



BASIC » TRAINING

PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS,
FACTS, AND STRATEGIES

House Floor Basics: People & Process

For any Member, new or veteran, the operation of the House floor can seem confusing. The House's presiding officer is attended to by a host of staff who support the day-to-day legislative functions of the House and facilitate the introduction of bills, the processing of committee reports, the recording of remarks on the House floor, and a variety of other functions. What follows is a basic description of each role's function, along with a basic outline of the legislative day.

ROSTRUM PERSONNEL AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

The Rostrum is the elevated platform located on the south side of the House chamber where the Member serving as the presiding officer stands or sits while the House is in session, along with the staff tending to the needs of the presiding officer and the House. Figure 1 shows the position for each of the major floor personnel positions on the Rostrum.

Bill Clerk. ① The Bill Clerk is a member of the Clerk's staff who is usually seated next to the "hopper" on the lower tier of the dais. The bill clerk receives and processes bills, resolutions, and lists of cosponsors, texts of amendments, and communications to the House. The Bill Clerk is also responsible for processing constitutional authority statements that are required to accompany bills.

Bills, cosponsor sheets, and constitutional authority statements are submitted directly to the hopper. Amendments for printing in the Congressional Record are to be placed in another box designated for that purpose on the lowest level of the rostrum.

Parliamentarian and Assistant Parliamentarians. ④ ② The Parliamentarian and his deputies are non-partisan appointees of the Speaker. The Parliamentarian counsels both the Speaker and individual members on the rules and precedents of the House. The Parliamentarian also makes recommendations to the Speaker on the referral of bills. A member of the Parliamentarian's staff is always in the chamber when the House is in session, including during special orders.

The Office of the Parliamentarian also prepares and publishes the rules and precedents, including the *House Rules and Manual* and *House Practice*.

Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms. ③ The Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms carries the Mace, the symbol of authority in the

House, at the beginning and end of each legislative day. That officer is responsible for bringing the chamber to order and preventing altercations.

Journal Clerk. ⑤ The Journal Clerk compiles the daily minutes of house proceedings known as the *Journal*, which is not a verbatim transcript like the *Congressional Record*. The *Journal* is the official record of the House's proceedings required under the Constitution.

Tally Clerks. ⑥ ⑦ Another member of the Clerk's staff, the tally clerk, is usually seated to the left of the Clerk's lectern. The tally clerk operates the electronic voting system, oversees the recording of votes on the House floor, receives reports of committees, and assigns report numbers (e.g. H. Rept. 112-123). The tally clerk also prepares the Calendars of the United States House of Representatives and History of Legislation. In addition to the "seated tally clerk," during the operation of the electronic voting system a "standing tally clerk" stands on the lowest level of the rostrum and collects votes cast via

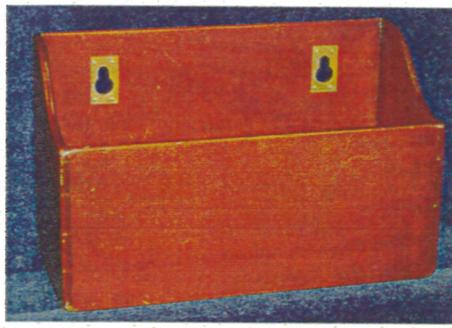


Figure 1. The "Hopper."

well cards and works with the seated tally clerk to ensure the accuracy of the vote.

Official Reporters. ⑧ The Official Reporters of Debate transcribe a verbatim account of remarks made on the House Floor for inclusion in the *Congressional Record*. They also provide transcription services to certain committees, such as the Committee on Rules.

Reading Clerk. ⑨ To the right of the Clerk's lectern are the reading clerks, who are responsible for reading aloud communications from the Senate, House bills, amendments, and other legislative matters. They are also responsible for tracking amendments adopted during consideration of a bill.

Clerk of the House. ⑩ The Clerk of the House is an elected officer of the House, responsible for managing the day-to-day legislative operations of the institution. The Clerk is usually not on the rostrum, outside of ceremonial occasions, and this position on the rostrum is then occupied by the Clerk to the Parliamentarian.

Clerks to the Reporters. ⑪ The Clerks to the Reporters produce the *Congressional Record* and collect written floor statements and extensions of remarks for inclusion in the *Record*. Members submitting an extension of remarks should drop a signed copy in the box marked for that purpose on the right side of the rostrum's lower-level, and staff should email a copy of the remarks to extensions@mail.house.gov.

Clerk to the Parliamentarian. ⑫ The Clerk to the Parliamentarian is the official time keeper for the legislative proceedings. The individual fulfilling this function identifies Members for the presiding officer, ensures that the rostrum personnel have all needed House documents, and tracks the use of time in debate.

Documentarian Pages. ⑬ The Documentarian Pages are the two pages who tend to the needs of the presiding officer and the chamber in general. The Documentarian Pages operate the controls for the House "bell system" which indicate the activity on the House floor and the elapsed time during an electronic vote.



Figure 2. Input terminal for the electronic voting system. Photo courtesy of the Office of the Clerk of the House.

They also assist members in setting up and taking down exhibits, such as charts and graphs.

OTHER IMPORTANT FLOOR PERSONNEL

Cloakroom Personnel. The Democratic and Republican Cloakrooms provide a variety of services to members of each caucus. The Republican Cloakroom provides members with up to date information on the legislative program and the progress of debate on the floor. The Cloakroom also maintains phone booths and computer workstations for members to use while on the floor. Finally, the Cloakroom is the point of contact for receiving "leaves of absence" from members who are not present on a particular day, as well as scheduling 5-minute speeches for morning hour debate or special order speeches (other than the Leadership hours). For updated information on what is happening on the floor, the Republican Cloakroom maintains a website at <http://repcloakroom.house.gov/>.

Floor Assistants. Each of the leadership offices with floor responsibilities (Speaker, Majority and Minority Leaders, and Majority and Minority Whips) have floor assistants stationed on the House floor to assist members during the consideration of legislation and voting. Floor assistants can often answer questions regarding the schedule, leadership, or committee positions on bills, and advise a member on a particular parliamentary process or procedure.

THE DAILY ORDER OF BUSINESS

Clause 1 of Rule XIV sets out the order of business in the House. The rule covers a number of items which are not routinely used (such as correcting the referral of bills), but a normal day normally follows this general outline:

1. **Morning Hour Debates.** Each morning before business begins, the Chair will recognize Members for 5 minute debates during "morning hour."
2. **The Prayer.** The prayer by the House or guest chaplain.
3. **Approval of the Journal.** The Speaker announces his approval of the House Journal, which is subject to a vote if demanded.
4. **The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.** Leadership of the pledge alternates be-

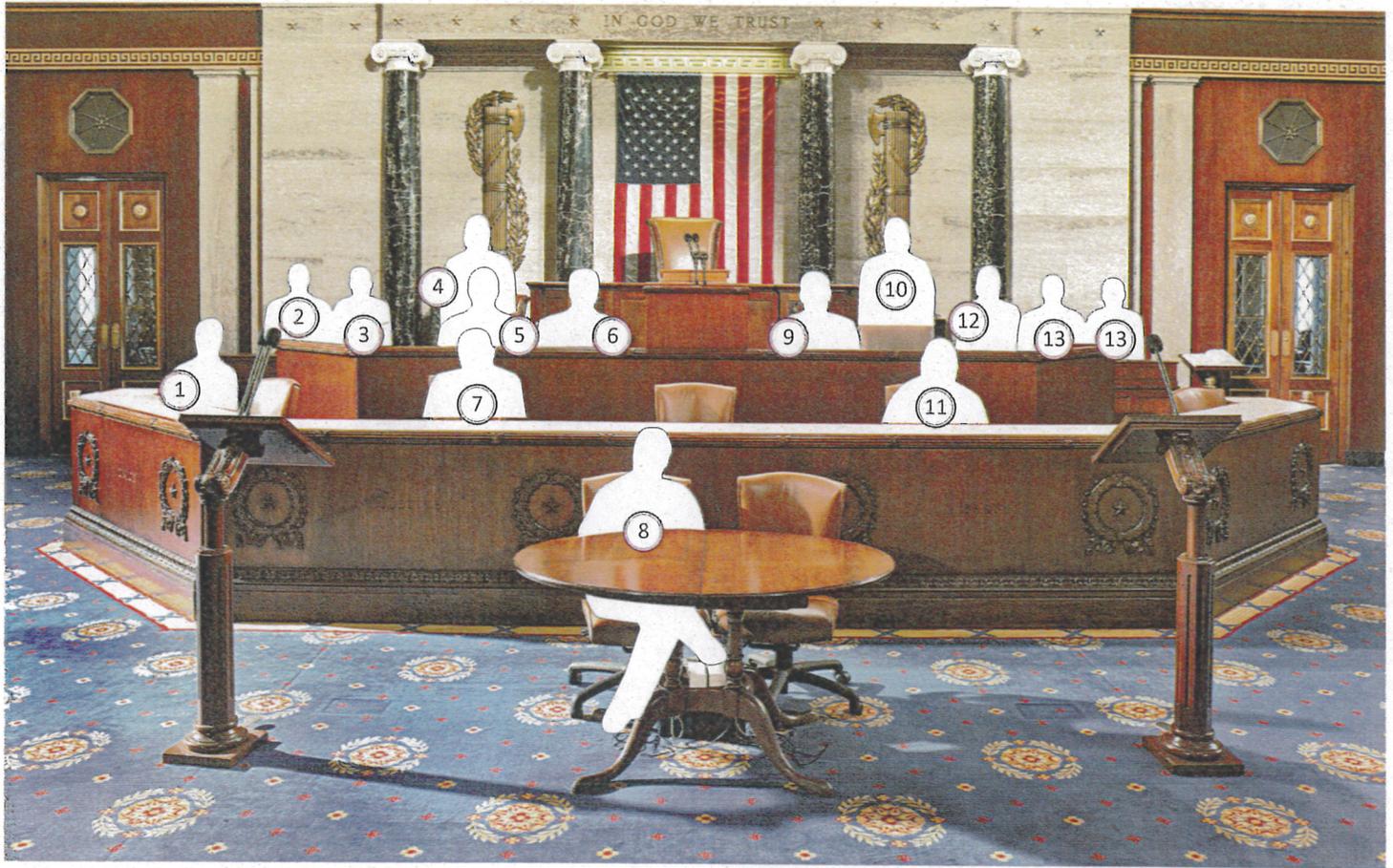


Figure 3. Positioning of rostrum personnel. This figure shows the location of each of the major individuals seated on the rostrum. For a key and an explanation of each function, see the accompanying text. Illustration courtesy of the Office of the Clerk of the House.

Each office's floor assistants have specific responsibilities as well. For instance, one of the Speaker's floor assistants is responsible for scheduling members to serve as presiding officers during debate, while the Whip's floor assistants operate the electronic voting system computer at the leadership table.

Committee Staff. When the House is considering a bill, staff from the primary and additional committees of jurisdiction are on the floor. Their job is twofold: first, they assist the Republican bill manager with allocating debate time and participation in debate, and second, they have a greater degree of understanding of the substance of the bill under consideration, and can often answer Member questions regarding the bill.



Figure 4. View of the Republican committee table (left) and Republican leadership table (right) from the back of the House chamber.

tween the Majority and Minority.

5. **One-Minute Speeches.** The Speaker will often recognize Members for short "one-minute" speeches.
6. **Legislative Business.** After the conclusion of one-minute speeches, the House will move to the day's legisla-

tive business, often beginning with the consideration of a rule from the Rules committee, followed by the legislation of the day.

7. **Special Orders.** After the conclusion of the day's legislative business, the House will proceed to consider "Spe-

cial Order" speeches.

8. **Adjournment.** At the conclusion of Special Order speeches, the chair entertains a motion to adjourn, which is usually agreed to by unanimous consent or by voice vote.

OPERATION OF THE ELECTRONIC VOTING SYSTEM

The current Electronic Voting System (EVS) was installed in January 2004, and it represents the fourth major upgrade of the EVS since its inception in 1972. There are 47 EVS input devices on the House floor, including a primary terminal that is located on the rostrum and controlled by the seated tally clerk. The remaining 46 voting stations are located behind various Members' seats. Figure 2 shows a voting terminal, and figure 5 shows their locations. In addition to these input devices, there are several terminals on the House floor that allow Members and staff to view the progress of the vote and the results in real time.

Members may cast or change their votes by inserting their personal voting card into one of the 46 voting machines and pushing one of three buttons—a green button for “yea,” a red button for “nay,” or an amber button for “present.” In addition to voting at an electronic voting station, Members may cast their votes manually in the area in front of the rostrum

referred to as the “well.” To do so, Members retrieve an appropriately colored card (called a “well card”) from the table in the well. On the card, they write their name, district, and the State or territory they represent and turn it in to the standing tally clerk. The standing tally clerk verifies the identifying information, records the Roll Call number on the card, and hands it to the seated tally clerk, who enters the vote into the EVS.

There are display boards above the east and the west doors of the chamber, referred to as “electronic summary displays.” These display the time remaining in the vote and the running tally. The display board behind the Chair displays the vote of each Member.

Members may verify their votes at any voting station or by checking the display board above the rostrum. As votes are cast at the voting stations, the EVS automatically records each vote and updates

the display boards behind the Chair and above the east and west doors.

For purposes of the vote total, although a Member may cast and change his or her vote any number of times during a record vote, each Member has only one vote—the last one cast.

In 1976, Speaker Albert announced changes to the voting policy, still in effect, that allows changes at voting stations to occur only during the first 10 minutes of a 15-minute vote. To change a vote after the first 10 minutes, a Member must vote in the well by well card, unless the Member voted present, in which case that Member may change his or her vote until the voting stations are closed. During a 5-minute vote, Members may change their vote at any station throughout the duration of the vote.

(Explanation of the EVS adapted from H.Rept. 110-885.)

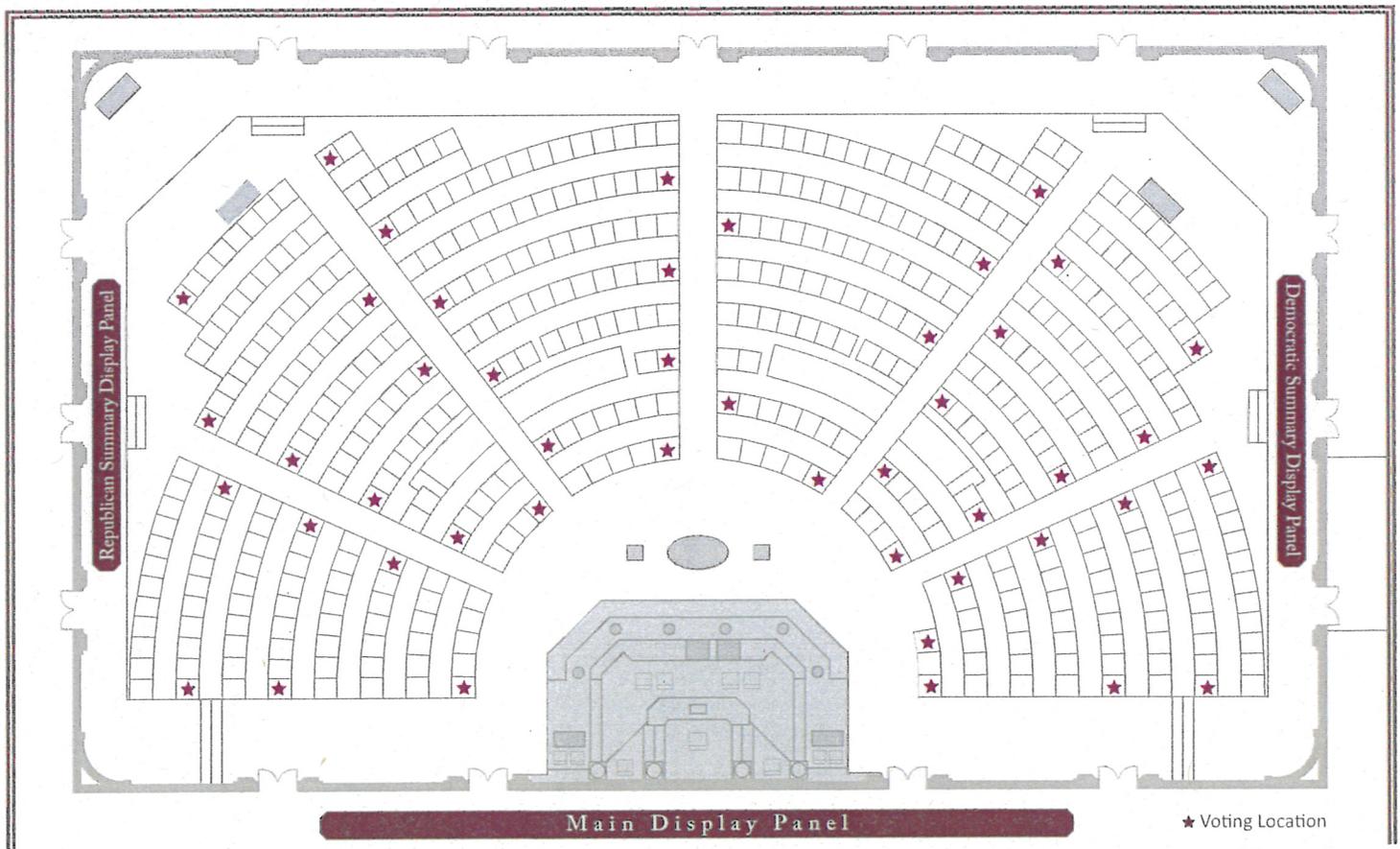


Figure 5. Location of voting terminals and displays on the floor of the House. Illustration courtesy of the Office of the Clerk of the House.