

📖 Topic Page: [Speaker of the House](#)

Definition: **speaker** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(14c) **1 a** : one that speaks; *esp* : one who uses a language [native ~s of French] **b** : one who makes a public speech **c** : one who acts as a spokesperson **2** : the presiding officer of a deliberative assembly [Speaker of the House of Representatives] **3** : loudspeaker

speak·er·ship \-ship\ *n*

Summary Article: **Speaker of the House**

From *American Government A to Z: The U.S. Constitution A to Z*

According to Thomas B. “Czar” Reed (1839–1902) (R-Maine), who served as Speaker of the House of Representatives for six years between 1889 and 1899, the office of Speaker is “the embodiment of the House, its power and dignity.” One of the few federal offices expressly created by the Constitution in addition to the president, vice president, and chief justice of the United States and the president pro tempore of the Senate, the Speaker of the House is second in the line of succession to the presidency after the vice president.

Many other national constitutions create a similar position and title for the presiding officer of the lower (more popularly elected) house of the legislature. The United Kingdom also has a speaker in its Parliament, who presides over the House of Commons, and under the constitutions of Singapore (1974) and Sweden (1975) a speaker is the chief officer of their unicameral national legislatures.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Speaker of the House of Representatives was not a major power in the federal government. Henry Clay (1777–1852) (D-R, Ky.), who served as Speaker from 1811 to 1814, 1815 to 1820, and 1823 to 1825, is credited with significantly increasing the incumbent’s power. Increased power, however, led to abuses—preventing legislation from being voted on and appointing cronies as committee chairmen, for example—and members revolted against Speaker Joseph G. Cannon (1836–1926) (R-Ill.) in 1910, seven years after he became Speaker. “Uncle Joe,” as Cannon was sometimes called, used his power to make committee assignments to reward loyal cronies and was suspected on occasion of miscounting votes in the House to his advantage. “The ‘ayes’ make the most noise,” he once ruled on a voice vote, “but the ‘nays’ have it.”

Speakers of the House of Representatives

<i>Name</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Tenure</i>
Frederick Muhlenberg	Federalist	Pennsylvania	1789–1791
Jonathan Trumbull	Federalist	Connecticut	1791–1793
Frederick Muhlenberg	Federalist	Pennsylvania	1793–1795
Jonathan Dayton	Federalist	New Jersey	1795–1799
Theodore Sedgwick	Federalist	Massachusetts	1799–1801
Nathaniel Macon	Democratic-Republican	North Carolina	1801–1807

Name	Party	State	Tenure
Joseph B. Varnum	Democratic-Republican	Massachusetts	1807–1811
Henry Clay ²	Democratic-Republican	Kentucky	1811–1814
Langdon Cheves	Democratic-Republican	South Carolina	1814–1815
Henry Clay ²	Democratic-Republican	Kentucky	1815–1820
John W. Taylor	Democratic	New York	1820–1821
Philip P. Barbour	Democratic-Republican	Virginia	1821–1823
Henry Clay ²	Democratic-Republican	Kentucky	1823–1825
John W. Taylor	Democratic	New York	1825–1827
Andrew Stevenson	Democratic	Virginia	1827–1834
John Bell	Democratic	Tennessee	1834–1835
James K. Polk	Democratic	Tennessee	1835–1839
Robert M. T. Hunter	Democratic	Virginia	1839–1841
John White	Whig	Kentucky	1841–1843
John W. Jones	Democratic	Virginia	1843–1845
John W. Davis	Democratic	Indiana	1845–1847
Robert C. Winthrop	Whig	Massachusetts	1847–1849
Howell Cobb	Democratic	Georgia	1849–1851
Linn Boyd	Democratic	Kentucky	1851–1855
Nathaniel P. Banks	American	Massachusetts	1856–1857
James L. Orr	Democratic	South Carolina	1857–1859
William Pennington	Republican	New Jersey	1860–1861
Galusha A. Grow	Republican	Pennsylvania	1861–1863
Schuyler Colfax	Republican	Indiana	1863–1869
Theodore M. Pomeroy	Republican	New York	1869
James G. Blaine	Republican	Maine	1869–1875
Michael C. Kerr	Democratic	Indiana	1875–1876
Samuel J. Randall	Democratic	Pennsylvania	1876–1881
Joseph W. Keifer	Republican	Ohio	1881–1883
John G. Carlisle	Democratic	Kentucky	1883–1889
Thomas B. Reed	Republican	Maine	1889–1891
Charles F. Crisp	Democratic	Georgia	1891–1895
Thomas B. Reed	Republican	Maine	1895–1899
David B. Henderson	Republican	Iowa	1899–1903
Joseph G. Cannon	Republican	Illinois	1903–1911
Champ Clark	Democratic	Missouri	1911–1919
Frederick H. Gillett	Republican	Massachusetts	1919–1925

<i>Name</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Tenure</i>
Nicholas Longworth	Republican	Ohio	1925–1931
John N. Garner	Democratic	Texas	1931–1933
Henry T. Rainey	Democratic	Illinois	1933–1935
Joseph W. Byrns	Democratic	Tennessee	1935–1936
William B. Bankhead	Democratic	Alabama	1936–1940
Sam Rayburn ¹	Democratic	Texas	1940–1947
Joseph W. Martin Jr.	Republican	Massachusetts	1947–1949
Sam Rayburn ¹	Democratic	Texas	1949–1953
Joseph W. Martin Jr.	Republican	Massachusetts	1953–1955
Sam Rayburn ¹	Democratic	Texas	1955–1961
John W. McCormack	Democratic	Massachusetts	1962–1971
Carl Albert	Democratic	Oklahoma	1971–1977
Thomas P. O’Neill Jr. ³	Democratic	Massachusetts	1977–1987
James Wright	Democratic	Texas	1987–1989
Thomas S. Foley	Democratic	Washington	1989–1995
Newt Gingrich	Republican	Georgia	1995–1999
J. Dennis Hastert	Republican	Illinois	1999–2007
Nancy Pelosi	Democrat	California	2007–

source: *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*. New York: World Almanac Books, 2002. As updated by the author.

1. Longest service (17 years total)

2. Second-longest service (10 years total)

3. Third-longest service (9 years)

The office of Speaker of the House has been filled by a number of men who have served honorably and ably, among them Sam Rayburn (1882–1961) (D-Texas), who was Speaker, except for two two-year periods spent as minority leader, from 1940 until his death in 1961, and Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill Jr. (1912–94) (D-Mass.), who served from 1977 until his retirement in 1987. Others, however, conducted themselves less than honorably. Jim Wright (b. 1922) (D-Texas) resigned in 1989 under a cloud of financial scandal following a House Ethics Committee report finding sixty-nine violations of House rules. Newt Gingrich (b. 1943) (R-Ga.) removed himself from reelection for the 1999–2000 session to avoid scrutiny concerning his extramarital affair. The “glass dome” of the U.S. Capitol was shattered in 2007 when Nancy Pelosi, the daughter and sister of mayors of Baltimore, Maryland, and a member of Congress from California since 1987, was elected by the House of Representatives as the first woman Speaker of that body.

Every legislative body needs a presiding officer. In Article I, section 2, the Constitution provides that the Speaker of the House of Representatives is to be the presiding officer of the lower house of Congress—the house that the Framers of the Constitution envisioned as being closer to the people than the upper house: “The House of Representatives shall chuse their Speaker and other Officers....” This selection occurs at the beginning of each two-year session of Congress, starting “at noon on the

3d day of January,” according to the Twentieth Amendment (1933) (see *Lame Ducks*).

CLOSER LOOK

Although enormously powerful, House Speakers are vulnerable to political attacks. In rare cases, they have been forced from office.

Democrat Jim Wright of Texas in 1989 resigned from the speakership amid allegations that he tried to evade congressional rules governing outside earnings. It was the first time in history that a House Speaker was forced by scandal to leave the office in the middle of his term.

One of his main accusers, Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), rose to the speakership six years later. But Gingrich, in turn, resigned in 1998 after a series of ethical charges and bruising political battles.

Between those events, Speaker Thomas Foley of Washington suffered a different fate. The Democrat was booted out of office by the voters in 1994—the first time a speaker had been turned out at the polls since the Civil War.

Although not specifically prohibited by the Constitution, no nonmember of the House has ever been named Speaker, who is chosen by the members of the House’s majority party (see *Political Parties*) and then submitted to a formal vote of the whole House. The member who in the last session was the majority or minority leader generally advances to the office of Speaker once that member’s party gains a majority in the newly elected House.

The Constitution does not prescribe the Speaker’s duties, but they include presiding over sessions of the House, ruling on points of order, referring bills and resolutions to the appropriate committees, setting the agenda for House action on measures including legislation, and appointing members to select and joint committees, as well as House-Senate conference committees that must reconcile bills when dissimilar acts are passed in each house of Congress on the same subject. Although a Speaker may participate in debate and vote just as any other member of the House, by tradition he or she rarely speaks on the floor of the House, generally votes only in cases of a tie, and does not hold a seat on any House committee.

Under the terms of section 3 of the Twenty-fifth Amendment (1967), which deals with presidential disability, the Speaker of the House, along with the president pro tempore of the Senate, is designated to receive the president’s “written declaration that he is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office.” In such a case, the vice president becomes acting president until the Speaker and the president pro tempore receive “a written declaration to the contrary.” Under section 4 of the amendment, the Speaker of the House and the president pro tempore are designated to receive any “written declaration that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office” from “a majority of either the principal officers of the executive departments or of such other body as Congress may by law provide.” Again, under such circumstances the vice president becomes acting president until the disability is removed. Thereafter, the Speaker, along with the president pro tempore of the Senate, is designated to receive the declaration of the president “that no inability exists.”

Like the other heads of the branches of the national government, success in the office of Speaker of the House depends to a large extent on the incumbent’s character and political abilities.

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