



BASICSPLAINER: HOUSE RULES AND PROCEDURES

The House of Representatives has 435 members, each representing a geographic district of roughly equal population. In part as a result of its large size, it has established a tradition of **majoritarianism**, in which a majority of members (218) can generally control what takes place. This majoritarianism contrasts with the Senate, in which supermajorities may be required for various purposes.

Like other large organizations the House uses a system of division of labor. Each party elects leaders, with the majority party electing the **House Speaker**, the official at the pinnacle of House leadership. Twenty standing **committees** handle most of the duties of vetting proposed laws and of scrutinizing executive-branch agencies.¹ Most members of the House serve on two or three of these committees.² All committees except the Ethics Committee have a majority of members from the party that holds the overall House majority, and party leaders (The Speaker, Majority Leader, and Minority Leader) play a major role in assigning members to committees.

When a Representative introduces a bill on the floor of the House, the Speaker refers the bill to the appropriate committee based on rules of **jurisdiction**, which define the subject matter of concern to each committee. The committee then may or may not consider the bill – in most cases bills “die” in committee, or in a **subcommittee**, to which a bill may be further delegated.

If the relevant committee chooses to act on a bill, a favorable recommendation will make the bill eligible for floor action. For uncontroversial

measures, the leadership will schedule a floor debate based on a simple standard set of rules. More controversial bills get a hearing from the **Rules Committee**, which crafts a specific tailor-made rule for consideration of the proposed law.

A rule may be **open**, allowing for broad discussion and amendments, or it may be **closed**, allowing for few or no amendments. Many variations on these two extremes are also possible. When the appointed time for floor debate arrives, the House votes first on the proposed rule; if it is approved, debate on the bill may then commence. Majority and minority party **floor managers** guide the debate, ceding time to others for statements and proposed amendments, if allowed.

Floor debates are constrained by time, by narrow rules, and by the standing House rule that any proposed amendments be **germane**, that is, strongly associated with the core subject matter of a bill. The House leadership usually keeps a tight rein on the scheduling of debates and on the drafting of the rules that govern them. If the Speaker does not wish to schedule a debate on a bill, in most cases the bill is dead.

An exception to this broad leadership power is the **discharge petition**. If 218 members of the House (a majority) sign a document demanding that a bill be considered on the floor, the Speaker is compelled to allow a debate on the bill. Such petitions are rarely successful, although there are a handful of attempts at them each year.³

¹ For a list, see <https://www.house.gov/committees>. For an account of how and why the power of leaders and committee chairs has varied, see John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde, “Lending and Reclaiming Power: Majority Leadership in the House Since the 1950s,” in *Congress Reconsidered*, 11th Edition, Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce Oppenheimer, eds. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017), pp. 29-59.

² Exceptions include the Speaker, the House Majority Leader, and the House Minority leader, who serve on no

committees; and most members of the Appropriations and Ways and Means Committees, who serve on only one committee. A member may be stripped of committee memberships when he or she has offended the House or his or her party in some way.

³ See the Clerk of the House website at <https://clerkpreview.house.gov/DischargePetition> for a list of current petitions.