

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Question to consider: How does being a member of the House of Representatives differ from being a member of the Senate?

◆ ◆ QUALIFICATIONS FOR A HOUSE REP ◆ ◆

"No Person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the age of twenty five Years, and been seven Years a Citizen of the United States, and who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen."

— U.S. Constitution, Article I, section 2, clause 2

The Constitution placed notably few hurdles between ordinary citizens and becoming a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. The founders wanted the House to be the legislative chamber closest to the people—the least restrictive on age, citizenship, and the only federal office at the time subject to frequent popular election. *The Constitution requires that Members of the House be at least 25 years old, have been a U.S. citizen for at least seven years, and live in the state they represent (though not necessarily the same district).* And Article VI, clause 3 requires that all members take an oath to support the Constitution before they exercise the duties of their office. In *Federalist 52*, James Madison of Virginia wrote that, "Under these reasonable limitations, the door of this part of the federal government is open to merit of every description, whether native or adoptive, whether young or old, and without regard to poverty or wealth, or to any particular profession of religious faith."

Age

The founders initially set 21, the voting age, as the minimum age to serve in the House. During the Federal Constitutional Convention, though, George Mason of Virginia moved to make the age 25. Mason said that there should be a period between being free to manage one's own affairs and managing the "affairs of a great nation."

Citizenship

At the time the U.S. Constitution was written, the British prevented anyone born outside England or its Empire from serving in the Commons, even if the individual had subsequently become a citizen. By mandating that an individual be a citizen for at least seven years, the founders attempted to strike a balance between preventing foreign interference in domestic politics and keeping the House of Representatives close to the people. The founders also did not want to discourage immigration to the new country by shutting off the government to new arrivals.

Residency

The constitutional qualifications for office originate in British law. Members of the House of Commons had to live in the shires or boroughs they represented, although that was rarely done in practice. The founders used that example to motivate the requirement that members of the House live in the state they represent. This would increase the likelihood that they would be familiar with the people's interests there, but there was no mention during the debates about living in the same district. The district system emerged later as states dealt with how to fairly organize their congressional delegations.

◆ ◆ MEMBERSHIP OF THE HOUSE OF REPS ◆ ◆

Every other autumn, hundreds of men and women seek election to the House of Representatives. Most of them try to attract supporters and win votes with posters, yard signs, billboards, flyers, buttons, and other eye-catching campaign materials. Nearly all make their "pitches" with radio and television spots, newspaper ads, and Websites. As you read, you will discover the general shape of the office that all of those candidates so eagerly pursue.

Size of House

The exact size of the House of Representatives—today, 435 members—is not fixed by the Constitution. Rather, it is set by Congress. The Constitution provides that the total number of seats in the House of Representatives shall be apportioned among the States on the basis of their respective populations (Article I, Clause 3). Each State is guaranteed at least one seat no matter what its population. Today, seven States only have one representative apiece: Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming.

◆ ◆ TERM OF OFFICE FOR HOUSE REPS ◆ ◆

Article I, Section 2, Clause 1 of the Constitution provides that "Representatives shall be . . . chosen every second Year"—that is, they are elected for two-year terms. This rather short term means that, for House members, the next election is always just around the corner. That fact tends to make them pay close attention to "the folks back home." The House of Representatives is meant to be "the people's house," or the part of government most responsive to public opinion. Each member of the House of Representatives is elected only by the constituents (people) in the district which they will represent.

There is no constitutional limit on the number of terms any member of Congress may serve. A considerable effort was made in the 1990s to persuade Congress to offer a constitutional amendment to limit congressional terms. Most versions of such an amendment would have put a three- or four-term limit on service in the House and a two-term limit for the Senate. John Dingel, Jr., a Democrat from Michigan, served in the House for a little over 59 years before retiring.

While many House elections are no longer as competitive as the Constitution's framers might have liked, they still occur every two years in all 435 congressional districts. House elections are held every two years on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years. Representatives are sworn in and begin their new term on January of odd-numbered years.

◆ ◆ HOUSE REPS LEADERSHIP ◆ ◆

Speaker of the House (Presiding Officer)

The Speaker of the House of Representatives is widely viewed as symbolizing the power and authority of the House. The Speaker's most prominent role is that of presiding officer of the House. In this capacity, the Speaker is empowered by House rules to administer proceedings on the House floor, including the power to recognize members on the floor to speak or make motions and the power to appoint members to conference committees. The Speaker's role as "elect of the elect" in the House also places him or her in a highly visible position with the public.

The Speaker is elected by the House on the first day of a new Congress. When the new Congress convenes, each party places the name of its candidate in nomination, and the majority party's candidate is typically elected on a party line vote.

House Majority Leader and House Minority Leader

The House majority leader, usually the second ranking member of the majority party, is the party leader on the floor. Often hand-picked by the Speaker, the majority leader helps plan the party's legislative program. Many Speakers came to their positions by serving as majority leader first.

The minority leader heads and organizes the minority party. Because the party has less voting power than the majority party has, this person's influence is usually limited. If the minority party succeeds in the next congressional election, the minority leader could well be the next Speaker.

◆ ◆ POWERS GRANTED ONLY TO THE HOUSE OF REPS ◆ ◆

Power to Introduce Tax (Revenue) Bills

All tax bills must originate in the House of Representatives. The main principle behind giving the House of Representatives the power to introduce revenue bills was that the chamber in which the states' constituencies are more directly represented should hold the "power of the purse."

Sole Power to Impeach

Impeachment, which is the authority to charge the President and other "civil officers" with wrongdoing, is given to the House. A simple majority vote can impeach an elected official. (The Senate has the sole power to conduct impeachment trials, essentially serving as jury and judge.)