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The Role of the House Majority Leader: An Overview

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SUMMARY

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The Role of the House Majority Leader: An Overview

The majority leader in the contemporary House is second-in-command behind the Speaker of the House. Typically, the majority leader functions as the Speaker's chief lieutenant or "field commander" for day-to-day management of the floor. Although the majority leader's duties are not especially well-defined, they have evolved to include two fundamental and often interlocking responsibilities that orient the majority leader's work: to the institution of the House, and to the majority party conference.

From an institutional perspective, the majority leader has a number of duties. Scheduling floor business is a prime responsibility of the majority leader. Although scheduling the House's business is a collective activity of the majority party, the majority leader has a large say in shaping the chamber's overall agenda and in determining when, whether, how, or in what order legislation is taken up. In addition, the majority leader is active in constructing winning coalitions for the party's legislative priorities; acting as a public spokesperson—defending and explaining the party's program and agenda; serving as an emissary to the White House, especially when the President is of the same party; and facilitating the orderly conduct of House business.

From a party perspective, three key activities undergird the majority leader's principal goal of maintaining the party's majority status in the House. First, the majority leader assists in the reelection campaigns of party incumbents by raising and donating campaign funds and traveling to scores of House districts to campaign with incumbents or challengers of the party. Second, the majority leader promotes the party's agenda by developing themes and issues important to core supporters and the general public. Third, the majority leader encourages party cohesion by working to minimize internal factional disagreements that may undermine the majority party's ability to govern the House.

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Introduction

The majority leader in the contemporary House is second-in-command behind the Speaker of the House.[1] Typically, the majority leader functions as the Speaker's chief lieutenant or "field commander" for day-to-day management of the floor. "I'm the Speaker's agent," stated one majority leader.[2] Another majority leader said: "I see it that [the Speaker] is the chairman of the board and I am the chief executive officer."[3] Or as one Speaker put it, the majority leader's "job is to run the floor and keep monitoring committees and legislation."[4]

Elected every two years by secret ballot of the party caucus or conference, the majority leader is usually an experienced legislator. For example, Representative Richard Armey of Texas became the GOP's first majority leader in 40 years when Republicans won control of the 104th House in the November 1994 elections. Armey began his House service in 1985, became GOP Conference chair during the 103rd Congress (1993-1994), and was one of the principal authors of the "Contract with America" the Republican Party and its congressional candidates presented to voters ahead of the 1994 elections. When Richard Gephardt, Democrat of Missouri, became majority leader in June 1989, he had been in the House for more than a decade, had served four years as chair of the Democratic Caucus, and was a contender for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination. Prior to his selection, John Boehner, Republican of Ohio, chaired the Education and the Workforce Committee (now Education and Labor) and piloted major education legislation ("No Child Left Behind") through the House. Representatives Eric Cantor, Republican of Virginia, and Kevin McCarthy, Republican of California, were elected majority leader during their sixth and fourth terms in office, respectively, and McCarthy previously had served as Republican leader in the California state assembly. Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, Democrat of Maryland, entered the House in 1981 and served six years as Democratic Caucus chair and then four years as Democratic whip before becoming majority leader.

Two fundamental and often interlocking responsibilities orient the work of the majority leader: to the institution of the House, and to the majority party caucus or conference. From an institutional perspective, the majority leader is principally responsible for exercising overall supervision of the order of business on the floor, especially as it affects the party's program. As former House parliamentarian Lewis Deschler (1928-1974) wrote:

> A party's floor leader, in conjunction with other party leaders, plays an influential role in the formulation of party policy and programs. He is instrumental in guiding legislation favored by his party through the House, or in resisting those programs of the other party that are considered undesirable by his own party. He is instrumental in devising and implementing his party's strategy on the floor with respect to promoting or opposing legislation. He is kept constantly informed as to the status of legislative business and as to the sentiment of his party respecting particular legislation under consideration. Such information is derived in part from the floor leader's contacts with his party's members serving on House committees, and with the members of the party's whip organization.[5]

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[1] On the roles and responsibilities of the Speaker, see CRS Report 97-780, *The Speaker of the House: House Officer, Party Leader, and Representative*, by Valerie Heitshusen. The position of House minority leader is the subject of CRS Report RL30666, *The Role of the House Minority Leader: An Overview*, by Mark J. Oleszek.

[2] Mark Wegner, "The Speaker's Agent," National Journal's *CongressDailyAM*, May 14, 2002, p. 16.

[3] Jonathan Kaplan, "Hastert, DeLay: Political Pros Get Along To Go Along," *The Hill*, July 22, 2003, p. 8.

[4] Alan Ota, "Setbacks Test Hastert's Leadership Style," *CQ Today*, May 4, 2005, p. 24.

[5] Lewis Deschler, *Deschler's Precedents of the United States House of Representatives*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977), pp. 211-212.

From a party perspective, the majority leader's paramount assignment is to employ his or her talents, energy, and knowledge of procedural rules and political circumstances to ensure that the party maintains majority control of the House. Each of these major responsibilities gives rise to a wide range of leadership activities. Before discussing the primary duties of the majority leader, it is worth highlighting the historical origins of the majority leader position.

Origin of the Majority Leader Position

Congressional scholars assert that in 1899 Speaker David Henderson, Republican of Iowa, appointed Sereno E. Payne, Republican of New York, as the first officially designated majority leader.[6] Prior to this date, there is neither an accurate nor complete compilation of House majority leaders. Two factors seem to account for the absence of a compilation. First, it took many decades before anything like our modern party structure emerged in the House. As a result, not until nearly the end of the 19th century did the position of "majority leader" become a recognized party office. Second, neither official congressional sources nor party records of this early period identify a lawmaker as *the* majority floor leader.

Several historians of the House suggest that from the chamber's early beginnings various lawmakers informally assumed the role of "floor leader." Usually, but not always, these informal party leaders were the chairs of either the Committee on Ways and Means (established in 1795) or the Committee on Appropriations (following its creation in 1865). Speakers often appointed either their allies or their principal rivals for the speakership to head these panels. As political scientist and Senate parliamentarian (1951-1975) Floyd M. Riddick explained:

> In the House, the early titular floor leaders were at the same time the chairmen of the Ways and Means Committee. Before the division of the work of that committee, the duties of its chairmen were so numerous that they automatically became the actual leaders, since as chairmen of that committee they had to direct the consideration of most of the legislation presented to the House. From 1865 until 1896 the burden of handling most of the legislation was shifted to the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, who then was designated most frequently as the leader. From 1896 until 1910 once again the chairmen of the Ways and Means Committee were usually sought as the floor leaders. During all of these years before the "Cannon revolution" of 1910, the Speaker, who appointed all members to committees, saw to it that his party opponent for Speakership, some Representative with a large following, or one of his faithful lieutenants was made the floor leader.[7]

Thus, these early titular floor leaders were appointed by the Speaker rather than chosen separately, as occurs today, by vote of the majority party caucus or conference.[8] A list of House majority leaders who have served since 1899 is appended in **Table 1**.

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[6] Randall B. Ripley, *Party Leaders in the House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1967), p. 24.

[7] Floyd M. Riddick, *The United States Congress: Organization and Procedure* (Manassas, Va.: National Capitol Publishers, Inc., 1949), p. 86. For further historical information about the floor leader, see DeAlva Stanwood Alexander, *History and Procedure of the House of Representatives* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916), Chapter VII; Garrison Nelson, "Leadership Position-Holding in the United States House of Representatives," *Capitol Studies*, Fall 1976, pp. 11-36; and the *Congressional Record - Appendix*, vol. 102, March 20, 1956, pp. A2489-A2494. The *Record* insertion is a report on the majority leadership prepared by historian George B. Galloway for House Majority Leader John McCormack, D-MA.

[8] Early House Members also recognized that certain lawmakers informally assumed floor leadership roles on behalf of presidents or executive officials. For instance, in 1789, Congress requested Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton to prepare a plan to deal with the public debt. Representatives Fisher Ames and Theodore Sedgwick of Massachusetts and

When the House "revolted" in 1910 against the leadership of Speaker Joseph Cannon, Republican of Illinois, the power to designate the floor leader was taken away from the Speaker. In 1911, with Democrats in charge of the House, Oscar Underwood of Alabama became the first majority leader elected by the party caucus. (Subsequently, all Democratic floor leaders have been selected in this manner.) Underwood also chaired the Ways and Means Committee, which functioned as the party's committee assignment panel during this period. The political reality was that Majority Leader Underwood's influence in the House exceeded that of the Speaker, Champ Clark of Missouri. As one scholar wrote, "For the first time the leader of the House was not at the rostrum, but was on the floor."[9] Probably no majority leader has ever matched Underwood's party power and institutional influence. (Underwood was elected to the Senate in 1915 and served as majority leader of that chamber as well.)

When Republicans reclaimed majority control of the House in 1919, Franklin Mondell of Wyoming, a high-ranking member of the Appropriations Committee, became majority leader upon nomination by the GOP committee assignment panel. (Four years later the GOP Conference began the practice of electing its majority leader.)[10] Mondell set the contemporary practice of majority leaders usually relinquishing their committee positions, and always any committee chairmanships, upon assuming this important and busy post. To be sure, there have been exceptions to the practice of majority leaders not serving on standing committees.[11]

The start of the 71st Congress, April 15, 1929, witnessed a first-ever event that remains the practice to this day: the official announcement in the House of the selection of the majority leader. Representative Willis Hawley of Oregon, the chair of the majority Republican caucus, addressed the presiding officer: "Mr. Speaker, the Republican caucus of the House has reelected Hon. John Q. Tilson, of Connecticut, majority leader for the Seventy-first Congress." As House precedents state, "this was the first occasion of the official announcement of the selection of party leaders in the House."[12]

Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut "served as Hamilton's lieutenants on the chamber floor, exercising some control over what proposals were made and how they were voted on by coordinating Hamilton's supporters in the House." John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Party Politics in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 79. President Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) also relied on trusted House Members to function as de facto floor leaders to shepherd his program through the House.

[9] George Rothwell Brown, *The Leadership of Congress* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1922), p. 176. Also see James S. Fleming, "Oscar W. Underwood: The First Modern House Leader, 1911-1915," in Roger H. Davidson et al., eds., *Masters of the House: Congressional Leadership Over Two Centuries* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 91-118.

[10] Ripley, *Party Leaders in the House of Representatives*, p. 25.

[11] For example, starting in the 1970s, Democratic majority leaders held leadership-designated positions on the Budget Committee and served ex officio on the Permanent Select Intelligence Committee. Since Republicans took control of the House in the mid-1990s, the majority leader has held no standing committee positions. However, in 2002, Majority Leader Richard Armey (R-TX), chaired a Select Committee on Homeland Security. This panel assembled the recommendations of several standing committees to craft legislation (H.R. 5005) authorizing the creation of a Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security. As an historical point of interest, it is worth noting that Underwood's successor as majority leader was North Carolinian Claude Kitchin (1915-1919), who also served as chair of the Ways and Means Committee. However, Kitchin disapproved of President Wilson's war policies and his floor and committee roles proved to be "cumbersome and impractical," as one scholar wrote. "A separation of the two roles was effected after the Democrats became the minority in 1919. Ever since then, the majority leader's job has existed as a full-time position." See Nelson W. Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review*, September 1968, pp. 157-158.

[12] Clarence Cannon, *Cannon's Precedents of the House of Representatives of the United States, Vol. VIII* (Washington: GPO, 1935), p. 957.

Separate election of the majority leader by the party caucus elevated the status and influence of the position and its occupants. The majority leader soon became the "heir apparent" to the speakership. In the modern House, no Democrat has been elected Speaker without having previously served as the party's majority or minority leader. The leadership succession ladder for Republicans is not as well-defined, but no Republican has become Speaker without previous experience in positions of party or committee leadership.[13]

Unfortunately, there is scant scholarly commentary about the duties and functions that devolved upon the informal floor leaders of the pre-20th century period. Nor are the duties and functions of today's majority leaders spelled out in any detail in the House rulebook or in party rules, although those sources make brief reference to the position. As a recent majority leader stated, "[E]ach leadership position is defined by the person who holds it. It's not defined by a job description."[14] In short, factors such as tradition, custom, context, and personality have largely defined the fundamental institutional and party responsibilities of the majority leader. Several of the most important of these two overlapping categories merit mention. However, it bears repeating that the scope of the majority leader's role in carrying out these assignments is shaped significantly by the Speaker and the sentiments of the majority party conference.

Institutional

The style and role of any majority leader is influenced by numerous elements, including personality and contextual factors, such as the relationship the majority leader has with the Speaker, the size and cohesion of the majority party, whether or not the party controls the White House, the general political environment in the House, and the degree of conflict over the party's policy priorities. Despite the variability of these factors, Members of both parties expect the majority leader to fulfill a number of institutional roles and responsibilities. To manage this workload, the majority leader is provided extra staff resources beyond those accorded to other House Members.[15]

Scheduling Floor Business

Although scheduling is a collective activity of the majority party, the majority leader has a large say in shaping the chamber's overall agenda and in determining whether, when, how, and in what order legislation is taken up. Everything from setting policy priorities; to consulting with Members, committee chairs, and the minority party on timing and other matters; to arranging the schedule; and announcing the schedule on the floor are within the purview of the majority leader. Scheduling is a complex process and the majority leader must juggle a wide range of considerations and pressures. Five concerns illustrate the scheduling role of the majority leader.

First, the majority leader commonly lays out the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual agenda of the House. For example, when the majority leader released the planned schedule for the 2022 legislative session, it indicated: "The House will convene for its Second Session on January 10. It

[13] For instance, in the 106th Congress (1999-2000), Republicans chose their chief deputy whip, J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois, as Speaker. Following the resignation of Speaker John Boehner, R-OH, in the 115th Congress (2017-2018), the chair of the Ways and Means Committee, Paul Ryan, R-WI, was elected Speaker by the GOP conference.

[14] Ben Pershing, "DeLay Adjusting to His New Role," *Roll Call*, March 17, 2003, p. 3.

[15] The number of congressional aides employed by House leadership has grown steadily "from 62 in 1977 to 238 in 2021." For more on House staffing levels over time, see CRS Report R43947, *House of Representatives Staff Levels in Member, Committee, Leadership, and Other Offices, 1977-2021*, by R. Eric Petersen.

will meet for 112 days, including Committee Work Days.... The 2022 schedule seeks to ensure that Members can get their legislative work done in Washington and maximize their time home in their districts interacting directly with constituents."[16] Typically, on a Thursday afternoon when the House's business for the day and week is winding down, the majority leader will announce the projected agenda for each day of the next business week, identify when votes are expected to occur, and respond to inquiries from Members about the House's program of activities.[17] To be sure, scheduling and agenda-setting are responsibilities done in close consultation with the Speaker, majority whip, and others.

Second, a host of strategic considerations influence scheduling. For instance, with a view toward upcoming congressional campaigns and elections, the majority leader may schedule legislation that helps to more clearly convey the party's messages and goals to voters. Some bills may not receive floor time unless there is reasonable certainty that the Senate will also act, while the timing of others might be coordinated by the majority leader based on input from party counterparts in the Senate. The majority leader may schedule floor action at specific times—a constitutional amendment to ban flag desecration just before July 4, for example, or a tax reform bill ahead of the April 15 filing deadline—to maximize public attention on the issue. The majority leader may use "deadline lawmaking," indicating to Members that floor action on certain legislation must occur before the House will adjourn for a district work period. Some weeks might be planned around particular messages or themes the majority party wants to convey—for instance, to "rebuild the nation's infrastructure," "put families first," or "make work pay"—with votes scheduled on bills that address that goal.

Third, majority leaders try to balance the House's workload requirements with Members' family or personal obligations. "Family friendly" scheduling aims to achieve better balance in the public and private lives of lawmakers. "As we welcome a large class of new members, many with young families, next year's [2019] schedule is focused on balancing time in Washington with time for Members to conduct work in their districts and spend time with their families," stated Majority Leader Hoyer.[18]

Fourth, majority leaders advance or delay action on measures for a variety of reasons, including whether they have the votes to achieve their objectives, or to maintain an element of surprise. Questioned by a colleague on the floor about when a particular bill might be scheduled, Majority Leader Jim Wright, Democrat of Texas, replied:

> In scheduling the program for the Congress one must be constantly aware of the importance of maintaining a little suspense. I learned this from Agatha Christie. Always hold something back and keep people guessing a little bit. And that is what we are doing with this bill, quite frankly. We are maintaining a little suspense in the schedule.[19]

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[16] Office of the Majority Leader, "Majority Leader Hoyer Releases 2022 House Floor Schedule," press release, November 30, 2021, at https://www.majorityleader.gov/content/majority-leader-hoyer-releases-2022-house-floor-schedule.

[17] For an example scheduling announcement by the majority leader, see *Congressional Record*, vol. 168 (January 13, 2022), p. H175. Floor statements on the schedule by the majority leader to the membership are routinely delivered by unanimous consent as "one-minute" speeches. By tradition, the presiding officer does not count time during "one-minutes" delivered by the Speaker, majority leader, or minority leader.

[18] Katherine Tully-McManus, "House Democrats Release 2019 Legislative Schedule," *Roll Call*, November 29, 2018, online edition.

[19] *Congressional Record*, vol. 126 (July 2, 1980), p. H6106.

Fifth, majority leaders recognize that timing considerations suffuse the lawmaking process. Majority Leader Hoyer put it this way:

> We have the regular legislation that needs to be passed. We need to pass appropriation bills to fund the government. We need to pass a national defense authorization act to ensure the security of our nation. We want to deal with a comprehensive immigration program. Obviously, our immigration system is not working. Everyone agrees on that.[20]

In every congressional session there are funding bills to enact, timetables to meet, pressures associated with the end-of-session rush to adjourn, the electoral needs of individual Members, and a multitude of other considerations that the majority leader must address to accommodate the rank-and-file, committee chairs, the minority party, the President, and colleagues in the extended party leadership. As one majority leader explained: "You have to find that elusive grail of harmony among this most heterogeneous mix of opinionated individualists."[21]

Manage Floor Decisionmaking

Majority leaders are active in constructing winning coalitions for their legislative priorities. To this end, a majority leader will consult with the chair of the Rules Committee to discuss procedures for considering legislation on the floor. For example, an open, structured, or closed amendment process might be options for discussion. Or, the majority leader might decide to call up a bill under suspension of the rules procedure, which limits debate and bars any floor amendments. To limit policy riders on appropriations bills, the majority leader might invoke House Rule XXI, clause 2(d). This rule grants preference to the majority leader to end consideration of an appropriations bill in the Committee of the Whole by offering a successful "motion to rise."[22]

Majority leaders engage in many other activities to promote policy success on the floor. They may, for instance, meet weekly or biweekly (more frequently, if needed) with committee chairs, ad hoc groups, or individual lawmakers to persuade them to support priority measures; woo lawmakers through the provision of various legislative services or rewards; coordinate vote counts with the party whip organization; propose changes in bills to attract support from wavering

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[20] Karen Tumulty, "117th Congress: House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.)," *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2021, online edition.

[21] Julia Malone, "To Jim Wright, Being Majority Leader Is One Long Juggling Routine," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 19, 1983, p. 40.

[22] The Rules of the House make specific reference to the majority leader in several other instances. Rule II, clause 6, states that the House's inspector general "shall be appointed for a Congress by the Speaker, the Majority Leader, and the Minority Leader, acting jointly." Rule II, clause 8, states that the "Office of General Counsel shall function pursuant to the direction of the Speaker, who shall consult with a Bipartisan Legal Advisory Group" comprised of the Speaker and the majority and minority leaderships. Clause 9 of that rule affords the majority leader a consultative role in the Speaker's selection of the Director of the House Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Under Rule IX, clause 2, a question of privilege offered from the floor by the majority leader "shall have precedence of all other questions except motions to adjourn." Clause 2 of Rule X requires "Not later than April 15 in the first session of a Congress, after consultation with the Speaker, the Majority Leader, and the Minority Leader, the Committee on Oversight and Reform shall report to the House the oversight plans [of the standing committees] together with any recommendations that it, or the House leadership group described above, may make to ensure the most effective coordination of oversight plans." Rule XVI, clause 6, states that an amendment to the title of bill or resolution "shall be in order only if offered by the Majority Leader or a designee, and shall be decided without debate." Rule XX, clause 7, directs the Speaker to consult with the majority leader on a determination of a catastrophic quorum. By tradition, the majority leader also serves as a member of the House Office Building Commission and names three Members to serve as Private Calendar official objectors. In addition, the majority leader may, after consultation with the Speaker, convene an early organizational meeting of the caucus or conference during any even-numbered year.

Members; reach out to lawmakers on the other side of the aisle to draft compromise legislation; craft "leadership amendments" designed to attract majority support; synchronize strategic activities with majority floor managers; and rally outside support for the party's legislative priorities.

Majority leaders can assume other duties relevant to floor action. To forge winning coalitions, for instance, they engage in deal-making, appeal to Members' party loyalty, enlist allies to overcome resistance to policy objectives, devote considerable time and energy in promoting consensus among colleagues, and work behind-the-scenes to get things done. Majority leaders might also encourage party colleagues to deliver one-minute, morning hour, or special order speeches that spotlight the party's program and defend it against criticism from the other party.

Act as Public Spokesperson

There are two interconnected dimensions associated with the majority leader's role as public spokesperson: external and internal. Externally, majority leaders are national newsmakers, especially in today's "24/7" news cycle and social media environment. When he became majority leader in 1973, Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr., Democrat of Massachusetts, remarked that "the media couldn't stay away ... I was interviewed constantly."[23] Majority leaders are expected to explain and defend the actions and decisions of the House and their party to the general public. "The role of the majority leader puts you in a spokesman role," noted one majority leader.[24] Accordingly, these leaders appear on the major network and cable television programs, the Sunday morning news shows, talk radio, and in various online venues. Periodically, they deliver major addresses and write articles or "op-ed" pieces on the major issues before the House. They meet with journalists and newspaper editors. Regularly, they give news briefings (so-called pen and pad sessions) to reporters on the schedule and agenda of the House, the priorities of the majority party, legislative-executive relations, and sundry other topics.

Some majority leaders have developed applications for smartphones and tablets in an effort to connect with voters. For instance, when he was majority leader, Eric Cantor released an application called "Citizen Cosponsor" that allowed individuals to indicate their support for legislation by providing an electronic "cosponsorship" through the app.[25] Majority Leader Steny Hoyer provides a link on his website to the "Dome Watch" application, which was "designed to help House staff, the press, and the public better follow the latest developments from the House Floor."[26] As a communications aide to the majority leader explained, "New technologies make it possible to keep the public informed of what we're doing and receive instant feedback."[27]

Internally, majority leaders are ready on the floor to defend their party, program, or President from criticism by the opposition. They participate in legislative debate and may make the closing argument on a bill. Majority leaders rise to defend the prerogatives of individual Members; offer critiques and rebuttals to minority party initiatives; work with committee chairs and others to coordinate and integrate the party's communication strategy; and employ floor speeches "to set the tone on a newsworthy issue or provide the proscribed leadership perspective before a major

[23] Speaker Tip O'Neill, *Man of the House* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 226-227.

[24] Jim VanDeHei, "DeLay Nears Top of House He Reshaped," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2002, p. A4.

[25] "Hoyer-Cantor, Round XXIVX," *Roll Call*, March 22, 2012, p. 16.

[26] Available online at http://www.majorityleader.gov/ under the heading "digital resources."

[27] Emily Yehle, "Members Grapple With Media Trends," *Roll Call*, November 11, 2009, p. 3.

vote."[28] In brief, the majority leader generally functions as the party's chief spokesperson on the floor and in other forums as well.

Sometimes the internal and external roles coincide when majority leaders introduce legislation, monitor executive branch actions, or champion proposals nationally. For example, Majority Leader Armey and another GOP colleague traveled the country in a "Scrap the Code Tour," a "national campaign to take the tax reform debate directly to the American people."[29] To highlight his party's legislative efforts at job creation, Majority Leader Cantor introduced the "Jumpstart Our Business Startups" Act in 2012, which consisted of "a series of measures to boost capital formation for small businesses."[30]

Confer with the White House

Majority leaders regularly attend meetings at the White House—especially when the President is of the same party—to discuss issues before Congress, the President's agenda, and political events generally. For example, the joint bipartisan congressional leadership, including the House majority leader, may meet at the White House to discuss agenda priorities for the year. There are occasions, too, when the President will journey to Capitol Hill to meet with the top leaders of Congress. There are instances as well where majority leaders can be sharp critics of the President.

Majority leaders may also be active on international issues: brokering foreign policy compromises with the White House, championing the interests of certain nations, or criticizing some foreign governments. In general, anyone who occupies the House's number two leadership post has strengthened leverage with the White House and greater public prominence on international issues. "People are now listening to what I've been saying because I'm majority leader," declared a former holder of the post.[31]

Strategically, the role of the majority leader will depend on whether the President is of the same party. In general, majority leaders will strive to advance in Congress the goals and aspirations of a same-party President. If the President is of the opposite party, then the procedural and political situation is more complicated. When should the majority leader cooperate with the President? When should the Administration's policies be opposed? Should alternatives to the President's priorities be offered, and if so, when? In short, the majority leader, the Speaker, and their other party colleagues need to determine when to function as the "governing" party in the House and when to act as the "loyal opposition."

Facilitate the Conduct of Business

The majority leader is responsible (as are other top party leaders) for ensuring the orderly conduct of House business. To expedite the work of the House, a wide range of responsibilities are typically performed by the majority leader. For example, the majority leader may act as Speaker pro tempore and preside over the floor; offer resolutions affecting the operations of the House, such as establishing the hour of daily meeting of the House; perform various ceremonial duties; and support initiatives to revamp or reform the internal procedures and structures of the House.

[28] Susan Crabtree, "DeLay Will Deliver a 'Speech of the Week'," *Roll Call*, January 29, 2003, p. 13.

[29] Dick Armey and Billy Tauzin, "Should We Scrap the System," *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1997, p. A11.

[30] Jonathan Strong, "Time for Election Year Agendas," *Roll Call*, February 29, 2012, p. 12.

[31] Juliet Eilperin, "Mideast Rises on DeLay's Agenda," *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2003, p. A7.

The majority leader also has statutory authority to serve on or appoint individuals to certain boards or commissions established by Congress.[32]

Party

The majority leader, former Speaker "Tip" O'Neill once said, "helps set policy and carries out the duties assigned to him by the Speaker."[33] Perhaps the most important duty of the majority leader is to maintain party control of the House. After all, legislative organization is party organization. The majority party sets the agenda of the House and controls all committee and subcommittee chairmanships. Thus, along with other party leaders, the majority leader works to help elect and reelect the party's rank-and-file Members, forge unity on priority legislation, and promote a favorable public image of the House majority. These three activities illustrate the majority leader's core party responsibilities.

Assist Colleagues' Reelection Campaigns

Majority leaders are typically energetic campaigners on behalf of their party colleagues. They assist incumbents and challengers in raising campaign funds, and they travel to scores of House districts to campaign with party candidates. According to his aides, in the months leading up to the 2018 congressional elections which returned Democrats to the majority, Representative Hoyer:

> [V]isited 94 districts in 22 states this cycle, campaigning for at least 112 Democrats—37 incumbents and 75 candidates, including everyone on the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's "Red-to-Blue list"—and raising or contributing nearly $9 million for the effort to retake the House.[34]

Majority leaders often establish their own "leadership PACs" to raise and donate money to candidates of their party. They maintain lists of campaign donors who can be called upon to support the party in the most competitive elections; assist with advertising campaigns on television and online in the months ahead of an election; encourage outside groups and allies to raise money for the party; and coordinate their campaign activities with congressional, state, and national campaign organizations. Majority leaders assist in recruiting qualified challengers to take on incumbents. They also promote get-out-the-vote drives and devise strategies to energize their party's grassroots supporters. In short, majority leaders are heavily engaged in the electoral campaigns of many party candidates. Their ultimate goal: to retain their majority status and, if possible, to increase the number in their ranks.

Promote the Party's Agenda

Majority leaders undertake a variety of actions to advance the party's agenda. They develop legislative agendas and themes (e.g., an "innovation agenda") that address issues important to the country and to core supporters and swing voters in the electorate, and they communicate the party message across print and digital media, on the House floor, and in numerous other venues. A key

[32] For an accounting of the various advisory groups, boards, and commissions to which the majority leader makes appointments, see Table 3 ("Statutory Role of the House Majority Leader") of CRS Report RL33313, *Congressional Membership and Appointment Authority to Advisory Commissions, Boards, and Groups*, by Jacob R. Straus.

[33] Speaker Tip O'Neill, *Man of the House* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 218-219.

[34] Nolan D. McCaskill and John Bresnahan, "Hoyer Eyes Majority Leader Position in 2019," *Politico*, October 11, 2018, p. 1. At this time Rep. Hoyer was the minority whip; he was reelected majority leader at the outset of the 116th Congress (2019-2020), a position he held when Democrats were last in the majority (from 2008 to 2011).

aim of this form of "message sending" is to animate and activate their electoral base to turn out on election day. Another objective is to develop electorally attractive ideas and proposals that may enable their party to retain the House (and, if possible, gain seats in the Senate or even the presidency).

To this end the majority leader may help organize "town hall meetings" in Members' districts to publicize and promote the party's agenda or a specific priority, such as health care or tax cuts. He or she may sponsor party "retreats" to discuss issues and evaluate the party's public image. The majority leader may also distribute reports, memorandums, briefing books, and online materials that highlight partisan campaign issues; conduct surveys of party colleagues to discern their priorities; organize "issue teams" or "task forces" to formulate specific party programs; and form "message groups" or "theme teams" to map media strategies to foster favorable press coverage of party initiatives and negative views of the opposition party.

Sometimes the majority leader will attend Senate party luncheons (usually held on Tuesdays when the Senate is in session) or other gatherings on the other side of the Capitol to better coordinate interchamber action on the party's legislative and message agenda. "We're having more bicameral meetings," remarked a majority leader, "so that ... we understand what each other is doing ... and what can and can't be done."[35] Majority leaders are also named as conferees on major bills "to represent the overall interests of the [majority] leadership."[36] In brief, the majority leader is a key strategist in promoting the party's agenda, outlining ways to neutralize the opposition's arguments and proposals, and determining when to compromise with the other party on policy matters.

Encourage Party Cohesion

If a party is to maintain its majority, it is generally considered advantageous to minimize internal factional feuds or disagreements that may undermine its ability to govern the House. One majority leader explained this job as a "combination of evangelist, parish priest, and part-time prophet. You have to be a peacemaker in the family."[37] To forge party cohesion means, in part, that majority leaders will consult widely with the diverse factions within their party; they will argue the need for party loyalty on crucial procedural and substantive votes; they will try to persuade colleagues of a measure's policy and political benefits; and they will schedule breakfasts, lunches, or dinners to keep in touch with party members and to listen to their concerns. Aiding these efforts is the majority leader's membership on various party units, such as policy or steering committees.

Majority leaders may also enlist the support of outsiders, such as lobbyists, to assist in building party cohesion. They may cultivate an external network of contacts in universities, think tanks, or consulting firms to function as an informal "brain trust" in policy development and strategic analysis, suggesting how the majority party might mobilize the support required to enact their ideas into law. Majority leaders, then, work to boost their party's fortunes internally and externally by acting as a political cheerleader, negotiator, consensus-builder, and peacemaker.

[35] Alan Ota, "DeLay Sees Improvement in Communications Between House, Senate Leaders," *CQ Today*, March 3, 2005, p. 6.

[36] Alan Ota, "Hastert Calls on DeLay as 'Super Conferee'," *CQ Today*, May 23, 2005, p. 1.

[37] Malone, "To Jim Wright, Being Majority Leader is One Long Juggling Routine," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 19, 1983, p. 40.

Final Observations

The majority leader's duties and functions, although not well-defined and contingent on his or her relationship with the Speaker, have evolved to the point where it is possible to highlight the customary institutional and party responsibilities. As one majority leader said about his institutional duties: "The Majority Leader has prime responsibility for the day-to-day working of the House, the schedule, working with the committees to keep an eye out for what bills are coming, getting them scheduled, getting the work of the House done, making the place function correctly." On the party side, the majority leader added: "[Y]ou are also compelled to try to articulate to the outside world what [your party stands] for, what [your party is] fighting for, what [your party is] doing."[38]

Table 1. House Majority Leaders, 1899-2022

Majority Leader	Congress
Sereno E. Payne, R-NY	56th (1899-1901)
Payne	57th (1901-1903)
Payne	58th (1903-1905)
Payne	59th (1905-1907)
Payne	60th (1907-1909)
Payne	61st (1909-1911)
Oscar W. Underwood, D-AL	62nd (1911-1913)
Underwood	63rd (1913-1915)
Claude Kitchin, D-NC	64th (1915-1917)
Kitchin	65th (1917-1919)
Franklin W. Mondell, R-WY	66th (1919-1921)
Mondell	67th (1921-1923)
Nicholas Longworth, R-OH	68th (1923-1925)
John Q. Tilson, R-CT	69th (1925-1927)
Tilson	70th (1927-1929)
Tilson	71st (1929-1931)
Henry T. Rainey, D-IL	72nd (1931-1933)
Joseph W. Byrns, D-TN	73rd (1933-1935)
William B. Bankhead, D-AL[a]	74th (1935-1937)
Sam Rayburn, D-TX	75th (1937-1939)
Rayburn/John W. McCormack, D-MA[b]	76th (1939-1941)
McCormack	77th (1941-1943)
McCormack	78th (1943-1945)
McCormack	79th (1945-1947)
Charles A. Halleck, R-IN	80th (1947-1949)

[38] Christopher Madison, "Message Bearer," *National Journal*, December 1, 1990, p. 2906.

Majority Leader	Congress
McCormack	81st (1949-1951)
McCormack	82nd (1951-1953)
Halleck	83rd (1953-1955)
McCormack	84th (1955-1957)
McCormack	85th (1957-1959)
McCormack	86th (1959-1961)
McCormack/Carl Albert, D-OK[c]	87th (1961-1963)
Albert	88th (1963-1965)
Albert	89th (1965-1967)
Albert	90th (1967-1969)
Albert	91st (1969-1971)
Hale Boggs, D-LA	92nd (1971-1973)
Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., D-MA	93rd (1973-1975)
O'Neill	94th (1975-1977)
Jim Wright, D-TX	95th (1977-1979)
Wright	96th (1979-1981)
Wright	97th (1981-1983)
Wright	98th (1983-1985)
Wright	99th (1985-1987)
Thomas S. Foley, D-WA	100th (1987-1989)
Foley/Richard A. Gephardt, D-MO[d]	101st (1989-1991)
Gephardt	102nd (1991-1993)
Gephardt	103rd (1993-1995)
Richard Armey, R-TX	104th (1995-1997)
Armey	105th (1997-1999)
Armey	106th (1999-2001)
Armey	107th (2001-2003)
Tom DeLay, R-TX	108th (2003-2005)
DeLay/John Boehner, R-OH[e]	109th (2005-2007)
Steny Hoyer, D-MD	110th (2007-2009)
Hoyer	111th (2009-2011)
Eric Cantor, R-VA	112th (2011-2013)
Cantor/Kevin McCarthy, R-CA[f]	113th (2013-2015)
McCarthy	114th (2015-2017)
McCarthy	115th (2017-2019)
Steny Hoyer, D-MD	116th (2019-2021)
Hoyer	117th (2021-2023)

Sources: *Office of the Historian*, U.S. House of Representatives; *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to Congress*, Fifth Edition, Vol. II (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2000), pp. 1102-1103; George Archibald, "GOP Elevates DeLay To House Majority Leader," *The Washington Times*, November 14, 2002, p. A1; Susan Ferrechio and Alan Ota, "Charge Takes DeLay Out of Lineup," *CQ Today*, September 29, 2005, p. 1; and Alan Ota, "Upset Win Comes With Expectations," *CQ Today*, February 3, 2006, p. 1.

a. Bankhead became Speaker of the House on June 4, 1936. The post of majority leader remained vacant until the next Congress.

b. McCormack became majority leader on September 26, 1940, filling the vacancy caused by the elevation of Rayburn to the post of Speaker of the House on September 16, 1940.

c. Albert became majority leader on January 10, 1962, filling the vacancy caused by the elevation of McCormack to the post of Speaker of the House, also on January 10.

d. Gephardt became majority leader on June 14, 1989, filling the vacancy created when Foley succeeded Wright as Speaker of the House on June 6, 1989.

e. On September 25, 2005, Majority Leader DeLay stepped down from his post. Majority Whip Roy Blunt, R-MO, served as interim majority leader until John Boehner, R-OH, was elected to be the new majority leader on February 2, 2006.

f. On July 31, 2014, Majority Leader Cantor stepped down from his post. Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy, R-CA, was elected to be the new majority leader on June 19, 2014, and assumed office on July 31, 2014.

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