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The First Day of a New Congress: A Guide to Proceedings on the Senate Floor

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Summary

The Senate follows a well-established routine on the opening day of a new Congress. The proceedings include swearing in new members, administrative business, and election of the President pro tempore, the constitutionally mandated officer elected to preside over the chamber in the absence of the Vice President. Other first day activities are dependent on specific circumstances and do not occur on the first day of every new Congress. Once these proceedings are completed, the Senate may then turn to routine business. The Senate committee assignment process begins prior to the convening of a new Congress.

Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution provides for a system of staggered six-year terms for Senators, one-third of their terms expiring at the conclusion of each Congress. As a consequence, the Senate is a continuing body and does not have to reorganize itself each new Congress, as does the House of Representatives, by adopting new rules and electing new leaders. Any changes in Senate leadership take place in the party conferences prior to the opening day, and there are no floor votes to ratify these changes.

The Senate Convenes¹

The Constitution (20th Amendment, Section 2) mandates that a new Congress convene at noon on January 3 in each odd numbered year, unless it has earlier passed a law designating a different day. Recently, however, it has been the exception rather than the rule for a new Congress to begin on January 3. Five out of the last six Congresses — 104th (January 4, 1995), the 105th (January 7, 1997), the 106th (January 6, 1999), the 108th Congress (January 7, 2003), and the 109th (January 4, 2005) — convened on another date. Only for the 107th Congress was the beginning date unchanged.

¹ For information on organizational meetings held prior to the formal start of a new Congress, see CRS Report RS21339, *Congress' Early Organizational Meetings*, by Judy Schneider.

The Vice President normally presides when the Senate first convenes, and the Senate chaplain offers a prayer. The Vice President then announces the receipt of the certificates and credentials of election of the newly elected Senators. The reading of these documents is waived, and they are subsequently printed in full in the *Congressional Record*.²

Proceedings at the convening of the Senate in the 107th Congress were somewhat different than other opening days because the Senate was evenly divided, with 50 Republicans and 50 Democrats. When Congress convened on January 3, 2001, Vice President Albert Gore, a Democrat, was still President of the Senate, providing Senate Democrats with an effective majority of one. Subsequently, at noon on January 20, 2001, when Republican Richard Cheney was sworn in as Vice President, Senate Republicans took control of the Senate.

Oath of Office

The first order of business in a new Senate is the swearing in of newly elected Senators, including reelected incumbents. Before this action is taken, however, the Majority Leader sometimes provides a brief history of the oath of office and the two leaders give welcoming remarks.³ At the beginning of the 107th Congress, both Senator Thomas Daschle, a Democrat who served as Majority Leader until noon on January 20, 2001, and Senator Trent Lott, a Republican, who then became Majority Leader, addressed the Senate. If there are any contested elections, the leadership may provide a brief status report and plan for their resolution.⁴ Then, the Vice President calls the newly elected Senators to the front of the chamber in alphabetical order in groups of four to take the oath and to “subscribe to the oath” in the official oath book.⁵ Each Senator is often accompanied by the other Senator from the same state, the Senator he or she is replacing, or a former Senator.

Notification to the Other Body and to the President

The Senate clerk then calls the roll, and the Majority Leader offers resolutions that the House and the President be formally notified that a quorum of the Senate is assembled and ready to proceed to business. Subsequently, the House and Senate leadership telephone the President with the news that Congress is ready to begin its work.

² The Vice President, “Certificates of Election and Credentials,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 151, Jan. 4, 2005, pp. S1-S4.

³ Sen. Lott, “The Oath We Take,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 143, Jan. 7, 1997, pp. 4-5; Sen. Daschle, “A Historic Day,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 147, Jan. 3, 2001, p. S1; and Sen. Lott, “Thanking the Vice President,” *Ibid.*, pp. S1-S2.

⁴ Sen. Lott, “Louisiana Election Contest,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 143, Jan. 7, 1997, p. 5.

⁵ Each Senator is allowed to keep the pen he or she uses to sign the historic oath book, which contains the signatures of all U.S. Senators. A Senator signs this book each time he or she takes the oath of office.

Election of the President Pro Tempore

The President Pro Tempore is elected by the Senate to preside during the absence of the Vice President.⁶ Often referred to as the “President Pro Tem,” this majority party Senator usually has the party’s longest continuous Senate service and often, by virtue of seniority, chairs a committee.⁷ If expecting to be unavailable for chamber duties, the President Pro Tempore appoints other Senators to preside. In the 109th Congress, the President Pro Tempore is Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK).

When there is a change in party control of the Senate, or a vacancy occurs, the President Pro Tempore is elected by resolution and then escorted to the front of the chamber to be sworn in by the Vice President.⁸ Afterwards, the Senate adopts a resolution to notify the President of the election of the President Pro Tempore.

From the beginning of the 104th Congress through the middle of the first session of the 106th Congresses, Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC) was the President Pro Tempore. In June 2001, when party control of the Senate changed, Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV) became the President Pro Tempore.⁹ In the 107th Congress, because the Senate was evenly divided on the opening day, Senator Byrd, a Democrat, was elected to serve as President Pro Tempore until January 20, 2001, and Senator Thurmond, a Republican, was elected to serve after January 20, 2001, when Albert Gore, a Democrat, was succeeded as Vice President and President of the Senate by Richard Cheney, a Republican.¹⁰ Subsequently, when Richard Cheney, a Republican, became the Vice President and President of the Senate, Senator Thurmond again became President Pro Tempore. He took the oath of office on January 20, 2001. That same day, the Senate adopted resolutions notifying the President and the House of Representatives of the election of the new President Pro Tempore.¹¹

⁶ The Constitution specifies that the Vice President is the presiding officer of the Senate. The Vice President, however, usually presides only on opening day, during ceremonial occasions, and when needed to cast a tie-breaking vote.

⁷ The President Pro Tempore holds that office during his or her Senate term and is not reelected at the beginning of a new Congress unless there is a change in party control.

⁸ Sen. Frist, “Election of the Honorable Ted Stevens As President Pro Tempore of the Senate,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 149, Jan. 7, 2003. p. S6.

⁹ Sen. Daschle, “Election of the Honorable Robert C. Byrd as President Pro Tempore,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 147, June 6, 2001, p. S5843.

¹⁰ Sen. Daschle, “Election of the Honorable Robert C. Byrd As President Pro Tempore and Election of the Honorable Strom Thurmond as President Pro Tempore,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 147, Jan. 3, 2001, pp. S6-S7.

¹¹ Sen. Roberts, “Notification to the President of the United States,” and “Notification to the House of Representatives,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 147, Jan. 20, 2001, p. S57.

Daily Meeting Time for the Senate

The Senate establishes its daily hour of meeting by a resolution which must be renewed each session of Congress. This resolution is also usually offered by the Majority Leader.

Other First-Day Floor Actions

Other routine organizational business is taken up on the Senate floor on the first day, including unanimous consent requests to expedite the daily business of the Senate. At the beginning of the 109th Congress, the Senate adopted 13 orders *en bloc* by unanimous consent, including floor privileges for staff.¹² In addition, the two leaders may lay out the highlights of the legislative schedule ahead and discuss particular pertinent issues. Sometimes on the first day, the Senate adopts resolutions providing for adjournments and for the joint session at which Congress receives the President's State of the Union message.

Other first day activities are dependent on specific circumstances and do not occur on the first day of every new Congress. For example, following a presidential election, the Senate must adopt a resolution to meet in joint session with the House to count the electoral votes for the President and Vice President,¹³ continue the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, and authorize the use of the Capitol for inaugural activities.¹⁴ On the first day of the 106th Congress, there were several announcements and a discussion related to the pending impeachment trial of the President.¹⁵

After the Senate has completed initial organizational proceedings, it may turn to routine business, which normally completes the legislative day. This business includes the introduction of bills and resolutions, appointments of Senate officials, and additional statements from Senators.

During adjournment periods preceding the start of a new Congress, the Secretary of the Senate is authorized to receive, on behalf of the Senate, messages from the House of Representatives, the President, and the executive departments. On the first day of a new

¹² Sen. Frist, "Unanimous Consent Requests," *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 151, Jan. 4, 2005, p. S7. In the 105th Congress, special floor privileges were granted for that Congress for a staff assistant from one particular Senator's office to accompany that Member, who needed assistance while in the Senate chamber.

¹³ Sen. Frist, "To Provide for Counting of Electoral Votes for President and Vice President of the United States," *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 151, Jan. 4, 2005, p. S6. This takes the form of a joint session with the House of Representatives.

¹⁴ Sen. Frist, "To Extend the Life of the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies," *Ibid.*, p. S7.

¹⁵ Sen. Lott, "The Public's Access to the Impeachment Proceedings," "Unanimous — Consent Agreement — Senate Access," and "Senate Agenda," *Congressional Record*, vol. 145, Jan. 6, 1999, pp. 7-11.

Congress, the presiding officer will present these messages to the Senate to allow it to take any action which may be necessary.¹⁶

Committee Organization

The committee assignment process begins prior to the convening of a new Congress, and mostly within the party groups — the Republican and Democratic conferences. The only action visible on the chamber floor is the adoption of resolutions assigning Senators from each party to committees agreed upon by the respective party conference. The adoption of both resolutions is routine and occurs without amendment, because of the tacit understanding that each party has a right to establish its own internal distribution of work without amendment from the other.¹⁷

On the opening day of the 108th and 109th Congresses, there were no committee assignment resolutions. On the opening day of the 107th Congress, the only committee assignment resolution taken up was one that designated committee chairs.¹⁸ Because of the Senate's equal division in that Congress, Democrats chaired committees prior to January 20, 2001. Effective January 20, 2001, with the inauguration of the Republican President and Vice President, Republican Senators became committee chairmen.¹⁹ This arrangement lapsed when Democrats regained control of the Senate for the balance of the 107th Congress on June 6, 2001.

¹⁶ On the first day of the 106th Congress, the Senate received a message from the House announcing that it had impeached the President and adopted articles of impeachment which the House managers had been instructed to carry to the Senate. See "Messages from the House Received Subsequent to Sine Die Adjournment," *Congressional Record*, vol. 145, Jan. 6, 1999, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ Note, however, that each party must abide by certain Senate rules governing the assignment process. See CRS Report RL30743, *Committee Assignment Process in the U.S. Senate: Democratic and Republican Party Procedures*, by Judy Schneider

¹⁸ Sen. Daschle, "Senate Resolution 7 — Designating the Chairmen of the Following Senate Committees," *Congressional Record*, daily edition, Jan. 3, 2001, p. S14.

¹⁹ The Senate's equal party strength was accompanied by a broader agreement between the parties to modify certain Senate practices during the 107th Congress. See CRS Report RS20785, *The Senate Powersharing Agreement*, by Paul Rundquist, and CRS Report RL30881, *Senate Organization in the 107th Congress, The Powersharing Agreement and Recent Developments*, by Paul Rundquist.