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# House Leadership: Whip Organization

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The whip system performs two primary functions: to take responsibility for the mobilization of party Members for key votes and to serve as a conduit for information between party leaders and party Members.

## Role and Responsibility

*Vote Mobilization.* The chief responsibility of the whip is to "count heads." The whips help their respective party leaders keep track of the whereabouts of Members in order to assist in the scheduling of legislation, in the case of the majority, or in the planning of opposition tactics, in the case of the minority.

Whips also "whip up" support for a party position. They try to build voting coalitions from disparate groups of party Members. They work with the other party leaders to fashion legislation that party Members will support. The whip is also expected to "get out the vote," by making sure that Members will be present on the floor during close votes. Often, whips are stationed at the door leading to the chamber with "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" to indicate the party preference on the matter being voted on.

*Information Dissemination.* As part of an information dissemination function, whips prepare "advisories" to provide daily, weekly, monthly, and even yearly schedules. These notices address what measures are anticipated on the floor, the time for convening and expected adjournment of the chamber, and when, and on what amendments, votes might occur. Issue papers are also often provided by a whip office, although they are generally prepared in conjunction with the party caucus or conference. "Recess packets" are generated prior to a district work period, giving party Members information on major points the party wants stressed while the Members are at home.

## Whip Organization

House Republicans have always had an elected whip. The Democrats appointed their whip until 1986; from then on, the position has been an elected one.[1] Each whip is aided

[1] In the last 25 years, the Republican whip position was contested twice: in 1980, when then Rep. Trent Lott defeated Rep. Bud Shuster (96-90); and, in 1989, when Rep. Newt Gingrich defeated

(continued...)

by a large whip organization. The majority and minority whips are assisted by appointed chief deputies. The Republicans have one chief deputy whip, the Democrats have six. Assistant, or at-large, whips are usually appointed by the whip or party leadership. Assistant whips often represent classes of Members, such as the freshmen class or the women Members. Regional whips, also referred to as zone whips, are elected by Members within a geographic region.

The following table depicts the formal and official party whip structure. It does not include informal whip positions that Members may acquire due to their affiliation with groups of Members.

| Type of Whip | Democrat | Republican |
|---|---|---|
| Chief Deputy Whip | 6 | 1 |
| Deputy Whips | 12 | 17 |
| Assistant Whip | | 49 |
| At-Large Whip | 70 | |
| Regional Whip | 24 | |

## History

The "whipper in" is a British term for the person responsible for keeping the foxhounds from leaving the pack. It was first used in the House of Commons in the late 1700s and in the House of Representatives in 1897, when James A. Tawney (R-Minn.) was appointed a whip by Speaker Thomas Reed (R-Maine) to help Reed keep track of the whereabouts of party Members. A Democratic whip was appointed soon thereafter, with most historical accounts setting the date as 1901. The whip, and an official whip organization, was first extensively used in the 1930s, when Democrats chose "assistant whips" to be responsible for Members from specified geographic areas or zones.

In 1955, Democrats created a deputy whip position, specifically for one Member, although the job did not have defined responsibilities. A Democratic chief deputy whip position was created in 1972; the Democrats appointed four deputy whips in 1981. In 1992, four chief deputy whips were appointed by the Democratic leadership. In 2002, two additional chief deputy whips were appointed. The leadership also appointed numerous deputy and at-large whips. Today, there are both appointed and elected whips, representing regions, classes of Members, groups of Members (such as women, Hispanics, and African Americans), and others.

The Republican whip organization has historically not received as much scholarly or press attention as the Democratic whip organization. It appears that the Republican whip organization was not as structured or formalized as the Democratic whip organization until the Republicans assumed the House majority in 1995.

[1] (...continued)
Rep. Edward Madigan (87-85). The Democratic whip position was contested in 1991, when Rep. David Bonior defeated Rep. Steny Hoyer (160-109), and in 2001, when Rep. Nancy Pelosi defeated Rep. Steny Hoyer (118-95).

## Author Information

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