

# United Nations Issues: Congressional Representatives to the U.N. General Assembly

The annual session of the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly is held at U.N. Headquarters in New York City. The President generally appoints one Democrat and one Republican to serve as U.S. representatives to the session, alternating each year between the House and Senate. The 75<sup>th</sup> session opened in September 2020 and operated remotely due to the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic; congressional representatives from the Senate did not appear to participate. The 76<sup>th</sup> session is scheduled to begin on September 14, 2021. It remains to be seen as to whether the session will be held virtually or in-person (or a combination of both), and to what extent, if any, members of the House of Representatives might participate.

## Overview of the U.N. General Assembly

The U.N. General Assembly is composed of all 193 U.N. member states, including the United States. It is the primary deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the United Nations. Each country, including the United States, has one vote. A two-thirds majority vote is required for decisions related to key issues such as peace and security, admission of new members, and the budget. A simple majority vote applies for all other matters.

The Assembly's annual regular session opens in September and runs for one year. The main part of the session, from September to December, includes most of the work of the Assembly's six committees. The annual meeting of heads of state and government, often referred to as the "general debate," is held at the beginning of the Assembly session. Members of Congress generally serve as representatives during this time.

It is unclear what General Assembly events will be held in person or virtually during the 76<sup>th</sup> session. On August 26, the U.N. spokesperson described the situation as "in flux" due to COVID-19. Previously, the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the Assembly was virtual, with most high-level speeches delivered via video link. Members used a "silence procedure" to adopt resolutions. Under this procedure, the President of the Assembly circulates a draft resolution and members have at least 72 hours to raise objections. If there are no objections, the President then circulated a letter stating that the resolution was adopted.

## History of Congressional Representation

The concept of congressional representation to the U.N. General Assembly emerged from extensive participation by both Senators and Representatives in the 1945 San Francisco Conference on International Organization, which led to the adoption of the U.N. Charter. The practice began at the first Assembly session in 1946, when Members of the Senate and House held positions as representatives and

alternate representatives, respectively. Since that time, with few exceptions, each year two Senators have alternated with two Representatives—with the Senate typically serving in years when the House holds elections. In most cases, both parties have been represented and, when possible, the Administration and Congress have aimed to select Members who have not previously served as delegates. (See **Table 1** for a list of congressional representatives since 2006.)

## Legislative Authority

After the adoption of the U.N. Charter, Congress enacted the United Nations Participation Act of 1945 (UNPA; 22 U.S.C. 287 et seq.), which provides legislative authority for U.S. engagement in the United Nations. UNPA does not require congressional participation in sessions of the General Assembly, but anticipates and permits participation of Members of Congress, among other U.S. representatives, in such sessions. Section 2 of the act sets out the authorities for U.S. representation to the United Nations. Specifically, Section 2(a) specifies that the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, shall designate not more than five U.S. representatives to attend a specified session or specified sessions of the General Assembly. UNPA does not specify whether Members are eligible to be appointed as U.S. representatives; however, Section 2(g) prohibits compensation for Members serving as U.S. representatives, signaling that Members might serve.

## Role and Responsibilities

The role and duties of congressional representatives are not formalized; thus, the level and extent of congressional engagement during the Assembly session depends on the interests and priorities of individual Members. Delegates generally travel to New York at the beginning of the regular session. In the past, some Members have attended the general debate and the President's reception for visiting heads of state, while others have stayed for several additional days or returned for other parts of the Assembly session. Congressional representatives have also followed the activities of one of the General Assembly's six main committees, with at least one Member tracking the work of the fifth committee, which is responsible for administrative and budgetary matters related to the organization. Before or during the session, Members may also schedule appointments on policy issues of interest; these might include one-on-one visits with heads of state, foreign representatives, or U.N. officials.

Congressional representatives have often received support from congressional committee staff and State Department officials. For example, staff from the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) and Senate Foreign Relations

Committee (SFRC) might write statements, provide background materials and briefings, or arrange meetings for Members. State Department officials generally coordinate meetings and brief Members on U.S. policy and key issues facing the Assembly. The Department also provides Members with office space and services in the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York City.

## Appointment Process

As outlined in UNPA, the President, with the advice and consent of the Senate, may designate congressional representatives. In practice, SFRC has developed a policy of not holding hearings for temporary or part-time positions, including General Assembly representatives. Instead, both HFAC and SFRC have annually provided the President with their choices, who are then nominated by the President and confirmed by vote of the full Senate. Nominees for the 72<sup>nd</sup> (2017) and 73<sup>rd</sup> (2018) Assembly sessions were confirmed by the Senate by voice vote. From 2013 to 2016, however, it appears that while SFRC reported out nominees, the full Senate did not vote on the nominations. For the 74<sup>th</sup> (2019) and 75<sup>th</sup> (2020) sessions, the President did not transmit nominations to SFRC, and thus no committee or full Senate consideration took place. In each of those years, Members of Congress still served as representatives to the Assembly (with the exception of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

## Committee Selection

Although both HFAC and SFRC have at different times documented procedures for selecting congressional representatives, in practice the process appears to be informal and has varied over time depending on the priorities and preferences of committee leadership.

**House of Representatives.** HFAC does not appear to have a formal process for selecting congressional representatives to the General Assembly. Based on past practice, it has assigned one Member from each political party on the basis of seniority, starting with those who have not served as representatives; however, in recent years HFAC members have increasingly selected participants based on the Member's level of interest in U.N.-related issues and availability to attend the session.

**Senate.** SFRC also does not appear to have a formal process for selecting congressional representatives to the Assembly. In practice, the chairperson and ranking member select the representatives, who are usually chosen from among SFRC members. Similar to the House, congressional representatives from the Senate appear to be selected based on their interest in U.N. issues and availability.

## Role of the Executive Branch

In accordance with the President's authority to appoint U.S. representatives to the U.N. General Assembly, the executive branch is responsible for sending a letter of invitation to the individual Member appointing him or her to the U.S. delegation. At the same time, it customarily forwards the names of the selected Members to the Senate for confirmation, and encloses a full list of participants on the U.S. delegation. The first public notice is usually a press statement from individual members, a White House

announcement, or a notice of intention to nominate as part of the General Assembly delegation, subject to Senate confirmation.

The State Department provides funding for U.S. representatives to the General Assembly, including per diem, transportation, and lodging expenses. These activities are typically financed through the Diplomatic & Consular Programs account, which funds the Office of International Conferences in the International Organization Affairs Bureau (IO/C). IO/C is responsible for accrediting, instructing, and managing U.S. delegates to multilateral conferences, including the General Assembly.

**Table 1. Congressional Representatives to U.N. General Assembly Sessions: 2008 to 2020**

General Assembly Main Sessions	Representatives or Senators
75 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 14-Dec. 27, 2020)	None due to COVID-19 pandemic.
74 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 17-Dec. 27, 2019)	Rep. Barbara Lee Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers
73 <sup>rd</sup> (Sept. 18-Dec. 22, 2018)	Sen. Ron Johnson Sen. Jeff Merkley
72 <sup>nd</sup> (Sept. 12-Dec. 24, 2017)	Rep. Barbara Lee Rep. Christopher Smith
71 <sup>st</sup> (Sept. 13-Dec. 23, 2016)	Sen. Chris Coons Sen. Ron Johnson
70 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 16-Dec. 29, 2015)	Rep. Barbara Lee Rep. Christopher Smith
69 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 16-Dec. 29, 2014)	Sen. Ben Cardin Sen. Ron Johnson
68 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 17-Dec. 27, 2013)	Rep. Barbara Lee Rep. Mark Meadows
67 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 18-Dec. 24, 2012)	Sen. John Isakson Sen. Patrick Leahy
66 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 13-Dec. 24, 2011)	Rep. Ann Marie Buerkle Rep. Russ Carnahan
65 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 14-Dec. 24, 2010)	Sen. Jeanne Shaheen Sen. Roger Wicker
64 <sup>th</sup> (Sept. 15-Dec. 23, 2009)	Rep. William Delahunt Rep. Christopher Smith
63 <sup>rd</sup> (Sept. 16-Dec. 23, 2008)	Sen. Bob Corker Sen. Bill Nelson

**Sources:** CRS, White House and congressional press releases.

**Notes:** The dates represent the end of the main part of the Assembly session. They do not represent the entire session, which typically concludes the following September, the day before the next session begins.

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