



Speakers of the House: Elections, 1913-2007

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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. Members normally vote for the candidate of their 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 voting “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 110th Congresses), a Speaker was elected four 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. Four such elections have been necessary since 1913. In the earlier two cases, the House elected the new Speaker by resolution; in the more recent two, 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, it usually happened that 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 1943 through 1995, only the nominated Republican and Democratic candidates received votes, representing the culmination of the establishment of an exclusively two-party system at the national level.

In four of the six elections since 1997 (105th, 107th-109th Congresses), however, some Members voted for Members of their own party other than the party nominees. Also, some Members in 1997 voted for candidates who were not then Members of the House. Although the Constitution does not so require, the Speaker has always been a Member. Further, in 2001, a Member affiliated with one major party voted for the nominee of the other. Until then, House practice had long taken for granted that voting for Speaker was demonstrative of party affiliation in 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. Customarily, the conference of each major party in the House selects a candidate whose name is formally placed in nomination before the roll call. Members may vote for one of these nominated candidates or for another individual. Usually, Members vote for the candidate nominated by their own party conference, 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 2007 (110th Congress). It shows the votes cast for the nominees of the two major parties, for other candidates nominated from the floor, and for 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 four times during the period examined:

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

On the two earlier occasions among these four, the election was by resolution rather than by roll call vote. On the more recent two, 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.”¹ A candidate for Speaker may 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 vote “present” rather than voting for a candidate. During the period examined, this kind of result has occurred four times:

- in 1917 (65th Congress), “Champ” Clark (D-MO) was elected with 217 votes;

¹ The Clerk, “Parliamentary Inquiry,” remarks from the chair, *Congressional Record*, vol. 143, Jan. 7, 1997, p. 117.

- in 1923 (68th Congress), Frederick Gillett (R-MA) was elected with 215 votes;
- in 1943 (78th Congress), Sam Rayburn (D-TX) was elected with 217 votes; and
- in 1997 (105th Congress), Newt Gingrich (R-GA) was elected with 216 votes.

Also, in 1931 (72nd Congress), the candidate of the new Democratic majority, John Nance Garner of Texas (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 or not any Speaker may have been elected lacking a majority of the *then qualified* membership of the House.²

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 throughout the period examined, only once during that period did the House fail to elect on the first roll call.³ 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. Progressives 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 favored by the progressives. Thus the Republican was ultimately elected, although (as noted earlier) still with less than a majority of the full membership.⁴

Third and Additional Candidates

The opening of the 105th Congress in 1997 marked the first time since 1943 that anyone other than the two major party candidates received votes for Speaker. Exclusively two-party voting had characterized the entire period since World War II, and the entire period of the “modern

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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

Congress,” usually reckoned from the implementation in 1947 (80th Congress) of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 (P.L. 79-601, 60 Stat. 812).

Earlier, however, the presence of votes for other candidates was normal, occurring in 11 of the 16 Congresses (63rd through 78th) that convened from 1913 through 1943. On seven of those 11 occasions, candidates for Speaker, in addition to 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.

The pattern of 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.

In 1997, 2001, 2003, and 2005 at least one Member voted for a member of their own party who was not that party’s official nominee. These events may indicate the emergence of a new period in voting for Speaker. Votes cast for other candidates in these years reflected specific circumstances and events, however, rather than established factions or even identifiable political groupings.

The 1997 ballot was also notable because votes were cast for candidates who were not Members of the House at the time. Although the Constitution does not require the Speaker (or any other officer of either chamber) to be a Member, he has always been so, and it is not known that any votes for individuals other than Members to be Speaker had ever previously been cast in the entire history of the House.

Finally, 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 voting for each candidate, examination of other available records confirms that no such action had occurred at least for the previous half century. Rather, House practice had long taken for granted that the vote for Speaker determines, or at least demonstrates, not only which parties command majority and minority status, but also of which Members each of these parties is composed. Subsequently, in organizing for that Congress (the 107th), the party caucus against whose nominee the Member in question voted did not formally expel him, but declined to provide him with committee assignments.

Table I. Individuals Receiving Votes for Speaker, 1913-2007

Year	Republican Nominee	Votes	Democratic Nominee	Votes	Others Receiving Votes	Votes
1913	James R. Mann (NY)	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 (NY)	195	James B. (“Champ”) Clark (MO)	222		
1917	James R. Mann (NY)	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

Year	Republican Nominee	Votes	Democratic Nominee	Votes	Others Receiving Votes	Votes
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		
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		

Year	Republican Nominee	Votes	Democratic Nominee	Votes	Others Receiving Votes	Votes
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		
1997	Newt Gingrich (GA)	216	Richard A. Gephardt (MO)	205	James Leach (R-IA) Robert H. Michel ^b Robert Walker ^c	2 1 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		

Source: *Journals* of the House of Representatives (for 2003-2007, *Congressional Record*, daily edition). Party designations are taken from the *Congressional Directory* for the respective years.

Key:

Elected candidate in **bold**.

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

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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