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Congress's Early Organization Meetings

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Summary

Since the mid-1970s, the House and Senate have convened early organization meetings in November or December of even-numbered years to prepare for the start of the new Congress in January.

The purposes of these meetings are both educational and organizational. Educational sessions range from legislative procedures and staff hiring to current issues. Organizational sessions elect class officers, party leaders, and chamber officers; name committee representatives and other party officials; and select committee chairmen and often committee members. Such actions are officially ratified at the start of the new Congress.

Background

As the complexities of the problems facing America have increased, Congress has responded the way hundreds of their constituents have, by going back to school. Early organization and orientation have provided Members a “leg up” in addressing pressing needs.

When the first Congress convened over 200 years ago, farmers and soldiers, journalists and scientists, carpenters and statesmen travelled from throughout the colonies to New York to take the oath of office as Members of the first Congress. They adopted rules, organized the structure of their chambers, and began legislating, each in accordance with the Member’s own individual understanding of just how to do that and how to be both a representative and a legislator, that is, how to be a Member of Congress.

There was no specific precedent to follow, no educational institution to attend to explore the intricacies of the legislative process, no classes to take to practice the politics of bicameralism and bipartisanship, no management consultant to teach them how to administer their offices. And so, these Members, and the hundreds who followed them, learned on the job, learned from their predecessors and each other, and learned from their mistakes. As the nation grew and prospered, and the number of Members increased with “manifest destiny,” it became clear that “on the job training” was no longer sufficient. The issues were becoming more complex, the procedures more intricate.

In the early 1970s, nearly 200 years after the first Members arrived to legislate, Congress began to consider formalizing its pre-Congress preparations, both structural and educational. The belief seemed to be that the sooner the organizational decisions were made and the structure was in place, the faster the start Members would have in solving the problems of the day. As well, the more Members knew about the intricacies and complexities of those problems, the more sophisticated the deliberations would be, the sooner those deliberations could begin, and the more comprehensive and appropriate the eventual response would be.

Formalizing the Process

Accordingly, in 1974, pursuant to the adoption of H.Res. 988 (93rd Congress), the Committee Reform Amendments of 1974, the House authorized early organizational meetings for its Members. The Senate followed suit soon thereafter.

Speaker Carl Albert and Minority Leader Gerald Ford agreed that during the transition time between Congresses, preparation for the next Congress would be of invaluable help in reducing the organizational and legislative congestion that normally accompanies the start of a Congress. Prior to the convening of a new Congress (somewhere between November 13 and December 20 of any even-numbered year), Democratic party caucuses or Republican party conferences may be called by the majority and minority leaders after consultation with the Speaker. If done, the business is, among other things, to choose party leaders, committee leaders, and committee members. As well, Members can pick up political tips, technical and administrative lessons, policy facts, figures and interpretations, and a sense of the informal “rules of the game.” Members-elect receive travel and per diem allowances, while reelected Members receive travel allowances if the House has adjourned *sine die*. Both groups are expected to attend.

In the past four decades, these meetings have become more formalized, more comprehensive, more valued, and more necessary. In fact, these sessions go far beyond those envisioned in 1974. Now, not only are there meetings for making organizational decisions, but also ones for educational purposes. Now, not only are they for Members, but some are for Members and staff

together while others are for staff only. Some are for Members and their spouses, some even are limited to spouses of newly elected Members. Now, not only are they sponsored by the party caucus and conferences, but by the respective campaign committees, the House Administration and Senate Rules and Administration Committees, Harvard University's Institute of Politics, the Congressional Management Foundation, the Congressional Research Service, the Heritage Foundation, and numerous informal groups both on and off the Hill. Now, not only are they held in Washington, DC, but in Cambridge, MA, Annapolis, MD, and Williamsburg, VA, as well. Each is well attended.

Educational Sessions

The educational sessions available range from legislative procedures, both in committee and on the floor, to how to hire a staff, and how to construct an office budget. They cover the broad range of current issues from defense to the environment to agriculture, from the specifics of a particular weapons system to the best method of reducing the federal deficit. They are taught by current Members, former Members, government practitioners, and academic experts. They focus on the substance of issues, previous attempts at legislative changes, the Administration's position, and the outlook for action in the current Congress. Numerous interest groups provide information for consideration, as does the party leadership.

Organizational Sessions

The organizational sessions serve as the first introduction to Congress and to each other for the new Members and attest to the value and intent of the early meetings envisioned in 1974. Accordingly, before the end of the year, class officers are elected, party leaders selected, and chamber officers, such as the chaplain, chosen. Regional representatives to steering and policy committees, designees to the committees on committees, and other party officials are named. Chairmen of selected committees are elected and members of those committees are often chosen. Each of these actions is then subject only to official ratification at the start of the Congress. Room selection drawings and room assignments are also accomplished during these sessions.

Conclusion

Each January of a recent odd-numbered year, Congress has begun work earlier than it used to. Both chambers immediately make remaining committee assignments, while committees hold their organizational sessions to establish subcommittees, make subcommittee assignments, hire staff, and adopt committee rules. Accordingly, when the scores of measures introduced on the first day are referred to committee, Congress is ready to get to work on its legislative agenda without having to spend time on organizational and administrative matters.

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