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Speakers of the House: Elections, 1913-2017

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Summary

Each new House elects a Speaker by roll call vote when it first convenes. Customarily, the conference of each major party nominates a candidate whose name is placed in nomination. A Member normally votes for the candidate of his or her own party conference but may vote for any individual, whether nominated or not. To be elected, a candidate must receive an absolute majority of all the votes cast for individuals. This number may be less than a majority (now 218) of the full membership of the House because of vacancies, absentees, or Members answering "present."

This report provides data on elections of the Speaker in each Congress since 1913, when the House first reached its present size of 435 Members. During that period (63rd through 115th Congresses), a Speaker was elected five times with the votes of less than a majority of the full membership.

If a Speaker dies or resigns during a Congress, the House immediately elects a new one. Five such elections occurred since 1913. In the earlier two cases, the House elected the new Speaker by resolution; in the more recent three, the body used the same procedure as at the outset of a Congress.

If no candidate receives the requisite majority, the roll call is repeated until a Speaker is elected. Since 1913, this procedure has been necessary only in 1923, when nine ballots were required before a Speaker was elected.

From 1913 through 1943, more often than not, some Members voted for candidates other than those of the two major parties. The candidates in question were usually those representing the "progressive" group (reformers originally associated with the Republican Party), and in some Congresses, their names were formally placed in nomination on behalf of that group. From 1945 through 1995, only the nominated Republican and Democratic candidates received votes, reflecting the establishment of an exclusively two-party system at the national level.

In nine of the 12 elections since 1997, however, some Members have voted for candidates other than the official nominees of their parties. Only in the initial election in 2015, however, were any such candidates formally placed in nomination. Usually, the additional candidates receiving votes have been other Members of the voter's own party, but in one instance, in 2001, a Member voted for the official nominee of the other party. In 1997 and 2013 and in both 2015 elections, votes were cast for candidates who were not then Members of the House, including, in the initial 2015 election, sitting Senators. Although the Constitution does not so require, the Speaker has always been a Member of the House.

The report will be updated as additional elections for Speaker occur.

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Regular and Special Elections of the Speaker

The traditional practice of the House is to elect a Speaker by roll call vote upon first convening after a general election of Representatives.[1] Customarily, the conference of each major party in the House selects a candidate whose name is formally placed in nomination before the roll call. A Member may vote for one of these nominated candidates or for another individual.[2] In the great majority of cases, Members vote for the candidate nominated by their own party conferences, since the outcome of this vote in effect establishes which party has the majority and therefore will organize the House.

Table 1 presents data on the votes cast for candidates for Speaker of the House of Representatives in each Congress from 1913 (63rd Congress) through 2017 (115th Congress). It shows the votes cast for the nominees of the two major parties, other candidates nominated from the floor, and individuals not formally nominated.

Included in the table are not only the elections held regularly at the outset of each Congress but also those held during the course of a Congress as a result of the death or resignation of a sitting Speaker. Such elections have occurred five times during the period examined

- in 1936 (74th Congress) upon the death of Speaker Joseph Byrns;
- in 1940 (76th Congress) upon the death of Speaker William Bankhead;
- in 1962 (87th Congress) upon the death of Speaker Sam Rayburn;
- in 1989 (101st Congress) upon the resignation of Speaker Jim Wright; and
- in 2015 (114th Congress) upon the resignation of Speaker John Boehner.

On the two earlier occasions among these five, the election was by resolution rather than by roll call vote. On the more recent three, the same procedure was followed as at the start of a Congress.

Size of the House and Majority Required to Elect

The data presented here cover the period during which the permanent size of the House has been set at 435 Members. This period corresponds to that since the admission of Arizona and New Mexico as the 47th and 48th states in 1912. The actual size of the House was 436, and then 437, for a brief period between the admission of Alaska and Hawaii (in 1958 and 1959) and the reapportionment of Representatives following the 1960 census.

By practice of the House going back to its earliest days, an absolute majority of the Members present and voting is required in order to elect a Speaker. A majority of the full membership of the House (218, in a House of 435) is not required. Precedents emphasize that the requirement is for a majority of "the total number of votes cast for a person by name."[3] A candidate for Speaker may

[1] Until the 1830s, the Speaker was elected by secret ballot. See Asher C. Hinds, *Hinds' Precedents of the House of Representative of the United States*, vol. I (Washington, DC: GPO, 1906), §§187, 204-211. Also see Jeffrey A. Jenkins and Charles Stewart III, *Fighting for the Speakership: The House and the Rise of Party Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[2] Candidates may vote for themselves, although they have often declined to vote or voted "present." For an example in which both party nominees voted for themselves, see *Congressional Record*, vol. 153, January 4, 2007, p. 3.

[3] The Clerk, remarks from the chair (and parliamentary inquiry immediately following), *Congressional Record*, vol. 143, January 7, 1997, p. 117. See also Charles W. Johnson, John V. Sullivan, and Thomas J. Wickham, Jr., *House Practice: A Guide to the Rules, Precedents, and Procedures of the House* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2017), ch. 34, §3, which states that "the Speaker is elected by a majority of Members-elect voting by surname, a quorum being present."

receive a majority of the votes cast, and be elected, while failing to obtain a majority of the full membership because some Members either are not present to vote or instead answer "present" rather than voting for a candidate. During the period examined, this kind of result has occurred five times

- in 1917 (65th Congress), "Champ" Clark was elected with 217 votes;
- in 1923 (68th Congress), Frederick Gillett was elected with 215 votes;
- in 1943 (78th Congress), Sam Rayburn was elected with 217 votes;
- in 1997 (105th Congress), Newt Gingrich was elected with 216 votes; and
- in 2015 (114th Congress), John Boehner was elected with 216 votes.

In addition, in 1931 (72nd Congress), the candidate of the new Democratic majority, John Nance Garner (later Vice President), received 218 votes, a bare majority of the membership. The table does not take into account the number of vacancies existing in the House at the time of the election; it therefore cannot show whether any Speaker may have been elected lacking a majority of the *then qualified* membership of the House.[4]

If no candidate obtains the requisite majority, the roll call is repeated. On these subsequent ballots, Members may still vote for any individual; no restrictions have ever been imposed, such as that the lowest candidate on each ballot must drop out, or that no new candidate may enter. Because of the predominance of the two established national parties during the period examined, only once in the period did the House fail to elect on the first roll call.[5] In 1923 (68th Congress), in a closely divided House, both major party nominees initially failed to gain a majority because of votes cast for other candidates by Members from the Progressive Party or from the "progressive" wing of the Republican Party. Many of these Members agreed to vote for the Republican candidate only on the ninth ballot, after the Republican leadership had agreed to accept a number of procedural reforms these Members favored. Thus the Republican was ultimately elected, although (as noted earlier) still with less than a majority of the full membership.[6]

See also U.S. Congress, House, *Constitution, Jefferson's Manual, and Rules of the House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifteenth Congress*, (compiled by) Thomas J. Wickham, Parliamentarian, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 114-192 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2017), §27.

[4] The existence of vacancies at the point when a new House first convened was more common before the 20th Amendment took effect in 1936. Until that time, a Congress elected in one November did not begin its term until March of the following year, and did not convene until December of that year, unless the previous Congress provided otherwise by law.

[5] This occurrence, however, was more common before the period covered in this report, when the two-party system had not become as thoroughly established nor the discipline accompanying it as pronounced.

[6] Full results were as follows:

Ballot and Date	Gillett (R)	Garrett (D)	Cooper	Madden	Present
1 December 3, 1923	197	195	17	5	4
2 December 3	194	194	17	6	3
3 December 3	195	196	17	5	3
4 December 3	197	196	17	5	3
5 December 4	197	197	17	5	3
6 December 4	195	197	17	5	3
7 December 4	196	198	17	5	3
8 December 4	197	198	17	5	3
9 December 5	215	197	0	2	4

Third and Additional Candidates

In the first portion of the period covered by **Table 1**, it was common for candidates other than those of the two major parties to receive votes. Such action occurred in 11 of the 16 Congresses (63rd-78th) that convened from 1913 through 1943. On seven of those 11 occasions, candidates other than those of the two major parties were formally nominated. These events reflect chiefly the influence in Congress, during those three decades, of the progressive movement. The additional nominations were offered in the name of that movement, and the votes cast for Members other than the major party nominees also generally represent an expression of progressive sentiments.

During this period, the occurrence of additional nominations (displayed in the table) reflects changing views of Members identifying themselves as "progressives" about whether to constitute themselves in the House as a separate Progressive Party caucus or as a wing of the Republican Party. So does the pattern of shifts in the party labels by which these nominees and others receiving votes chose to designate themselves. The last formal Progressive Party nominee appeared in 1937 (75th Congress). After defeats in the following election, the only two remaining Members representing the Progressive Party were reduced to voting for each other for Speaker, and beginning in 1947 (80th Congress), the last standard bearer of the tendency accepted the Republican label. The demise of this movement in the House represented the final stage in the establishment of a two-party system at the national level.

From 1945 through 1995 (79th-104th Congresses), only the official nominees of the two major parties received votes for Speaker. This pattern, in other words, persisted from the end of World War II and the advent of the "modern Congress"[7] until after the Republicans had regained the majority in the 104th Congress (1995-1996) after four decades as the minority party. During this period, the presumption became firmly established that a Member's vote for Speaker will reliably reflect his or her party membership.

The opening of the 105th Congress in 1997, accordingly, marked the first time since 1943 that anyone other than the two major party candidates received votes for Speaker. In nine of the 12 speakership elections since then (1997-2017), at least one Member has voted for a candidate other than ones formally nominated by the major party conferences. Early in this period, votes cast for other candidates seem to have usually reflected specific circumstances and events, but in the most recent instances, some of them may be regarded as reflecting action by identifiable political factions or groupings. During this period, only in the initial election of 2015 have the names of any candidates other than those of the party conferences been formally placed in nomination.

The 1997 and 2013 ballots and both 2015 ballots were also notable because votes were cast for candidates who were not Members of the House at the time, and in the initial election in 2015, two of these were sitting Members of the Senate. Although the Constitution does not require the Speaker (or any other officer of either chamber) to be a Member, the Speaker has always been so; it is not known that any votes for individuals other than Members to be Speaker had ever previously been cast in the history of the House.

Notably, in 2001, a Member who bore the designation of one major party voted for the nominee of the other. Although the table below does not indicate the party affiliation of the Members

[7] The "modern Congress" is usually reckoned from the implementation in the 80th Congress (1947-1948) of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 (P.L. 79-601, 60 Stat. 812).

voting for each candidate, examination of other available records confirms that no such action had occurred at least for the previous half century.[8]

[8] Subsequently, in organizing for that Congress (the 107th), the party caucus against whose nominee the Member voted declined to provide him with committee assignments.

Table 1. Individuals Receiving Votes for Speaker, 1913-2017

Year	Republican Nominee	Votes	Democratic Nominee	Votes	Others Receiving Votes	Votes
1913	James R. Mann (IL)	111	**James B. ("Champ") Clark** (MO)	272	*Victor Murdock* (P-KS) Henry A. Cooper (R-WI) John M. Nelson (R-WI)	18 4 1
1915	James R. Mann (IL)	195	**James B. ("Champ") Clark** (MO)	222		
1917	James R. Mann (IL)	205	**James B. ("Champ") Clark** (MO)	217	Irvine L. Lenroot (R-WI) Frederick H. Gillett (R-MA)	2 2
1919	**Frederick H. Gillett** (MA)	228	James B. ("Champ") Clark (MO)	172		
1921	**Frederick H. Gillett** (MA)	297	Claude Kitchin (NC)	122		
1923 (first ballot)	Frederick H. Gillett (MA)	197	Finis J. Garrett (TN)	195	*Henry A. Cooper* (R-WI) *Martin B. Madden* (R-IL)	17 5
(ninth ballot)	**Frederick H. Gillett** (MA)	215	Finis J. Garrett (TN)	197	*Martin B. Madden* (R-IL)	2
1925	**Nicholas Longworth** (OH)	229	Finis J. Garrett (TN)	173	*Henry A. Cooper* (R-WI)	13
1927	**Nicholas Longworth** (OH)	225	Finis J. Garrett (TN)	187		
1929	**Nicholas Longworth** (OH)	254	John N. Garner (TX)	143		
1931	Bertrand H. Snell (NY)	207	**John N. Garner** (TX)	218	George J. Schneider (R-WI)	5
1933	Bertrand H. Snell (NY)	110	**Henry T. Rainey** (IL)	302	*Paul J. Kvale* (F-L-MN)	5
1935	Bertrand H. Snell (NY)	95	**Joseph W. Byrns** (TN)	317	*George J. Schneider* (P-WI) W.P. Lambertson (R-KS)	9 2
1936 (June 4)[a]			**William B. Bankhead** (AL) (H.Res. 543)[b]	voice vote		
1937	Bertrand H. Snell (NY)	83	**William B. Bankhead** (AL)	324	*George J. Schneider* (P-WI) Fred L. Crawford (R-MI)	10 2
1939	Joseph W. Martin (MA)	168	**William B. Bankhead** (AL)	249	Merlin Hull (P-WI) Bernard J. Gehrmann (P-WI)	1 1
1940 (Sept. 16)[a]			**Sam Rayburn** (TX) (H.Res. 602)[b]	voice vote		
1941	Joseph W. Martin (MA)	159	**Sam Rayburn** (TX)	247	Merlin Hull (P-WI) Bernard J. Gehrmann (P-WI)	2 1
1943	Joseph W. Martin (MA)	206	**Sam Rayburn (**TX)	217	Merlin Hull (P-WI) Harry Sauthoff (P-WI)	1 1
1945	Joseph W. Martin (MA)	168	**Sam Rayburn** (TX)	224		

Year	Republican Nominee	Votes	Democratic Nominee	Votes	Others Receiving Votes	Votes
1947	**Joseph W. Martin** (MA)	244	Sam Rayburn (TX)	182		
1949	Joseph W. Martin (MA)	160	**Sam Rayburn** (TX)	255		
1951	Joseph W. Martin (MA)	193	**Sam Rayburn** (TX)	231		
1953	**Joseph W. Martin** (MA)	220	Sam Rayburn (TX)	201		
1955	Joseph W. Martin (MA)	198	**Sam Rayburn** (TX)	228		
1957	Joseph W. Martin (MA)	199	**Sam Rayburn** (TX)	227		
1959	Charles A. Halleck (IN)	148	**Sam Rayburn** (TX)	281		
1961	Charles A. Halleck (IN)	170	**Sam Rayburn** (TX)	258		
1962 (Jan. 10)[a]	Charles A. Halleck (IN)	166	**John W. McCormack** (MA)	248		
1963	Charles A. Halleck (IN)	175	**John W. McCormack** (MA)	256		
1965	Gerald R. Ford (MI)	139	**John W. McCormack** (MA)	289		
1967	Gerald R. Ford (MI)	186	**John W. McCormack** (MA)	246		
1969	Gerald R. Ford (MI)	187	**John W. McCormack** (MA)	241		
1971	Gerald R. Ford (MI)	176	**Carl B. Albert** (OK)	250		
1973	Gerald R. Ford (MI)	188	**Carl B. Albert** (OK)	236		
1975	John J. Rhodes (AZ)	143	**Carl B. Albert** (OK)	287		
1977	John J. Rhodes (AZ)	142	**Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill** (MA)	290		
1979	John J. Rhodes (AZ)	152	**Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill** (MA)	268		
1981	Robert H. Michel (IL)	183	**Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill** (MA)	233		
1983	Robert H. Michel (IL)	155	**Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill** (MA)	260		
1985	Robert H. Michel (IL)	175	**Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill** (MA)	247		
1987	Robert H. Michel (IL)	173	**Jim Wright** (TX)	254		
1989	Robert H. Michel (IL)	170	**Jim Wright** (TX)	253		
1989 (June 6)[a]	Robert H. Michel (IL)	164	**Thomas S. Foley** (WA)	251		
1991	Robert H. Michel (IL)	165	**Thomas S. Foley** (WA)	262		
1993	Robert H. Michel (IL)	174	**Thomas S. Foley** (WA)	255		
1995	**Newt Gingrich** (GA)	228	Richard A. Gephardt (MO)	202		

Year	Republican Nominee	Votes	Democratic Nominee	Votes	Others Receiving Votes	Votes
1997	**Newt Gingrich** (GA)	216	Richard A. Gephardt (MO)	205	James Leach (R-IA)	2
					Robert H. Michel[c]	1
					Robert Walker[c]	1
1999	**J. Dennis Hastert** (IL)	220	Richard A. Gephardt (MO)	205		
2001	**J. Dennis Hastert** (IL)	222	Richard A. Gephardt (MO)	206	John P. Murtha (D-PA)	1
2003	**J. Dennis Hastert** (IL)	228	Nancy Pelosi (CA)	201	John P. Murtha (D-PA)	1
2005	**J. Dennis Hastert** (IL)	226	Nancy Pelosi (CA)	199	John P. Murtha (D-PA)	1
2007	John A. Boehner (OH)	202	**Nancy Pelosi** (CA)	233		
2009	John A. Boehner (OH)	174	**Nancy Pelosi** (CA)	255		
2011	**John A. Boehner** (OH)	241	Nancy Pelosi (CA)	173	Heath Shuler (D-NC)	11
					John Lewis (D-GA)	2
					Jim Costa (D-CA)	1
					Dennis Cardoza (D-CA)	1
					Jim Cooper (D-TN)	1
					Marcy Kaptur (D-OH)	1
					Steny H. Hoyer (D-MD)	1
2013	**John A. Boehner** (OH)	220	Nancy Pelosi (CA)	192	Eric Cantor (R-VA)	3
					Allen West[c]	2
					Jim Cooper (D-TN)	2
					John Lewis (D-GA)	1
					Jim Jordan (R-OH)	1
					Colin Powell[c]	1
					Raúl R. Labrador (R-ID)	1
					Justin Amash (R-MI)	1
					John Dingell (D-MI)	1
					David Walker[c]	1

Year	Republican Nominee	Votes	Democratic Nominee	Votes	Others Receiving Votes	Votes
2015	**John A. Boehner** (OH)	216	Nancy Pelosi (CA)	164	*Daniel Webster* (R-FL)	12
					Louie Gohmert (R-TX)	3
					Ted S. Yoho (R-FL)	2
					Jim Jordan (R-OH)	2
					Jeff Duncan (R-SC)	1
					Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY)[c]	1
					Colin Powell[c]	1
					Trey Gowdy (R-SC)	1
					Kevin McCarthy (R-CA)	1
					Jim Cooper (D-TN)	1
					Peter A. DeFazio (D-OR)	1
					Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL)[c]	1
					John Lewis (D-GA)	1
2015 (Oct. 29)[a]	**Paul D. Ryan (WI)**	236	Nancy Pelosi (CA)	184	Daniel Webster (R-FL)	9
					Colin Powell[c]	1
					Jim Cooper (D-TN)	1
					John Lewis (D-GA)	1
2017	**Paul D. Ryan (WI)**	239	Nancy Pelosi (CA)	189	Tim Ryan (D-OH)	2
					Daniel Webster (R-FL)	1
					Jim Cooper (D-TN)	1
					John Lewis (D-GA)	1

Source: *Journals* of the House of Representatives (for 2003-2011, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, and for 2013-2017, Clerk of the House website). Party designations are taken from the *Congressional Directory* for the respective years since these reflect a Member's official party self-designation; historical sources may differ as to the effective party affiliation of certain individuals.

Key:

Elected candidate in **bold**.

"Other" candidate's name formally placed in nomination in *italic*.

Party designations of "other" candidates: R = Republican, P = Progressive, F-L = Farmer-Labor.

Notes:

a. Special election to fill a vacancy in the speakership caused by death or resignation.

b. Elected by resolution, not by roll call from nominations.

c. Not a Member of the House at the time.

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