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General Debate in Committee of the Whole

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Summary

The House considers most important bills (and resolutions) on the floor by resolving into the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union. This is a committee on which all Representatives serve and which meets on the House floor. The House acts on a measure by resolving into Committee of the Whole (as it usually is called) first to debate the bill as a whole and subsequently to debate and vote on any amendments to the bill. At the end of this process, the committee “rises” and reports the bill back to the House with whatever amendments the Committee of the Whole has approved. Then the House votes on these amendments and on final passage of the bill. The process of considering a bill in Committee of the Whole has two distinct stages: first, a period for general debate; and second, a process of debating and voting on amendments to the bill. What follows in this report focuses exclusively on the general debate phase; other reports discuss the amendment process in Committee of the Whole.

General debate is a period of time set aside for debating the merits of the bill as a whole, the state of current law on the subject of the bill, the need for new legislation, the various provisions of the bill, and possible amendments to it. This is a time for debate only. No amendments to the bill are in order, nor can Members offer any other motions that can affect the content of the bill or its fate.

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Setting and Allocating the Time for General Debate

The total amount of time available for general debate usually is specified in the special rule, reported by the Rules Committee and adopted by the House, which brings the bill to the floor and governs its consideration while on the floor. Typically, the amount of time set aside for general debate is one hour. That time normally is divided equally between the control of the chairman of the committee with jurisdiction over the bill and the ranking minority Member of the committee; these two Representatives act as the majority and minority party floor managers of the bill. There may be more than one hour provided for general debate on particularly important bills and on bills that touch on the jurisdiction of more than one House committee. In the latter case, the special rule typically allocates control over some portion of the time for general debate to each committee chairman and each ranking minority Member.

Not all measures are considered under the terms of a special rule, however. When a measure is called up for consideration as a privileged matter there is no special rule to govern the terms of general debate. For example, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee can call up a general appropriations bill as a privileged matter and move that the House resolve into Committee of the Whole to consider it. In that case, the chairman proposes to limit and divide the time for general debate, and the House agrees to this proposal by unanimous consent, before Members vote on resolving into Committee of the Whole. Similarly, there may be statutory provisions that govern House floor consideration of certain kinds of measures. These provisions usually specify the amount and allocation of time for general debate. For example, under Section 305 of the Congressional Budget Act, as amended, a congressional budget resolution may be considered as a privileged matter with a maximum of 14 hours for general debate.

Engaging in General Debate

Once in Committee of the Whole, the chairman of the Committee of the Whole first recognizes the majority floor manager to make his or her opening statement. When the majority floor manager concludes, he or she reserves the balance of the time remaining. Then the chairman recognizes the minority floor manager for the same purpose. After these two opening statements, the chairman recognizes each floor manager to yield portions of the time remaining to him or her

to other Members who wish to speak. Members who want to participate in general debate usually contact their party's floor manager in advance to request that time be reserved for them.

A manager may yield one or more minutes at a time to other Members, or sometimes as little as 30 seconds if many Members want to participate in the debate. If Member A is one of the floor managers and yields a certain amount of time to Member B, Member B may use part or all of that time to engage in exchanges with other Members. However, Member B may not yield specific portions of the time (such as one or two minutes) that was yielded to him or her. Member B simply may yield or decline to yield to another Member. If Member B does yield, he or she always has the option of reclaiming the time whenever he or she chooses.

The chairman of the Committee of the Whole normally alternates in recognition between the two floor managers in an effort to ensure that they use their time at roughly the same rate. From time to time, floor managers may ask the chairman how much time they have remaining, so they can allocate their time carefully. The majority floor manager has the right to make the closing statement during general debate. If a floor manager has no need for the remaining time, he or she may "yield back" the balance of that time.

When all the time for general debate has been consumed or yielded back, general debate ends, and Members may proceed into the second stage of consideration in Committee of the Whole: the process of offering, debating, and voting on amendments.

Related CRS reports include CRS Report 98-564, *Committee of the Whole: Stages of Action on Measures*, by (name redacted), CRS Report 98-143, *Procedural Distinctions between the House and the Committee of the Whole*, by (name redacted), CRS Report 98-439, *Amendment Process in the Committee of the Whole*, by (name redacted), and CRS Report 98-870, *Quorum Requirements in the House: Committee and Chamber*, by (name redacted) .

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