

Main Idea

The House of Representatives, with its frequent elections and regular reapportionment, is the more representative chamber of Congress. Its members carry out much of their work in committees.

Reading Focus

1. What are the key features of the House of Representatives and its membership?
2. What are some of the challenges that reapportionment and redistricting raise?
3. How is the leadership of the House organized?
4. What is the role of committees in the operation of the House?

Key Terms

reapportionment
gerrymandering
Speaker of the House
bills
floor leader
whips
party caucus
standing committees
select committees
joint committees

Membership in the House (pp. 137–138)

The Framers wanted the House of Representatives to be the chamber most closely in touch with the people. They decided that House members would be chosen by direct popular vote. Some delegates to the Constitutional Convention worried that the voters would not elect qualified people, so they created the Senate, with members chosen by state legislatures.

Formal Qualifications The House of Representatives has less strict qualifications for membership than does the Senate. A member must be at least 25 years old, a U.S. citizen for at least seven years, and a resident of the state he or she represents.

The House can expel a member for any reason. Expulsion, however, requires a two-thirds majority vote.

Informal Qualifications Members must appeal to the voters in their district. The qualities valued by voters differ according to time and place. The ability to raise money—or have a lot of one’s own—is also important to candidates, because campaigning is costly.

Reading Check Identifying

Supporting Details What are the formal and informal qualifications for membership in the House?

Reapportionment and Redistricting (pp. 138–140)

There are 435 members of the House, each of whom represents around 690,000 Americans. Some House members represent considerably fewer or more than average. One reason is that each state must have at

least one representative regardless of its population. Wyoming, with a population of 500,000, has one representative. Montana, with a population of 900,000, also has one representative because it falls short of the number needed to have two representatives.

Changes in Population The Constitution requires that every 10 years, the House must undergo **reapportionment**, in which seats are redistributed among the states based on the results of the census. The number 435 has been fixed since 1929. Thus if a state gains or loses population, its number of representatives may change.

Gerrymandering Congress controls reapportionment, but states draw their own district boundaries. The party in power tends to draw boundaries to its own political advantage. Drawing district boundaries for political advantage is known as **gerrymandering**.

One Person, One Vote The Court has placed restrictions on gerrymandering over the last 50 years. *Wesberry v. Sanders* (1964) focused on a congressional district in Georgia that had several times as many people as other districts in the state. The Court ruled that districts must be of roughly equal population.

Race as a qualification for drawing district boundaries has also been considered by the Court. It has ruled against districts drawn to break up the minority vote as well as those drawn to benefit racial minorities. It has recently ruled that race can be a factor in the drawing of boundaries, but not the only factor.

In *Davis v. Bandemer* (1986) the Court ruled that political gerrymandering that actually harms a political party may violate the Constitution. Proving that harm has occurred is difficult, however.

Reading Check Identifying

Supporting Details By what process does reapportionment occur?

Leadership in the House (pp. 140–141)

The Constitution declares that the House shall choose its officers. These people lead the House in its activities.

The Speaker of the House The most powerful member and the presiding officer of the House is the **Speaker of the House**. The Speaker is elected by his or her fellow members and comes from the party that holds the most seats. House rules and tradition give the Speaker a great deal of power. The Speaker presides, or rules, over debates and recognizes speakers. He or she rules on points of order. The Speaker assigns **bills**, or proposed laws, to particular committees. The Speaker also determines what bills come up for debate and assigns House members to committees. Finally, the Speaker is second in line to the presidency after the vice president.

Other Leadership Posts Each party also elects a **floor leader** to help manage the actions and strategy of the party in the house. The floor leader of the majority party is known as the majority leader and assists the Speaker. The floor leader of the minority party is the minority leader and works as a party unifier. The two parties also elect **whips**. The job of the whip is to encourage fellow party members to vote as the party leadership wants. There are around 100 assistant whips reporting to the whip.

All of these positions are elected at a party caucus at the beginning of the congressional term. A **party caucus** is a meeting of all the House members from a particular political party.

House Rules The Constitution allows the House to make the rules necessary for

carrying out business or reprimanding, or correcting, its members. The House also has a separate Rules Committee that makes the rules for how, when, and under what conditions debate for a bill will take place.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea What are the leadership positions in the House?

The Role of Committees (pp. 141–142)

The House has a system of committees and subcommittees to provide expert analysis for the legislative process. Each committee and subcommittee concentrates on a specific area of public policy.

Standing Committees The House has 20 **standing committees**, or permanent committees. Standing committees address the major areas in which most proposed laws fall. The House Committee on Ways and Means deals with taxes and other revenue-raising measures. Standing committees typically have at least four subcommittees.

Other Committees The House sometimes creates **select committees** to carry out specific tasks not already covered by existing committees, such as

investigations. These committees are usually temporary. The House and Senate sometimes form **joint committees**. Such committees address broad issues that affect both chambers. Another type of committee formed by both chambers is the conference committee, which you will read about in Section 5.

Committee Chairs Each committee is headed by a chair. Chairs are chosen by the majority party. In the past, the person with the most years on the committee was chosen chair. Though this is still a factor in deciding who the committee chairs will be, today the chairs are elected. The House recently decided to limit chairs to six-year terms.

Committee Membership Members typically request which committee they would like to be placed on, based on political issues. Not all requests are granted. Final assignments are made by a vote of the party caucus or conference. In general, House members can serve on up to two standing committees and four subcommittees. Paid staff members typically do most of the information gathering and background work of committees.

Reading Check Summarizing What types of committees are found in the House?

SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT

1. **Describe** What are the formal qualifications for the House?
2. **Identify** What is **gerrymandering**?
3. **Describe** What is the role of the **Speaker of the House**?
4. **Recall** What is the term for the regular committees that exist to evaluate **bills**?