On average, they served for 12 terms before being elected Speaker—more than twice as long as Speakers in the period after the Civil War and four times as long as Speakers during the antebellum era. These longer careers also meant they tended to be older than their predecessors—about 64 years old on average—in the first term of their Speakership.

While nine of these Speakers entered Congress with previous legislative experience, only Sam Rayburn touted any experience leading a legislative chamber, having held the speakership in the Texas house of representatives in 1912 and 1913. Rayburn, like the vast majority of Speakers, was a lawyer. Joseph W. Martin of Massachusetts—a former journalist and publisher—was the lone Speaker between World War I and the early 1970s to come from a field other than law.

The forty-fourth Speaker, Joseph W. Martin of Massachusetts, served more than 41 years in the House.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Two Speakers during this period had military service: John W. McCormack of Massachusetts, who enlisted in the Army during World War I, and Carl Albert of Oklahoma, who joined the Army in 1941. Albert served in a tank division before becoming a lawyer in the office of the Judge Advocate General. He served in the Pacific, where he won a Bronze Star and left active duty as a lieutenant colonel in 1946.[130]

For much of the twentieth century following World War II, two states dominated the ranks of House leadership: Texas and Massachusetts. Democrats controlled the House for all but two Congresses between 1931 and 1995. During that period, with a handful of exceptions, if the Speaker came from Massachusetts, the Majority Leader hailed from Texas—or in Carl Albert's case, the Texas–Oklahoma border—and vice versa. Political observers have called this unique pattern the "Austin–Boston alliance" which sought to unite the regional interests of an increasingly diverse party.[131]

Speaker Nicholas Longworth

The fall of the House of Cannon in 1910 ushered in a period of landmark changes on Capitol Hill. When Democrats took over the House in 1911, they gave powers that once belonged to the Speakership to other groups of lawmakers. Led by Speaker Champ Clark and Majority Leader Oscar Wilder Underwood of Alabama, Democrats stripped the Speaker of his committee assignment powers and gave them to a new committee on committees comprising Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee.[132]

A handful of other changes in the immediate post-Cannon period also opened access to the legislative process. With the creation of the unanimous consent calendar, the House established procedures to circumvent the Speaker by allowing lawmakers to vote to suspend the rules temporarily to bring certain bills to the floor. Usually, this meant Representatives could expedite consideration of private bills, which, before the rise of federal programs like Social Security and Medicare, enabled lawmakers to aid individual constituents.[133]

When the Republican Party took back the House eight years later in 1918, it also used a committee on committees, separate from the Ways and Means Committee, to make assignments for the upcoming Congress. With their new majority, Republicans began discussing ways to improve how the party conference functioned. At the center of that discussion was future Speaker Nick Longworth, one of almost 30 lawmakers on an internal GOP steering committee that recommended reforms to the party's decision-making and law-writing processes.[134]

Longworth's role on the steering committee placed him on the shortlist of Republican powerbrokers in the House. He was nominated for Speaker in 1919 but lost to Frederick Gillett. In 1923, Longworth was elected the House Republican Leader. In his new role, Longworth sought to instill party government above all else. He accommodated

certain small changes to the rules that, in theory at least, empowered rank-and-file lawmakers. In return, Members accommodated Longworth as he set an ambitious legislative calendar that saw the House pass veterans' legislation, tax cuts, and a restrictive immigration quota system. In 1925, after Gillett won election to the Senate, Longworth began the first of three terms as Speaker.[135]

Longworth thrived in the world of gladhanding retail politics and cultivated relationships with lawmakers across the ideological spectrum. Many mornings when the House was in session, he and John N. Garner of Texas, the Democratic Leader, commuted to the Capitol together. After the workday, they frequently retired to a small room in the Capitol known as the Bureau of Education where, despite Prohibition, party leaders would unwind and hash out the issues. Longworth seemed to have a joke or story for every situation and regularly dined with colleagues in the House Restaurant. An accomplished violinist and avid golfer, Longworth also loved to hike and led extended excursions through Washington's Rock Creek Park as part of what was called "the Statesmen's Sunday Morning Marching Club." Historians have pointed out that his disarming personality and reputation for fairness made him beloved by the House and led many to acquiesce when he began reclaiming the Speaker's powers. Longworth "made people enjoy themselves because he himself was happy in company," his sister observed. And according to a modern scholar who has written extensively about the Ohio legislator's career, Longworth's "irrepressibly lighthearted approach to life" underscored the fact that he enjoyed the job like few others. "The Speakership is a fine thing, better than I had hoped or expected," Longworth said during his first term in the chair.[136]

Like Henry Clay and Thomas Brackett Reed before him, Longworth also realized a fundamental truth about the Speakership: that so long as he had the support of enough Members, he could shape the powers of the office however he wanted. "Regardless of the rules," Longworth said, "the speakership always will be what the Speaker makes it."[137]

During his time with the gavel, Longworth enjoyed large GOP majorities and courted the good graces of the House by opening access to the legislative calendar. He required the chamber's schedule to be posted in advance and had his chairmen make public the status of legislation being considered in their committees.[138]

Longworth was also the first lawmaker to move directly from the Majority Leader's office to the Speakership. As Speaker, the collegial Longworth continued to demand the level of Republican discipline that he had cultivated during his time as Majority Leader, and he used it to centralize power in party leadership. He kept his seat on the GOP's steering committee, which handled internal party issues, and stacked it with his allies. He stripped some Progressive Republicans who had opposed his nomination for Speaker of their committee assignments—and another of his chairmanship—and eliminated the seniority of still others who refused to go along with his program.

Speaker Frederick Gillett, right, stands next to his successor, Nick Longworth, in this 1925 image.
Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Eventually, his detractors came back into the fold. He increased the number of Member signatures needed to discharge a bill out of committee and onto the floor. And he brought the Rules Committee to heel by installing Bertrand Hollis Snell of New York, a key member of his leadership team, as chairman. Longworth made few alterations to the House Rules but still managed to reconsolidate many of the Speaker's powers once wielded by Cannon. Under Longworth, the House quickly won a reputation for its straightforward, business-like approach.[139]

Speaker's Staff

Key to winning that reputation was the trailblazing work of Mildred Reeves, Longworth's primary adviser in the Speaker's office. During Longworth's career in Washington, the House community experienced profound changes at both the Member and staff levels. Reeves shattered longtime precedent when she became the first woman to run the Speaker's office, serving in a capacity equivalent to today's chief of staff.

Mildred Reeves was Nick Longworth's most trusted aide by the time this picture was taken in 1925, the same year Longworth became Speaker. Reeves made history by becoming the first woman to run the Speaker's Office. "She is an expert on parliamentary procedure," the *Los Angeles Times* reported.

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Reeves had worked for Longworth when he was an up-and-coming lawmaker and stayed with him when he became Majority Leader in 1923. Another woman, Stella Deffenbaugh, had run the Majority Leader's office during the tenure of Longworth's predecessor, Republican Frank Wheeler Mondell of Wyoming. When Longworth was elected Speaker in 1925, he named the 29-year-old Reeves as his top aide, a job that had traditionally always been reserved for men. Her historic appointment made national news.[140]

Known as "an expert on parliamentary procedure," Reeves managed a team of seven, including two parliamentarians, in the Speaker's office. She often spoke for Longworth in the press and directed his agenda while handling a seemingly endless number of daily requests from lawmakers. "She knows the House Members," an Ohio newspaper reported in 1925. "She knows what they stand for, knows their various relationships and recognizes instantly what persons should see Mr. Longworth and what information should be placed before him. Through her Mr. Longworth sees and hears."[141]

"Both before and after he became Republican floor leader," the paper pointed out, "Miss Reeves has carried within her head all the intricacies of Mr. Longworth's affairs. She probably has a clearer conception of what is going on in the House than many members."[142]

While running the Speaker's office, Reeves also took law classes at night and passed the bar in 1928. When Longworth died in 1931, Reeves left the House, practiced as an attorney, and eventually became a judge. In 1936, she again made history as the first woman to serve on the national Republican platform committee.[143]

As the demands of governing the country grew more complex by the mid-twentieth century, the

House expanded the size of its workforce, hiring advisors and support staff to help draft policy and assist with constituent services. The size of the Speaker's office grew gradually as well.

Over the years, the staff responsibilities Reeves pioneered in the 1920s remained relatively consistent. Linda Melconian helped run the House Floor during Tip O'Neill's Speakership in the 1970s and had worked for him during his time as Whip and Majority Leader. "I went on to the floor a lot as the 'eyes and ears' to see what was going on," she said of her job during O'Neill's time as Whip. "At first, it was to listen and learn—to really absorb the parliamentary procedures, the processes, what happened, who was close to whom, who talked to whom." Melconian also regularly counseled Members or referred them directly to O'Neill. "I would give them advice, or I'd say, 'I think you should ask him directly. Just go right up to him. You'll be pleased with his answer.' If I thought it was something where I needed to maybe smooth things over before they talked to him—explain what their interests were because I knew maybe this particular individual was not one whom the Speaker was enamored about—then I would do that first."[144]

House Parliamentarian

Reeves was not the only historic member of Longworth's staff in the Speaker's office. In 1925, Longworth hired a recent college graduate named Lewis Deschler to keep time during debate and handle parliamentary issues. Deschler was promoted to assistant Parliamentarian in 1927. Less than a year later he was appointed the House Parliamentarian, a position he held under both Republican and Democratic Speakers until he retired in 1974.

The House Parliamentarian—a nonpartisan official whose office today employs attorneys and clerks to counsel the Speaker and presiding officers on House procedure—is one of the oldest advisory positions in Congress. A version of the office dates to at least the mid-1850s. At the time, the House employed just a few dozen people, most of whom worked as clerks in committee and on the floor. Some maintained the *House Journal* and handled additional administrative tasks. Others served as messengers. Some employees in the antebellum era had worked for the House for years and in the process had become experts on the House Rules. Because of their familiarity with the House's parliamentary processes, these aides became vital members of the House community.

The longest-serving Parliamentarian in House history, Lewis Deschler dedicated his career to serving the institution.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Even the most experienced nineteenth-century Speakers regularly sought advice when ruling from the chair or when seeking more information about House precedent. On paper, few antebellum Speakers were more prepared for the job than Robert Winthrop. From 1838 to 1840, Winthrop had served as speaker of the Massachusetts house, and when he entered Congress in 1840, he occasionally served as presiding officer. When Winthrop was elected Speaker in 1847, he nevertheless faced formidable challenges in the chair. "In spite of his long experience as a presiding officer, both as Speaker in the Massachusetts Legislature and as Chairman of the Committee of the Whole in Washington," Winthrop's son later wrote about his father's first year with the gavel, "his new duties proved somewhat more laborious than he had expected, partly owing

This late-nineteenth century stereoview gives the vantage of a Member walking into the chamber down the center aisle toward the marble Speaker's rostrum.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

to the complexity and conflict of the Rules and Orders then existing, and partly to the election of a Clerk of the House who saw fit to remove the experienced assistants accustomed to look up precedents at a moment's notice."[145]

Winthrop's experience underscored the need for aides who were well-versed in the House's often arcane operations. As Congress's legislative calendar became increasingly busy and the House's compendium of procedures grew, Speakers hired staff to help manage the workload and to provide counsel before making rulings from the chair.

One of the first to hold this staff responsibility was Thaddeus Morrice, who started as a House Page in the early 1850s and began working for the Speaker in 1853. Morrice likely advised six different Speakers and was a consistent presence on the rostrum despite the frequent turnover in leadership. "As you enter the House, when it is fully organized," a journalist observed in 1860, "you will see standing on the right of the Speaker, a young gentleman, named Thaddeus Maurice [*sic*], who may be called the prompter of the presiding officer.… Those who applaud the Speaker for his readiness and proficiency do not know that the quiet, unpretending young man by his side frequently puts the words into the Speaker's mouth."[146]

"No matter what party was in power in Congress, Thad. Morrice was retained," another reporter wrote following Morrice's death in 1864. "Every new Speaker found him an almost indespensable [*sic*] assistant.… It is said he knew more of Parliamentary law than any man in America."[147]

For much of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, Parliamentarians were known by different names: "messenger to the Speaker," "clerk to the Speaker," the Speaker's "private secretary," and "the clerk at the Speaker's table." Like Morrice, some of these earliest Parliamentarians were trusted compatriots on the rostrum. When Speaker Schuyler Colfax was elected Vice President in 1868, his clerk in the House, William D. Todd, went with him to the executive branch. To replace Todd in 1869, Speaker James Blaine hired as his private secretary John D. Barclay, the son of the longtime *House Journal* clerk, John M. Barclay. The

elder Barclay had worked on the House Floor for two decades and was the author of *Barclay's Digest*, an early compilation of the rules and precedents of the House. By 1874, he was known as "the highest authority in the nation on all questions of parliamentary law." It seems likely that from his seat on the rostrum, Barclay senior, more than his son, provided parliamentary guidance to the Speaker.[148]

In 1927, the position officially became known as the House Parliamentarian, and over the course of the twentieth century, a handful of individuals professionalized the office while serving for decades. From the early 1850s to 1928, 15 people held the job. But since Deschler's appointment in 1928, the House has only had six Parliamentarians through 2022.[149]

A handful of the individuals who held this role went on to win election to the House. Forrest Goodwin of Maine, who was clerk at the Speaker's table under Thomas Brackett Reed, later served in the House in the 63rd Congress (1913–1915); Asher Crosby Hinds, also of Maine, filled the post from 1895 to 1911, when he won election to the House as a Republican; Charles Robert Crisp, the son of Speaker Charles Crisp, offered parliamentary advice during his father's time in the chair, and later represented a Georgia district from 1913 to 1932; and Clarence Andrew Cannon of Missouri, who, after his time as clerk at the Speaker's table, served in the House for 41 years and chaired the powerful Appropriations Committee for 10 terms. Another clerk at the Speaker's table, Joel Bennett Clark of Missouri, resigned in 1917 to join the Army during World War I and later served as a Senator from 1933 to 1945.

Demographic Change in the House

When Longworth first took his seat in the 58th Congress, there were no women Members, no Black Members, one Hispanic-American Member—Federico Degetau, the Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico—and one Asian Pacific American Member, Jonah Kuhio Kalanianaole, the Delegate from Hawaii. In 1916, Jeannette Rankin became the first woman elected to Congress, and in 1929, Oscar De Priest of Illinois became the first Black lawmaker to serve in the House since 1901. But while the door to a more diverse membership had been cracked ajar, the House largely remained an exclusive club for the most influential White men in the country.[150]

Over his three terms as Speaker, Longworth served alongside nine women, including Democrat Mary Teresa Norton of New Jersey and Republican Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts, both of whom went on to chair committees after serving in the House for decades. At one point, Longworth insisted that women lawmakers be recognized during debate as "the gentlewoman" rather than "the gentle lady." Some Congresswomen asked the Speaker to do away with the House's traditional titles completely and instead refer to lawmakers by their home state. Garner, the Democratic Leader, would become "the Member from Texas," and Rogers "the Member from Massachusetts." Longworth, however, settled on "the gentlewoman," a recognition the House continues to use.[151]

As Speaker, Longworth also changed how the House administered the oath of office on Opening Day of a new Congress. At the time, the Speaker swore in each state delegation separately in alphabetical order, starting with Alabama. Worried that southern segregationists sworn in before the Speaker reached Illinois in the alphabet would protest De Priest's swearing in, supporters encouraged Longworth to swear in every Member of the House at the same time. On April 15, 1929, Opening Day of the 71st Congress (1929–1931), Longworth followed that advice and announced that he would administer "the oath to all Members of the body at once" to "more comport with the dignity and solemnity of this ceremony," he said. The House has continued that practice ever since.[152]

On March 4, 1931, on the final day of the 71st Congress, lawmakers thanked Longworth for

the "able, impartial, and dignified manner" in which he presided over the session. Longworth expressed his gratitude for the opportunity and acknowledged that the majority for the upcoming 72nd Congress (1931–1933) remained uncertain amid some recent vacancies. "Perhaps this is the last time I will address you from this rostrum," he said. "I do not mean to insinuate that I regard it as a probability, but I must admit it is a possibility." Longworth died unexpectedly from pneumonia only a month later in April 1931.[153]

But change was already afoot. Although Republicans had won a slender House majority in the midterm elections in 1930, the political effects of a deepening global economic crisis became apparent when—in a series of special elections between Election Day in 1930 and the opening of the new Congress in December 1931—Democrats captured the House majority.

In July 1949, Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas stood at the temporary rostrum ready to call the House into session for its first meeting in the Ways and Means Committee room in what is now the Longworth House Office Building. The House moved its operations to the committee space while its chamber underwent renovations in the 81st Congress (1949–1951).

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Speaker Sam Rayburn

In October 1929, during Longworth's final term as Speaker, the U.S. stock market collapsed. The Great Depression set in a short while later. Meanwhile, across the Great Plains, years of tilling had left the grasslands without a suitable anchor to the soil. When the winds kicked up amid a prolonged drought, the plains were enveloped by the suffocating shadow of acres of earth being lifted into the sky. The twin catastrophes—the Depression and the Dust Bowl—left Congress searching for solutions.[154]

In 1932, as America sifted through the ruins of its economy and looked for ways to rebuild, Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt won the presidency, with the man who had succeeded Longworth as Speaker, John Garner, as his running mate. In the House, Henry T. Rainey of Illinois, a reform-minded progressive Democrat, won election over a retinue of southern lawmakers to succeed Garner as Speaker. Nearly 130 first-term Democrats had been elected to start the 73rd Congress (1933–1935), the vast majority of whom came from districts across the North and West. As Speaker, Rainey opted to focus on passing FDR's immediate legislative agenda. He appointed friendly special committees to fast-track the President's New Deal programs, and severely limited debate and amendments on the floor.[155]

Over the next few years, the House Speakership experienced a series of difficult turnovers. Rainey died in 1934 after one term, and Joseph W. Byrns of Tennessee, the Democratic Leader, succeeded him. But Byrns also died a year and a half into office, and in June 1936, House Democrats, who still commanded a huge majority, elected William B. Bankhead of Alabama as Speaker. Bankhead suffered from poor health too, and he died in September 1940 after four years on the job.[156]

Stability arrived with the man who succeeded Bankhead in the Speaker's chair: Sam Rayburn, a Texas Democrat then in his thirteenth term. The previous eight years had seen three different

Democratic Speakers, but it would be two decades before the House saw a Democratic Speaker not named Rayburn.

Rayburn was born in 1882 in the foothills of East Tennessee. At the age of five, he moved with his family to a lonely, hardscrabble farm in northeast Texas not far from the Oklahoma border. Years later he told a longtime aide, Alla Clary, that on Sundays "he would sit on the fence and wish for somebody to come by." Clary, who worked for Rayburn in the House for decades, remembered that for the Speaker, a bachelor for much of his life who worked incessantly, "Sunday had never ceased to be a long tiresome day to him."[157]

Rayburn went to college to become a teacher and settled in Bonham, Texas, not far from where he had grown up. At 24, he was elected to the Texas house of representatives and served for six years. Rayburn earned a law degree from the University of Texas and, before turning 30, was elected speaker of the state house. He wielded the gavel for two years, pursuing new labor laws and other Progressive Era reforms.[158]

In 1912, Rayburn won election to the U.S. House, where he served for nearly 50 years. Before the Civil War, congressional service was not often considered a career. There were exceptions in the early decades of the Republic, and certain Members—including Thomas Newton Jr. of Virginia, who served for more than 30 years, and John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, who served for 17 years—had long tenures by any standard. But most lawmakers served a handful of terms at most before pursuing other endeavors, returning to their jobs as lawyers or merchants or seeking state office. By the twentieth century, however, Members began staying put in Washington, using safe seats to build seniority and gradually move up the ladder in committee. In his pursuit of power, Rayburn opted for this path.

Rayburn arrived on Capitol Hill during a Democratic majority and just one term removed from the overthrow of Speaker Joe Cannon in 1910.

After the death of 14 lawmakers, including Speaker Nick Longworth, in between sessions, the slim Republican majority after Election Day 1930 evaporated. When the House opened for the 72nd Congress (1931–1933) a new Democratic majority elected John N. Garner as Speaker.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Early in his career, he became a close ally of John Garner, who represented a south Texas district that stretched along the Rio Grande River and helped Rayburn win a seat on the influential Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. When Democrats captured the House for the 72nd Congress, Rayburn became chairman. Because so much of FDR's legislative agenda passed through his committee, Rayburn used his gavel to shape and guide some of the New Deal's major regulatory bills.[159]

When William Bankhead was elected Speaker, Rayburn moved into the Majority Leader's office for the 75th Congress (1937–1939). At the time, Democrats had the largest House majority in American history—334 of 435 seats—and Rayburn confronted the question of how to coordinate such a big, ideologically diverse party. When FDR proposed expanding the Supreme Court to protect New Deal programs, for instance, many conservative southern Democrats rebelled, and Rayburn scrambled to keep the caucus together.[160]

Speaker Sam Rayburn used this gavel to preside over Congress's declaration of war against Germany and Italy in December 1941. Rayburn presented it to House reading clerk Irving Swanson following the day's proceedings.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives, Gift of Irving Swanson

An intensely private man, Rayburn buried himself in the work. "He knew more about the ins and outs of the legislative process in the House than any member," wrote Richard Walker Bolling of Missouri, who served in the House with Rayburn for a dozen years. "He sucked up information about the House, its committees, employees, members, and activities like a giant vacuum cleaner. The result was that he knew nearly everything that was going on. He had done ten thousand favors for hundreds of members. When the House was in session, it was his whole life."[161]

When Bankhead died in 1940, Rayburn was elected Speaker for the remainder of the 76th Congress (1939–1941). He was re-elected nine more times and served as Speaker for a total of 17 years until he died in 1961. When Democrats lost the majority in the 80th Congress (1947–1949) and again in the 83rd Congress (1953–1955), Rayburn stayed on as Minority Leader and then quickly regained the Speakership.

As Speaker, Rayburn often performed like a conductor of an orchestra, keeping the House on beat with the legislative calendar while trying to make sure his committees worked in harmony. Rayburn famously pointed out that he never served "under" any President; rather, he served "with" them, as equals. And while he rejected claims that the House had ever been a rubber stamp for any administration, others have argued that Rayburn made sure the Democratic House usually deferred to the needs of Democratic Presidents.[162]

There were times when Rayburn had large Democratic majorities and other times when he could spare just a few votes. He was known as a careful party leader; later historians went so far as to call him "risk-averse" and "cautious." Rayburn recognized the limits of his caucus and counted on lawmakers to follow his famous advice: "In order to get along you have to go along." It was also the case, his aide Alla Clary said, that Rayburn "never pressured any member of the House to vote for a bill if it was against his principles."[163]

Like Longworth and Garner before him, Rayburn held court at what became known as the Board of Education, where he and other party leaders talked policy and procedure and took the measure of their younger colleagues. He furnished the space with grand if otherwise well-worn leather chairs and a sofa, and kept his bar stocked with bourbon.[164]

Often dour and self-deprecating, Rayburn once joked that "the hardest decision he had to make during the day was what he was going to eat for lunch," Clary recalled. But few Speakers ever faced the sort of decisions he did. Rayburn led the House through World War II and into the Cold War. For nearly 20 years he helped steer to passage

The vote for Speaker taken on January 3, 1953, for the opening of the 83rd Congress (1953–1955), declared Joe Martin the victor. The final tally was 220 to 201.

Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Subject: ELECTION OF SPEAKER

Date Jan 3, 1953

TALLY SHEET

No. 2.

EIGHTY-THIRD CONGRESS — FIRST SESSION

220 — 201 — 201

Martin	NAMES	Rayburn
	A	
	Abbitt	1
	Abernethy	2
1	Adair	
	Addonizio	3
	Albert	4
	Alexander	5
2	Allen of California	
3	Allen of Illinois	
4	Andersen, H. Carl	
5	Andresen, August H.	
	Andrews	6
6	Angell	
7	Arends	
	Aspinall	7
8	Auchincloss	
9	Ayres	
	B	
	Bailey	8
10	Baker	
	Barden	9
	Barrett	10
11	Bates	
	Battle	11
12	Beamer	
13	Becker	
14	Belcher	
15	Bender	
	Bennett of Florida	12
16	Bennett of Michigan	
17	Bentley	
	Bentsen	
18	Berry	
19	Betts	
20	Bishop	
	Blatnik	
	Boggs	13
	Boland	14
	Bolling	1
21	Bolton, Frances P.	
22	Bolton, Oliver P.	
	Bonner	15
23	Bonin	
24	Bosch	
25	Bow	
	Boykin	16
26	Brambblett	
27	Bray	
	Brooks of Louisiana	17
	Brooks of Texas	18
	Brown of Georgia	19
28	Brown of Ohio	
29	Brownson	
30	Broyhill	
	Bryson	20
	Buchanan	21
	Buckley	22
31	Budge	
32	Burdick	
	Burleson	23
33	Busbey	
34	Bush	
	Byrd	24
	Byrne of Pennsylvania	25
35	Byrnes of Wisconsin	
	C	
	Camp	26
	Campbell	27
36	Canfield	
	Cannon	28
	Carlyle	29
	Carnahan	30
37	Carrigg	
38	Case	
39	Cederberg	
	Celler	31
	Chatham	32
	Chelf	33
40	Chenoweth	
41	Chiperfield	
	Chudoff	34
42	Church	
43	Clardy	
44	Clevenger	
45	Cole of Missouri	
46	Cole of New York	
	Colmer	
	Condon	35
	Cooley	36
47	Coon	
	Cooper	37
48	Corbett	
49	Cotton	
50	Coudert	
51	Cretella	
	Crosser	38
52	Crumpacker	
53	Cunningham	
54	Curtis of Massachusetts	
55	Curtis of Missouri	
56	Curtis of Nebraska	
	D	
57	Dague	
	Davis of Georgia	39
	Davis of Tennessee	40
58	Davis of Wisconsin	
	Dawson of Illinois	41
59	Dawson of Utah	
	Deane	42
	Delaney	43
	Dempsey	44
60	Derounian	
61	Devereux	
62	D'Ewart	
	Dies	45
	Dingell	46
	Dodd	47
	Dollinger of New York	48
63	Dolliver of Iowa	
64	Dondero	
	Donohue	49
	Donovan	50
65	Dorn of New York	
	Dorn of South Carolina	51
	Dowdy	52
	Doyle	53
	Durham	54
	E	
	Eberharter	55
	Edmondson	56
	Elliott	57
66	Ellsworth	
	Engle	58
	Evins	59
	F	
	Fallon	60
	Feighan	61
67	Fenton	
	Fernandes	
	Fine	62
68	Fino	
	Fisher	63
	Fogarty	64
	Forand	65
69	Ford	
	Forrester	66
	Fountain	95
	Frazier	67
70	Frelinghuysen, Jr.	
	Friedel	68
19	Fulton	
	G	
71	Gamble	
	Garmatz	69
	Gary	70
	Gathings	71
72	Gavin	
	Gentry	72
73	George	
74	Golden	
75	Goodwin	
	Gordon	73
76	Graham	
	Granahan	74
	Grant	75
	Green	76
	Gregory	77
77	Gross	
78	Gubser	
79	Gwinn	
	H	
	Hagen of California	78
80	Hagen of Minnesota	
81	Hale	
	Haley	79
82	Halleck	
83	Hand	
84	Harden	
	Hardy	80
	Harris	81
85	Harrison of Nebraska	
	Harrison of Virginia	82
86	Harrison of Wyoming	
	Hart	83
87	Harvey	
	Hays of Arkansas	84
	Hays of Ohio	85
	Hébert	86
	Heller	87
	Herlong	88
88	Heselton	
89	Hess	
90	Hiestand	
91	Hill	
92	Hillelson	
93	Hillings	
94	Hinshaw	
95	Hoeven	
96	Hoffman of Illinois	
97	Hoffman of Michigan	
	Holifield	
98	Holmes	
99	Holt	
	Holtzman	89
100	Hope	
1	Horan	
2	Hosmer	
	Howell	90
3	Hruska	
4	Hull	
5	Hunter	
6	Hyde	
	I	
	Hard	91
	J	
7	Jackson	
8	James	
	Jarman	92
9	Javits	
10	Jenkins	
11	Jensen	
12	Johnson	
13	Jonas of Illinois	
14	Jonas of North Carolina	
	Jones of Alabama	93
	Jones of Missouri	94
	Jones of North Carolina	95
15	Judd	
	K	
	Karsten of Missouri	96
16	Kean	
17	Kearney	
18	Kearns	
19	Keating	
	Kee	97
	Kelley of Pennsylvania	98
	Kelly of New York	99
	Keogh	100
20	Kersten of Wisconsin	
21	Kilburn	
	Kilday	1
	King of California	96
22	King of Pennsylvania	
	Kirwan	2
	Klein	3
	Kluczynski	4
23	Knox	
24	Krueger	
	L	
25	Laird	
	Landrum	5
	Lane	6
	Lanham	
	Lantaff	7
26	Latham	
27	LeCompte	
	Lesinski	8
	Long	97
28	Lovre	
	Lucas	9
	Lyle	10
	M	
	McCarthy	98
29	McConnell	
	McCormack	11
30	McCulloch	
31	McDonough	
32	McGregor	
33	McIntire	
	McMillan	12
34	McVey	
	Machrowicz	13
	Mack of Illinois	14
35	Mack of Washington	
	Madden	15
	Magnuson	16
	Mahon	17
36	Mailliard	
	Marshall	18
20	Martin of Iowa	
	Martin of Massachusetts	
37	Mason	
	Matthews	19
38	Meader	
39	Merrill	
40	Merrow	
	Metcalf	20
	Miller of California	
	Miller of Kansas	21
41	Miller of Maryland	
42	Miller of Nebraska	
43	Miller of New York	
	Mills	22
	Mollohan	23
44	Morano	
	Morgan	24
	Morrison	25
	Moss	26
	Moulder	27
	Multer	28
45	Mumma	
	Murray	29
	N	
46	Neal	
47	Nelson	
48	Nicholson	
49	Norblad	
	Norrell	30
	O	
50	Oakman	
	O'Brien of Illinois	31
	O'Brien of Michigan	32
	O'Brien of New York	33
	O'Hara of Illinois	34
51	O'Hara of Minnesota	
52	O'Konski	
	O'Neill	35
53	Osmers	
54	Ostertag	
	P	
	Passman	36
	Patman	37
	Patten	38
55	Patterson	
56	Pelly	
	Perkins	39
	Pfost	40
	Philbin	41
57	Phillips	
58	Pillion	
	Poage	42
59	Poff	
	Polk	43
60	Poulson	
	Powell	44
	Preston	45
	Price	46
	Priest	47
61	Prouty	
	R	
	Rabaut	48
62	Radwan	
	Rains	49
63	Ray	
	Rayburn	Present
	REAMS	Present
64	Reece of Tennessee	
65	Reed of Illinois	
66	Reed of New York	
67	Rees of Kansas	
	Regan	50
68	Rhodes of Arizona	
	Rhodes of Pennsylvania	51
	Richards	52
69	Richlman	
	Riley	53
	Rivers	54
	Roberts	55
	Robeson of Virginia	56
70	Robsion of Kentucky	
	Rodino	59
	Rogers of Colorado	58
	Rogers of Florida	
71	Rogers of Massachusetts	
	Rogers of Texas	59
	Rooney	60
	Roosevelt	61
	S	
72	Sadlak	
73	St. George	
74	Saylor	
75	Schenck	
76	Scherer	
77	Scott	
78	Scrivner	
79	Scudder	
	Secrest	62
80	Seely-Brown	
	Selden	63
81	Shafer	
82	Sheehan	
	Shelley	64
	Sheppard	65
83	Short	
	Shuford	66
	Sieminski	67
	Sikes	68
84	Simpson of Illinois	
85	Simpson of Pennsylvania	
86	Small	
87	Smith of Kansas	
	Smith of Mississippi	69
	Smith of Virginia	70
88	Smith of Wisconsin	
	Spence	71
89	Springer	
	Staggers	72
	Stanley	73
90	Stauffer	
	Steed	74
91	Stringfellow	
	Sullivan	75
	Sutton	76
	T	
92	Taber	
93	Talle	
94	Taylor	
	Teague	77
	Thomas	200
	Thompson of Louisiana	78
95	Thompson of Michigan	
	Thompson of Texas	79
	Thornberry	80
96	Tollefson	
	Trimble	81
	U	
97	Utt	
	V	
98	Van Pelt	
99	Van Zandt	
200	Velde	
	Vinson	82
1	Vorys	
2	Vursell	
	W	
3	Wainwright	
	Walter	83
4	Wampler	
5	Warburton	
	Watts	84
6	Weichel	
7	Westland	
8	Wharton	
	Wheeler	85
	Whitten	99
	Wickersham	86
9	Widnall	
	Wier	87
10	Wigglesworth	
	Williams of Mississippi	88
11	Williams of New York	
	Willis	89
12	Wilson of California	
13	Wilson of Indiana	
	Wilson of Texas	90
	Winstead	91
	Withers	92
14	Withrow	
15	Wolcott	
16	Wolverton	
	Y	
	Yates	93
	Yorty	94
17	Young	
18	Younger	
	Z	
	Zablocki	

CORRECTED TO JANUARY 3, 1953

TOTAL, 433; QUORUM, 217.

Vacancies, Two, 2d Georgia, 7th Illinois.

HENRY W. KALICH, *Tally Clerk.*

CURTIS A. CHRISTIANSON, W. H. HICKSON, *Assistant Tally Clerks.*

RALPH R. ROBERTS, *Clerk.*

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landmark, often bipartisan, legislation. Under his watch, Congress created the national highway system, directed hundreds of millions in federal education funds as part of the National Defense Education Act, and established NASA, among many other key laws and programs.[165]

By the late 1950s, Rayburn's Democratic Caucus had grown steadily more bifurcated. At one end, long-serving conservative southern Democrats controlled important House committees and blocked efforts to pass legislation, including federal civil rights protections. At the other end stood many newer and younger House Democrats who supported increasingly liberal policies. A decade earlier, numerous southern Democrats had backed Strom Thurmond's pro-segregation, third-party candidacy for President. Harry S. Truman still managed to win the White House, but for many Democrats the southerners' refusal to support the party's nominee was an act of betrayal. Rayburn and the rest of Democratic leadership in the House, however, let them return to the party caucus without ramifications. Richard Bolling later lamented that "by pretending that all those who wore the Democratic party label shared a common outlook, Rayburn, in effect, transferred the power of the majority party to the political opposition, the coalition of most Republicans with sixty to eighty Dixiecrats."[166]

Speaker Sam Rayburn sets his outsized gavel to rest on this cover of *Time* magazine from February 1961. The story inside vividly recounted Rayburn's battle to break the Rules Committee's stranglehold on legislation. Rayburn died later that year in November.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

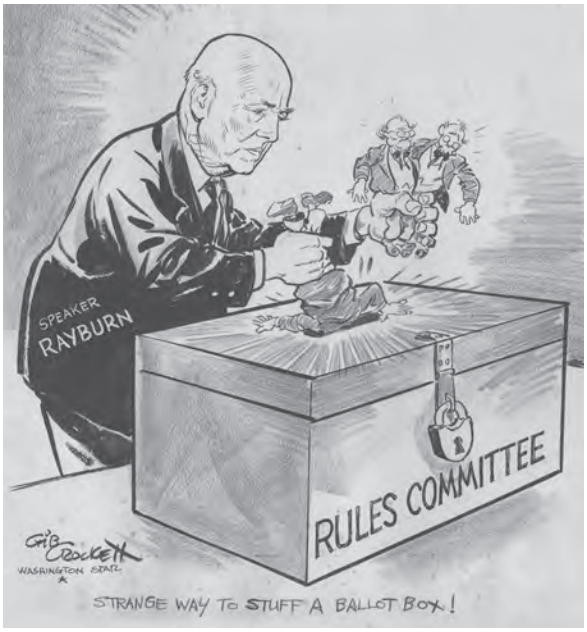
In 1957, Congress passed a civil rights act that did little to improve life for Black Americans living under apartheid conditions in the South. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, however, pressure continued to build for meaningful legislation to end discrimination and segregation. But because the House Committee on Rules was dominated by segregationists, including longtime chairman Howard Worth Smith of Virginia, prospects for a bill seemed slim. "With the single exception of Rayburn," Carl Albert later recalled, "Smith was the smartest person and most skilled legislator that I ever saw in Congress. Always calm, unfailingly polite, he was the kind of person who could place one hand on your shoulder while the other was cutting out your heart.… To call him a reactionary was to honor him, for reaction was his political religion."[167]

More broadly, new President John F. Kennedy also worried about how his agenda would fare among conservative southern Democrats. To ensure Kennedy's legislative program stood a chance in the House, Rayburn—himself the son of a Confederate soldier and who traditionally supported segregation—proposed expanding the committee's membership by two Democrats and one Republican, enough to effectively break the ties in committee that frequently stopped important legislation. Both the Kennedy White House and Rayburn's Democratic leadership team lobbied rank-and-file Members on the change. Rayburn, meanwhile, offered Smith and other

southerners an ultimatum: accept the three new lawmakers or expect to be forced off the committee by a vote in the caucus. Smith and the others agreed to send the change from committee for the full House's consideration.[168]

When the bill to expand the Rules Committee went to the floor for a vote, the outcome remained uncertain. "That's when they say Mr. Rayburn laid his prestige on the line," Alla Clary said. Rayburn and John McCormack, the Democratic Leader, had personally whipped the votes and suspected they had the support they needed. Rayburn's effort succeeded, and the House approved the expansion, 217 to 212. The House made the expansion of the Rules Committee permanent two years later. For his part, Rayburn framed his win within much larger historical context; he saw it as a step to reclaiming the powers Joe Cannon had lost 50 years earlier. "When the House revolted against Speaker Cannon in 1910, they cut the Speaker's powers too much. Ever since I have been Speaker, I have been trying to get some of that power back for the office," Rayburn told his biographer.[169]

Rayburn's victory over the Rules Committee was one of his last major battles. He died in November 1961.



This 1961 cartoon in the *Washington Evening Star* dramatizes Speaker Sam Rayburn's move to expand the size of the House Rules Committee in order to pass civil rights legislation over the objections of the committee's segregationist chairman, Howard Worth Smith of Virginia. Despite vigorous opposition to expanding the committee, including from the *Evening Star*, Rayburn won the vote to enlarge Rules, 217 to 212, just days after this cartoon appeared.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

A New Generation of Reform

Over the course of Rayburn's life, America—and the House of Representatives—underwent a series of profound changes. Rayburn was born in 1882, became a legislative leader during the New Deal, and served as Speaker during the Cold War. He had lived through the Great War, the Depression, and World War II. The America he helped shape had become an economic juggernaut and a global superpower. But it largely remained a place in which a limited and exclusive circle of officials wielded outsized power—especially in Congress, where he served alongside the likes of Joe Cannon, Nick Longworth, and John Garner.

Rayburn's death in 1961, however, occurred at the beginning of a transformative era. In the decade and a half after Rayburn died, the country experienced a series of upheavals that fundamentally changed American society. From coast to coast, women sought new opportunities and demanded equal treatment, especially in the workplace and in access to health care. In the South, everyday people mobilized to overturn a century of exhausting and brutal discrimination. The civil rights movement—and the courageous Black Americans who risked their lives to challenge segregation—spurred Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Voters also pushed lawmakers to confront inequalities in housing and employment, invest in America's social safety net, and strengthen the government's regulatory powers. The issues had widespread support. In just two years, for example, from 1970 to 1972, the Democratic-controlled Congress created the Environmental Protection Agency, extended and strengthened both the Clean Air Act and the Clean

Water Act, and passed the Consumer Product Safety Act—all of which were signed into law by Republican President Richard M. Nixon.[170]

This was also a remarkably turbulent and violent period. The peaceful protests of the civil rights movement stood in stark contrast to the malicious reaction by southern segregationists. The era witnessed the assassinations of President Kennedy, his brother Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. In the wake of King's murder in 1968, cities across the country experienced widespread civil violence, unrest, and property destruction. Meanwhile, as successive presidential administrations committed more American troops and resources to the Vietnam War, a vocal and confrontational antiwar movement emerged at home. And then in 1974, President Nixon resigned after journalists and congressional investigations revealed that he had repeatedly lied to the American people to cover up a break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee conducted by his re-election campaign team two years earlier. Nixon stepped down in the face of certain impeachment, but the Watergate scandal exacted a heavy price on the country. Americans across the political spectrum lost confidence in their leaders, questioned the motives of their government, and called for greater transparency and oversight.

Both the pace and the magnitude of the change happening in America had a profound effect on Congress. During the 1960s and early 1970s in the House, diverse classes of first-term lawmakers demanded access to the levers of power. Most were unwilling to play the long game by building seniority over years of service on Capitol Hill. Many mid-career legislators had also grown frustrated with a system controlled by autocratic committee chairs. In the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, Democrats increased their majority in the House in the 94th Congress (1975–1977) by nearly 50 seats following the election of a new group of lawmakers who made good government central to their candidacies. The "Watergate Babies," as they were called, accelerated the era of reform. They worked to ensure transparency across the federal system and in the House sought to improve access to the legislative process.[171]

The Speakership adapted to the new political landscape. Rayburn had been a singular figure in Congress during the postwar period, but when he died, the political scientist Ronald M. Peters Jr. has observed, "there emerged a new leadership system in the House that was more open and participatory."[172]

That "democratizing" process, as Peters has called it, unfolded over many years. And during their Speakerships, both John McCormack (1962–1971) and Carl Albert (1971–1977) confronted many of the same challenges Rayburn navigated during his tenure—especially the power of the entrenched southern committee chairmen who controlled much of the House's legislative agenda and who typically opposed both procedural and legislative reforms.

In fact, for much of the twentieth century, lawmakers had operated under a committee system subject to the seemingly arbitrary whims of just a few individuals. "As chairs, the southerners' power was all but absolute in their committee rooms," Albert remembered during his retirement. "They convened the committees, if and when they wanted to. They took up bills and assigned them, if they favored them. They scheduled hearings, if there were to be any. They designated subcommittees, if they decided to have any. They directed mark-ups, if they wanted to. They reported bills out of committee, if they chose to." And if a bill they supported made it to the full House, Albert observed, "they directed the floor debate, thereby influencing its outcome."[173]

In his memoirs, Albert was even blunter. "No Speaker since Joe Cannon had had any real power over legislation. That fell to the chairmen of 20 standing committees and 138 subcommittees, each with power independent of the Speaker."[174]

But in the early 1970s, House Democrats orchestrated a series of seismic shakeups at the committee level. Rather than allow a handful of

committee chairmen to dictate policy, Speaker Albert resurrected the Democratic Caucus—which Rayburn had neglected—as the driving force behind the majority's agenda in the House. During Albert's Speakership, the Democratic Caucus began electing committee chairs, rather than relying on the seniority system. The caucus also assumed the power to name subcommittee chairs—which had previously fallen under the purview of the old committee chairmen—and guaranteed certain rights to the subcommittees. Importantly, Democrats empowered the Speaker to name the chair and Democratic members of the powerful Rules Committee. "I knew that I was going to control that committee," Albert later wrote, "not for the exaltation of Carl Albert, not even for the power of the Speakership, but for the rights of the entire House membership, too often frustrated by that obstinate committee."[175]

Democrats also took their reform effort a step further. At the time, the Democratic Members of the Ways and Means Committee still made committee assignments for the majority. But the Democratic Caucus transferred its committee-making powers to the Steering and Policy Committee, which was controlled by the Speaker and the Speaker's appointees.[176]

In a little more than two years, lawmakers had returned to the Speakership a version of the powers the office last held at the beginning of the twentieth century. "For the first time since 1911, the elected House leadership controlled committee assignments and the flow of bills through the Rules Committee," Albert later observed. "For the first time in too long, we all shared our power with each other and did our work in full public view."[177]

The successor to Speaker Rayburn, John W. McCormack of Massachusetts, served four and a half terms as Speaker before retiring at the end of the 91st Congress (1969–1971).

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Carl Albert of Oklahoma served as Speaker for three terms from 1971 to 1977.

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Carl Albert wielded this gavel in the House Chamber at some point during his Speakership. He signed his name on the head of the gavel and gave it to Gilman Grant Udell Sr., a longtime employee of the House Document Room.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives, gift of Elizabeth C. Udell in memory of her husband Gilman Grant Udell, Sr.

As the seniority system lost its potency and the Speaker grew more powerful, lawmakers lobbied Albert for seats on important committees. Working with Member groups like the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), Albert helped open access to seats traditionally controlled by close-minded committee chairmen. In 1973, when Ronald V. Dellums of California was initially passed over for a historic appointment to become the first Black lawmaker assigned to the Armed Services Committee, Dellums and other Members of the CBC met with Speaker Albert to press their case. It worked. "I'm going to see if I can get this name reconsidered," Albert told Dellums and the others after their meeting. "At that moment, I knew I had won," Dellums recalled years later. Dellums said it took only 30 minutes before he received a phone call informing him that he had been named the first African-American Representative to serve on the Armed Services Committee. Dellums held a seat on the committee for decades, and in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), he became the first Black lawmaker to chair Armed Services.[178]

The 103rd Congress marked the end of a nearly 60-year reign of Democratic control in the House. Between 1931 and 1995, Democrats had held the chamber for all but two terms. In fact, Democrats controlled the House for 40 years straight, from 1955 until 1995. But in the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans captured the House behind an ambitious national agenda conceived by the man who would be Speaker, Newt Gingrich of Georgia.

PART 5: THE SPEAKERSHIP AND MODERN AMERICA

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked a major transition in American history and signaled a new era in the country's politics. Taken together, the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal shook the faith many Americans had in their government. The twin crises also shook the foundation on Capitol Hill. As the younger generation of lawmakers entered the House and a reform ethos took root in Congress that prioritized transparency and accountability, a changing media environment exposed lawmakers to new levels of scrutiny and further nationalized congressional politics. At the same time, the growth of the Republican Party in the South in the decades after the civil rights revolution led to a major political realignment. These and other factors contributed to an era of rising partisanship when both major parties grew less ideologically diverse: Democrats became more uniformly liberal and Republicans more uniformly conservative. This changing political landscape raised new expectations for Speakers and presented them with new opportunities to shape the office.

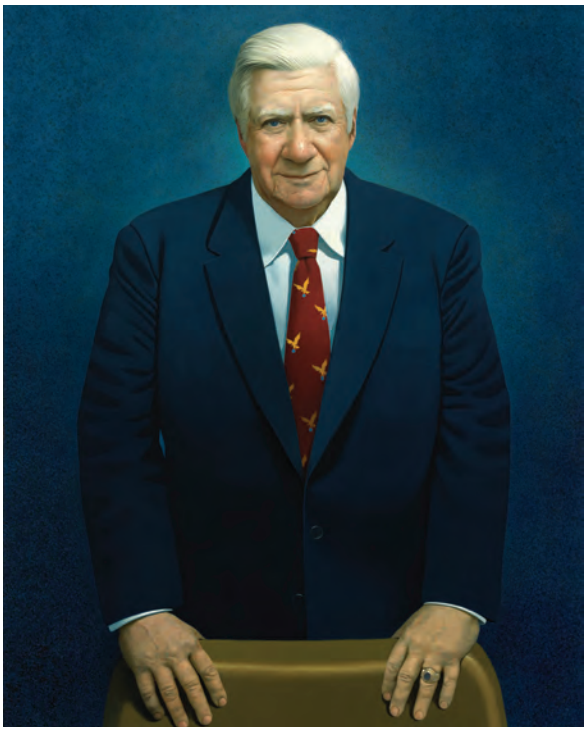
Two Speakers dominated the era between the late 1970s and late 1990s: Democrat Tip O'Neill and Republican Newt Gingrich. O'Neill—a New Deal Democrat and old-school, backslapping ward politician from Boston, Massachusetts—considered the work of Congress to be first and foremost rooted in the local affairs of America's individual towns, communities, and congressional districts. Gingrich, on the other hand, saw the work of the House as part of a national program to fundamentally change the role of the federal government. O'Neill and Gingrich disagreed politically and personally. But both lawmakers eventually became household names, and during their time in office, the Speakership grew increasingly influential and, arguably, more powerful than it had been in nearly a century.

Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr.

Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. grew up the son of a civil servant in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and it was from his father that O'Neill inherited his famous political adage that "all politics is local." He got his nickname, Tip, from a wily professional baseball player whose last name was also O'Neill and who, refusing to strike out, famously exhausted pitchers by tipping foul ball after foul ball. Tip O'Neill Jr. began his working life selling insurance, and during the Depression he won a seat in the Massachusetts state house, where he served until 1952. In his final three years in Boston, O'Neill served as speaker.[179]

Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. of Massachusetts held the Speaker's gavel for a decade and oversaw the transition to televised coverage of the House Floor.

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives



In 1953, at age 41, O'Neill made the jump to Capitol Hill and began what would become a three-decade career in the House. As a young Representative, O'Neill belonged to what was called the "Tuesday-Thursday Club," the derisive name given to the group of lawmakers who spent the middle of the week in Washington but commuted home to their districts for the weekend. O'Neill had an advantage most new Members lacked: early on, John McCormack—the Democratic Leader and a fellow Massachusetts lawmaker—had taken O'Neill under his wing. McCormack invited O'Neill to events around Washington, and O'Neill accompanied McCormack to sessions in the Board of Education, where he interacted with Rayburn and other leading lawmakers. In 1970, McCormack put O'Neill in charge of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. O'Neill called his experience with the DCCC an "education." It required extensive travel to districts from coast to coast but helped him meet scores of future legislators.[180]

Upon McCormack's recommendation, O'Neill was assigned to the powerful Rules Committee in just his second term. From Rules, O'Neill learned the inner workings of the House and observed how the party leaders operated. After 18 years in Congress, O'Neill was named Democratic Whip for the 92nd

During O'Neill's Speakership, most people still referred to him by his childhood nickname "Tip."
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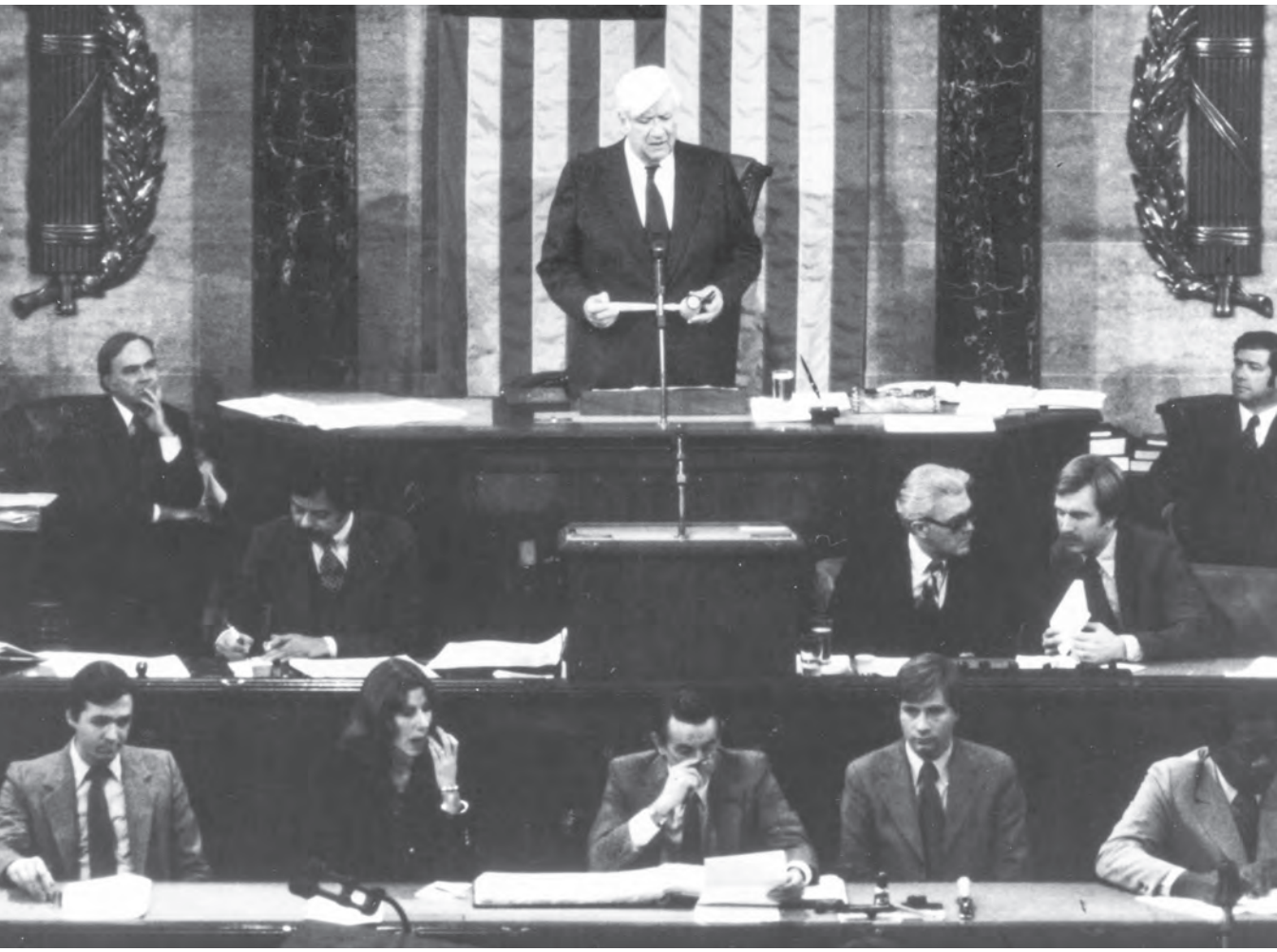

Congress (1971–1973). At the time, the Speaker controlled the Whip position, and after O'Neill asked Majority Leader Thomas Hale Boggs Sr. of Louisiana for the job, Carl Albert agreed.[181]

When Boggs went missing during a flight in Alaska in 1972, O'Neill was elected to Boggs's post as Democratic Leader.[182]

O'Neill made it a point to build relationships with as many lawmakers as he could. "Mr. O'Neill was a very good coalition builder," remembered Donnald K. Anderson, who managed the Democratic Cloakroom in the House Chamber from 1972 to 1987 and later served as Clerk of the House. "You know, he was a socializer, a very warm, ebullient, friendly guy. He spent most of his day on the House Floor. Very accessible. Accessibility was always the key to his success. He was very approachable."[183]

By the time O'Neill was elected Speaker in 1977, an influx of liberal lawmakers who, like O'Neill, had opposed the Vietnam War and supported efforts to expand social programs, upended the old ways on Capitol Hill. In addition to opening up the committee system, reformers sought to improve accessibility and transparency across the government, including through the adoption of electronic voting in 1973—which made it easier to hold recorded votes, and meant votes usually lasted 15 minutes, where previously they took much longer. Moreover, under Speaker O'Neill's direction, the House began televising its proceedings in March 1979.[184]

Early in his Speakership, O'Neill had access to several new powers, but he initially demurred when it came to making committee assignments and often let the committee chairs, who had been elected by his caucus, take the lead on the issues. He also counseled Democratic President James Earl "Jimmy" Carter on how he thought the administration could pass its agenda through Congress.[185]

As Speaker, O'Neill focused on the bigger picture and was keenly attentive to the rhythms of the House and the needs of its lawmakers—both of which readily influenced policy on Capitol Hill. One of O'Neill's biographers called him "a matchless barometer of the mood of the House." Whether it was talking sports with the manager of the snack bar in the Democratic Cloakroom or chatting with colleagues, O'Neill took to heart a lesson he said he learned from Sam Rayburn. The longtime Texas lawmaker "understood that a Speaker must get to know the members so that, as he used to say, he could *feel* what is going on," O'Neill noted. "I always remembered this and tried to keep in close touch with the members. If I didn't know what they were going to do before they did it, I was in trouble."[186]

As Speaker, O'Neill worked to broaden the umbrella of House leadership while also consolidating the party's agenda in his office. Like his predecessor, Carl Albert, O'Neill used ad hoc committees and task forces to both bypass the traditional committee process and ensure rank-and-file lawmakers were included alongside party leaders in the decision-making process. O'Neill also leveraged the Rules Committee's influence over the legislative process. A former member of Rules himself, O'Neill appointed members who would comply with his agenda. "During my speakership," he later observed, "the power that the leadership exercised over the House calendar increased greatly because the Rules Committee was under firm control."[187]

When Ronald Reagan entered the White House upon Carter's departure from office in 1981, O'Neill became the highest-ranking Democrat in the country and a national ambassador for those who looked to the government to assist everyday Americans. "The main change in my role as Speaker was the increasingly public role I played," O'Neill later observed. As leader of the opposition party, his job in the House also changed. Unlike the period of unified Democratic control during the Carter presidency, O'Neill more readily used the powers of the Speakership to give Democrats additional leverage in Congress during the Reagan administration. He expanded the size of powerful House committees—Appropriations, Rules, Ways

The first Republican Speaker in 40 years, Newt Gingrich of Georgia held the gavel for the 104th and 105th Congresses (1995–1999).

Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

and Means, and Budget—to ensure his allies could influence federal funding decisions. And he supported efforts in the Democratic Caucus to restrict dilatory motions on the floor and curtail amendments on spending bills.[188]

O'Neill retired in 1987 at the end of the 99th Congress (1985–1987), having served as Speaker for 10 straight years. No other Speaker has surpassed his five consecutive terms in the chair.

"Never forget that the power of the speakership is like all power—temporary," O'Neill observed during his retirement. "The power has been loaned, not given, and must be used to help members and the country. It is easy for politicians, and especially a Speaker, to conclude that the office they hold is deserved. It is wiser to realize that the people have taken a chance and that their trust must be earned every day."[189]

Speaker Newt Gingrich

While O'Neill employed the Speakership to preserve Democratic policies and prerogatives against the ambitions of a popular Republican President, Congress was shifting beneath his feet. Republicans were the beneficiaries of a decades-long party realignment in the South after the civil rights movement. Favorable redistricting after the 1990 Census further strengthened the GOP's fortunes in what once had been a regional stronghold for Democrats. From this new electoral landscape emerged an opposition leader determined to rally House Republicans and bring them back into power after decades in the minority.

Two months before C-SPAN broadcast the first regular feed from the House Floor, a 35-year-old history professor from Georgia named Newt Gingrich took the oath of office at the start of the 96th Congress (1979–1981) to begin his first term on Capitol Hill. Gingrich was born in southern Pennsylvania in 1943. He spent part of his childhood moving around the country—as well as overseas—depending on where his father was stationed with the military. Eventually, his family settled in Georgia. Gingrich took an early interest in the workings of America's government. He loved animals, and at only 11 years old he lobbied the city council in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to build a zoo. As a teenager in 1960, he campaigned for Republican Richard Nixon in Georgia. Nixon lost his run for the presidency that year to John F. Kennedy, but Gingrich remained active in politics in college at Atlanta's Emory University. He later completed a doctorate in history at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he wrote his dissertation about Belgian colonial policy in the Congo.[190]

As a young history professor at a small college in rural west Georgia, Gingrich turned his ambitions from academia to electoral politics and first ran for the House in 1974. Gingrich made good government a central part of his campaign and accused the incumbent Democrat John James Flynt Jr. of being corrupt. Gingrich lost to Flynt in 1974 and again in 1976.[191]

Gingrich finally won a seat in the House in 1978. Flynt had decided to retire, and during the campaign for the open seat, Gingrich criticized both Republican and Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill. He called Speaker O'Neill a "dictator" and championed issues like lower taxes and reduced spending.[192]

For Gingrich, politics was winner-take-all, and the prize was the power to determine policy. He arrived in Washington in 1979 hoping to roll back the social safety net Democrats had created during the New Deal and later augmented in the 1960s. In its place he envisioned what he eventually called a "conservative opportunity society." If O'Neill had operated under the assumption that every political debate was essentially local in scope, Gingrich sought to take his vision national. In the House, Gingrich coordinated ideas and tactics with likeminded Republicans. They challenged the assumptions at the foundation of the Democratic majority's legislative agenda and criticized Members of their own party who they said were too willing to compromise. But more than that, Gingrich and the others offered voters a vision that sharply contrasted with Democrats' policy agenda. "Newt Gingrich understood and argued that the Republican Party could not simply be against. They had to replace what existed with something new," remembered Representative John Vincent "Vin" Weber of Minnesota, a close ally of Gingrich's. "His argument was that we need to talk about replacing the Liberal Welfare State [*sic*] with something." The recently installed television feed from the House Chamber meant their speeches, often delivered at the end of the legislative day, reached audiences well beyond their individual districts. "Republicans had, over the years, gotten used to just accepting the crumbs that Democratic leadership left for us from their cake," observed future Speaker John A. Boehner of Ohio, who had been elected to Congress in 1990. "They seemed to have accepted as fact the idea that they were always going to be in the minority." But the new generation of GOP lawmakers, including Gingrich, Weber, Boehner, and many others, believed differently.[193]

Gingrich gained further influence by challenging Tip O'Neill's successor in the Speaker's chair, a decorated World War II veteran from Texas named Jim Wright. Unlike O'Neill, Wright did not shy away from the full weight of the Speakership. "If Wright consolidates his power, he will be a very, very formidable man," Gingrich worried, promising "to take him on early to prevent that." Gingrich accused Wright of trampling over the Republican minority in the House. He also went a step further and accused the Speaker of ethics violations stemming from a book deal. As Gingrich, who became Republican Whip in March 1989, pushed the claim against Wright, the House Ethics Committee eventually investigated and charged Wright with having broken House Rules. Wright resigned from Congress in June 1989.[194]

After Wright, Democrats elected Thomas S. Foley of Washington as Speaker. The former chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Foley believed the Speakership served the House as an institution as much as the majority party. Foley, who first entered the House in 1965, regularly sought compromise and bipartisanship. During his time in the chair, the House passed the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act, and the North American Free Trade Agreement. In 1994, after two and a half terms with the gavel, Foley became the first incumbent Speaker to lose re-election since 1862, when he was defeated amid widespread Republican victories in the midterms that year. In the months before the

election, Gingrich had compiled a series of policy promises that included internal House reforms, a balanced budget, tax credits, and new defense spending as part of what he called the "Contract with America." The Contract neatly articulated the GOP's agenda and "gave all of us Republicans something to organize ourselves around," Boehner remembered. With the retirement of longtime Republican Leader Robert Henry Michel of Illinois, and for his work leading the GOP back to the majority, Republicans elected Gingrich Speaker for the 104th Congress (1995–1997).[195]

In the new Congress, Republicans built on the powers that had been conferred to the Speakership over the previous 20 years. Gingrich took a more active role making committee assignments, often bypassing more senior lawmakers for Members who would more aggressively push to roll back the federal commitments made in the New Deal and Great Society. The Republican Conference instituted term limits for committee and subcommittee chairs, shrank the number of committee staff, and consolidated policy-writing powers in Gingrich's leadership team. While the new Speaker assumed more control over which bills were referred to which committee, Gingrich also often appointed task forces to develop legislation outside the traditional markup process in committee. Like O'Neill before him, Gingrich developed a prominent national profile that helped him rival the platform held by the White House. But if O'Neill had a cordial if occasionally adversarial relationship with Reagan, Gingrich had a much less amiable and often combative relationship with President William J. Clinton.[196]

In early 1997, the House reprimanded and fined Gingrich for violating its ethics rules regarding a source of outside income. Late the following year, in Gingrich's final months as Speaker, the House impeached President Clinton. When Democrats gained seats in the House during the 1998 election cycle, Gingrich, facing an imminent challenge to his leadership, announced his retirement.[197]

Under Speaker Gingrich, the Republican Party instituted House reforms as part of an agenda called the "Contract with America." Gingrich's supporters issued this button with the slogan "Under Newt Management" stamped over the Capitol dome.

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The Twenty-first Century

The Speakership has continued to evolve in the twenty-first century. As the needs of the nation have changed, so too has the Speakership.

Demographically, the Speakership remained the same over the first two centuries of American history. The first 51 Speakers of the House were all White men. But that changed in 2007, with the election of Nancy Pelosi as Speaker for the 110th Congress (2007–2009). In addition to being the first woman elected Speaker, Pelosi was also the first lawmaker from California and only the second Representative from the West Coast to hold the gavel.

After winning a special election in June 1987 to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Representative Sala Galante Burton of San Francisco, California, Pelosi spearheaded environmental and health care reform efforts in the House, quickly winning a seat on the Appropriations Committee. In 2001, she

became the first woman to serve as Democratic Whip, and in November 2002, she became the first woman to serve as Democratic Leader. When Democrats captured the House majority during the 2006 midterm elections, Pelosi won election as Speaker in January 2007. After her first two terms as Speaker, Pelosi returned to the chair in 2019 and was re-elected Speaker in 2021. The eight years between her first tenure as Speaker—which ended in 2011—and her second—which began in 2019—is without precedent in Congress. Pelosi's 10 terms as either Speaker or Democratic Leader make her one of the longest-serving party leaders in House history. Among Democrats, she is surpassed by only Sam Rayburn—and even then, just barely. Unlike Rayburn, Pelosi has never served as Majority Leader; she has served as either Speaker, when her party held the majority, or as Democratic Leader, when her party was in the minority. The longest-serving Republican Leader in the House was Joe Martin, who led the GOP Conference from 1939 until 1959, serving as Speaker for two nonconsecutive terms during that period.[198]

In 2011, John Boehner became Speaker after Republicans captured the majority during the 2010 midterm elections. He was the first Ohioan elected Speaker since Nick Longworth during the 1920s. Boehner served in the chair for two and a half terms before he retired in October 2015 after 24 years in the House. "There wasn't a day that went by when I was in Congress that I didn't feel … lucky—the son of a bartender who made good, or at least tried to," he reflected during his retirement. "And I'm going to guess the vast majority of the men and women I served with, Republican and Democrat, feel the same way about themselves." Boehner's successor in the Speakership, Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin, made history in his own right. When Ryan assumed the gavel in 2015, he became the first former House staffer to win election as Speaker. He was also the first former chairman of the Ways and Means Committee to serve as Speaker since the early 1840s.[199]

At the opening of the 110th Congress (2007–2009) in January 2007, California's Nancy Pelosi made history by being elected the first woman Speaker.

Image courtesy of the U.S. House of Representatives Photography Office

In 2023, the 118th Congress (2023–2025) opened with the first multi-ballot Speaker election in a century. After 15 votes over five days, lawmakers elected longtime Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy of California to the House's top office. McCarthy, who had once worked as an aide to the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, held the gavel for 10 months until a combination of Democrats and a handful of Republicans approved a measure offered by a Republican lawmaker to remove McCarthy from the Speakership and declare the chair vacant. Two weeks later, Mike Johnson of Louisiana was elected the 56th Speaker of the House after balloting that lasted nine days and required four rounds of

voting. Johnson's election meant that for the first time since the modern party leader system emerged in the House nearly 125 years earlier, the chamber had a Speaker and Majority Leader—Steve Scalise of Louisiana—from the same state.

An Evolving Institution

Since 1789, more than 11,000 people—men and women from all walks of life, Republicans, Democrats, and many others, from nearly all corners of the country—have been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. But only a fraction have ever served as Speaker—each of whom, in his or her own way, occupies what Champ Clark once called a "large space" in the annals of America's past.

But the history of the Speakership encompasses more than just the individual lawmakers who have occupied the chair. Ultimately, the history of the Speakership is kaleidoscopic, the product of an ever-changing collection of influences. Since its inception, the Speakership has been the sum of many parts: the experiences and ambitions of the individual in the chair, the agenda of the majority, as well as the needs of the House and the country it serves. It may be the case that, as Nick Longworth once observed, the Speakership was whatever each individual Speaker made of it. But it was also the case that the Speakership—a vital part of America's democratic order—has been whatever the House and its constituents have allowed it to be.

The Speakership has evolved significantly since Frederick Muhlenberg took the oath of office as the House's first presiding officer in April 1789. It is an evolution made possible by the Constitution, which says only that the House shall choose its Speaker. Each subsequent generation has decided what to make of the Speakership. Whatever the future holds, the Office of the Speaker can find inspiration and guidance in its complex and rich backstory. "The House of Representatives will continue its march into history," Carl Albert once observed, "led by the speakership."[200]

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SPEAKERS OF THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 1789 TO 2024

Speaker	Date Elected	Congress (Years)	State
1. Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg	April 1, 1789 December 2, 1793	1st (1789–1791) 3rd (1793–1795)	Pennsylvania
2. Jonathan Trumbull	October 24, 1791	2nd (1791–1793)	Connecticut
3. Jonathan Dayton	December 7, 1795 May 15, 1797	4th (1795–1797) 5th (1797–1799)	New Jersey
4. Theodore Sedgwick	December 2, 1799	6th (1799–1801)	Massachusetts
5. Nathaniel Macon	December 7, 1801 October 17, 1803 December 2, 1805	7th (1801–1803) 8th (1803–1805) 9th (1805–1807)	North Carolina
6. Joseph B. Varnum	October 26, 1807 May 22, 1809	10th (1807–1809) 11th (1809–1811)	Massachusetts
7. Henry Clay	November 4, 1811 May 24, 1813[1] December 4, 1815 December 1, 1817 December 6, 1819[2] December 1, 1823	12th (1811–1813) 13th (1813–1815) 14th (1815–1817) 15th (1817–1819) 16th (1819–1821) 18th (1823–1825)	Kentucky
8. Langdon Cheves	January 19, 1814[3]	13th (1813–1815)	South Carolina
9. John W. Taylor	November 15, 1820[4] December 5, 1825	16th (1819–1821) 19th (1825–1827)	New York
10. Philip P. Barbour	December 4, 1821	17th (1821–1823)	Virginia
11. Andrew Stevenson	December 3, 1827 December 7, 1829 December 5, 1831 December 2, 1833[5]	20th (1827–1829) 21st (1829–1831) 22nd (1831–1833) 23rd (1833–1835)	Virginia
12. John Bell	June 2, 1834[6]	23rd (1833–1835)	Tennessee
13. James K. Polk	December 7, 1835 September 4, 1837	24th (1835–1837) 25th (1837–1839)	Tennessee
14. Robert M.T. Hunter	December 16, 1839	26th (1839–1841)	Virginia
15. John White	May 31, 1841	27th (1841–1843)	Kentucky
16. John W. Jones	December 4, 1843	28th (1843–1845)	Virginia
17. John W. Davis	December 1, 1845	29th (1845–1847)	Indiana
18. Robert C. Winthrop	December 6, 1847	30th (1847–1849)	Massachusetts
19. Howell Cobb	December 22, 1849	31st (1849–1851)	Georgia
20. Linn Boyd	December 1, 1851 December 5, 1853	32nd (1851–1853) 33rd (1853–1855)	Kentucky
21. Nathaniel P. Banks	February 2, 1856	34th (1855–1857)	Massachusetts
22. James L. Orr	December 7, 1857	35th (1857–1859)	South Carolina
23. William Pennington	February 1, 1860	36th (1859–1861)	New Jersey

Speaker	Date Elected	Congress (Years)	State
24. Galusha Grow	July 4, 1861	37th (1861–1863)	Pennsylvania
25. Schuyler Colfax	December 7, 1863 December 4, 1865 March 4, 1867[7]	38th (1863–1865) 39th (1865–1867) 40th (1867–1869)	Indiana
26. Theodore M. Pomeroy	March 3, 1869[8]	40th (1867–1869)	New York
27. James G. Blaine	March 4, 1869 March 4, 1871 December 1, 1873	41st (1869–1871) 42nd (1871–1873) 43rd (1873–1875)	Maine
28. Michael C. Kerr	December 6, 1875[9]	44th (1875–1877)	Indiana
29. Samuel J. Randall	December 4, 1876[10] October 15, 1877 March 18, 1879	44th (1875–1877) 45th (1877–1879) 46th (1879–1881)	Pennsylvania
30. J. Warren Keifer	December 5, 1881	47th (1881–1883)	Ohio
31. John G. Carlisle	December 3, 1883 December 7, 1885 December 5, 1887	48th (1883–1885) 49th (1885–1887) 50th (1887–1889)	Kentucky
32. Thomas Brackett Reed	December 2, 1889 December 2, 1895 March 15, 1897	51st (1889–1891) 54th (1895–1897) 55th (1897–1899)	Maine
33. Charles F. Crisp	December 8, 1891 August 7, 1893	52nd (1891–1893) 53rd (1893–1895)	Georgia
34. David B. Henderson	December 4, 1899 December 2, 1901	56th (1899–1901) 57th (1901–1903)	Iowa
35. Joseph G. Cannon	November 9, 1903 December 4, 1905 December 2, 1907 March 15, 1909	58th (1903–1905) 59th (1905–1907) 60th (1907–1909) 61st (1909–1911)	Illinois
36. Champ Clark	April 4, 1911 April 7, 1913 December 6, 1915 April 2, 1917	62nd (1911–1913) 63rd (1913–1915) 64th (1915–1917) 65th (1917–1919)	Missouri
37. Frederick H. Gillett	May 19, 1919 April 11, 1921 December 5, 1923	66th (1919–1921) 67th (1921–1923) 68th (1923–1925)	Massachusetts
38. Nicholas Longworth	December 7, 1925 December 5, 1927 April 15, 1929[11]	69th (1925–1927) 70th (1927–1929) 71st (1929–1931)	Ohio
39. John N. Garner	December 7, 1931	72nd (1931–1933)	Texas
40. Henry T. Rainey	March 9, 1933[12]	73rd (1933–1935)	Illinois
41. Joseph W. Byrns	January 3, 1935[13]	74th (1935–1937)	Tennessee
42. William B. Bankhead	June 4, 1936[14] January 5, 1937 January 3, 1939[15]	74th (1935–1937) 75th (1937–1939) 76th (1939–1941)	Alabama
43. Sam Rayburn	September 16, 1940[16] January 3, 1941 January 6, 1943 January 3, 1945	76th (1939–1941) 77th (1941–1943) 78th (1943–1945) 79th (1945–1947)	Texas

Speaker	Date Elected	Congress (Years)	State
43. Sam Rayburn (cont.)	January 3, 1949	81st (1949–1951)	
	January 3, 1951	82nd (1951–1953)	
	January 5, 1955	84th (1955–1957)	
	January 3, 1957	85th (1957–1959)	
	January 7, 1959	86th (1959–1961)	
	January 3, 1961[17]	87th (1961–1963)	
44. Joseph W. Martin	January 3, 1947	80th (1947–1949)	Massachusetts
	January 3, 1953	83rd (1953–1955)	
45. John W. McCormack	January 10, 1962[18]	87th (1961–1963)	Massachusetts
	January 9, 1963	88th (1963–1965)	
	January 4, 1965	89th (1965–1967)	
	January 10, 1967	90th (1967–1969)	
	January 3, 1969	91st (1969–1971)	
46. Carl Albert	January 21, 1971	92nd (1971–1973)	Oklahoma
	January 3, 1973	93rd (1973–1975)	
	January 14, 1975	94th (1975–1977)	
47. Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr.	January 4, 1977	95th (1977–1979)	Massachusetts
	January 15, 1979	96th (1979–1981)	
	January 5, 1981	97th (1981–1983)	
	January 3, 1983	98th (1983–1985)	
	January 3, 1985	99th (1985–1987)	
48. Jim Wright	January 6, 1987	100th (1987–1989)	Texas
	January 3, 1989[19]	101st (1989–1991)	
49. Thomas S. Foley	June 6, 1989[20]	101st (1989–1991)	Washington
	January 3, 1991	102nd (1991–1993)	
	January 5, 1993	103rd (1993–1995)	
50. Newt Gingrich	January 4, 1995	104th (1995–1997)	Georgia
	January 7, 1997	105th (1997–1999)	
51. J. Dennis Hastert	January 6, 1999	106th (1999–2001)	Illinois
	January 3, 2001	107th (2001–2003)	
	January 7, 2003	108th (2003–2005)	
	January 4, 2005	109th (2005–2007)	
52. Nancy Pelosi	January 4, 2007	110th (2007–2009)	California
	January 6, 2009	111th (2009–2011)	
	January 3, 2019	116th (2019–2021)	
	January 3, 2021	117th (2021–2023)	
53. John A. Boehner	January 5, 2011	112th (2011–2013)	Ohio
	January 3, 2013	113th (2013–2015)	
	January 6, 2015[21]	114th (2015–2017)	
54. Paul D. Ryan	October 29, 2015[22]	114th (2015–2017)	Wisconsin
	January 3, 2017	115th (2017–2019)	
55. Kevin McCarthy	January 7, 2023[23]	118th (2023–2025)	California
56. Mike Johnson	October 25, 2023[24]	118th (2023–2025)	Louisiana

NOTES

1 Speaker Henry Clay resigned from the House of Representatives on January 19, 1814.

2 The first session of the 16th Congress (1819–1821) adjourned on May 15, 1820. Speaker Henry Clay resigned as Speaker of the House of Representatives on October 28, 1820. John W. Taylor filled the vacancy on November 15, 1820, two days after the start of the second session on November 13, 1820.

3 Langdon Cheves was elected Speaker on January 19, 1814, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Speaker Clay.

4 John W. Taylor was elected Speaker on the third day of the second session of the 16th Congress (1819–1821) on November 15, 1820, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Speaker Clay.

5 Speaker Andrew Stevenson resigned from the House of Representatives on June 2, 1834. John Bell filled the vacancy on June 2, 1834.

6 John Bell was elected Speaker on June 2, 1834, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Speaker Stevenson.

7 Speaker Schuyler Colfax was not a candidate for renomination to the House of Representatives in 1868, having become the Republican nominee for Vice President and was successfully elected to that office. He resigned from the House on March 3, 1869, the final day of the 40th Congress.

8 Theodore M. Pomeroy was elected Speaker on March 3, 1869, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Speaker Colfax and served one day.

9 The first session of the 44th Congress (1875–1877) adjourned on August 15, 1876. Speaker Michael C. Kerr died in office on August 19, 1876. Samuel J. Randall filled the vacancy on December 4, 1876, the first day of the second session.

10 Samuel J. Randall was elected Speaker on the first day of the second session of the 44th Congress (1875–1877) on December 4, 1876, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Speaker Kerr.

11 The 71st Congress (1931–1933) adjourned sine die on March 4, 1931. Speaker Nicholas Longworth died on April 9, 1931.

12 The 73rd Congress (1933–1935) adjourned sine die on June 18, 1934. Speaker Henry T. Rainey died on August 19, 1934.

13 Speaker Joseph W. Byrns died in office, June 4, 1936. William B. Bankhead filled the vacancy on June 4, 1936.

14 William B. Bankhead was elected Speaker on June 4, 1936, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Speaker Byrns.

15 Speaker William B. Bankhead died in office, September 15, 1940. Sam Rayburn filled the vacancy on September 16, 1940.

16 Sam Rayburn was elected Speaker on September 16, 1940, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Speaker Bankhead.

17 The first session of the 87th Congress (1961–1963) adjourned on September 27, 1961. Speaker Sam Rayburn died in office on November 16, 1961. John W. McCormack filled the vacancy on January 10, 1962, the first day of the second session.

18 John W. McCormack was elected Speaker on the first day of the second session of the 87th Congress (1961–1963) on January 10, 1962, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Speaker Rayburn.

19 Speaker Jim Wright resigned as Speaker of the House on June 6, 1989. Jim Wright then resigned from the House of Representatives on June 30, 1989.

20 Thomas S. Foley was elected Speaker on June 6, 1989, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Speaker Wright.

21 Speaker John A. Boehner resigned as Speaker of the House on October 29, 2015. John A. Boehner then resigned from the House of Representatives on October 31, 2015.

22 Paul D. Ryan was elected Speaker on October 29, 2015, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Speaker Boehner.

23 Kevin McCarthy was elected Speaker on calendar day January 7, 2023, and legislative day January 6, 2023. Pursuant to H. Res. 757, "Declaring the office of Speaker of the House of Representatives to be vacant," Speaker McCarthy was removed from the Speakership on October 3, 2023.

24 Mike Johnson was elected Speaker on October 25, 2023, to fill the vacancy caused by the removal of Speaker McCarthy from the Speakership pursuant to H. Res. 757.