A Message from the Speaker

The United States House of Representatives, with its 435 Representatives (plus four Delegates and a Resident Commissioner) representing all Americans, meets in the House Chamber to conduct its daily legislative business. Inside the Chamber on the Floor of the House, Members of Congress introduce legislation, debate, and vote on important national and international issues. The House meets in Joint Sessions here with the Senate to receive the President’s annual State of the Union address. The House and Senate also meet together in this Chamber to receive periodic addresses from foreign leaders and, once every four years, to count electoral ballots after a presidential election. As Speaker of the House, I am the Chamber’s presiding officer and top leader.

This brochure highlights many parts of the House Chamber, including the Speaker’s Lobby and the Chamber’s surrounding corridors. I hope the brochure helps you understand the architecture, art, history, and legislative importance of the House Chamber. Welcome to the Chamber of the People’s House!

Sincerely,

Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
Welcome to the House Chamber

Vital democratic processes and a rich heritage resound in the House Chamber. Legislative activities in the U.S. House of Representatives begin and end in this room. Every bill is introduced here, and those reported out of Committee return to be debated and voted on. The House Chamber hosts the President’s annual State of the Union address, delivered to a Joint Session of Congress, as well as addresses by foreign dignitaries. It has also served as the scene of some of the most dramatic legislative events in American history—as Representatives craft laws and decide questions of war and peace.

The House met in this room for the first time on December 16, 1857. Formerly the House met in the Old House Chamber, now called National Statuary Hall. Seven Delegates and 234 Representatives (from 32 states and seven territories) sat at individual desks.

The Chamber has been altered several times to meet the needs of a growing membership.

The present, theater-style seating was installed in 1913. Major renovations made from 1949 to 1950 included the removal of the original marble rostrum and the replacement of the stained-glass ceiling. The House Floor now accommodates 435 Representatives, five Delegates, and the Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico.

Voting Machine Introduced in 1973, electronic voting is one in a long series of changes brought about by technological advances from the telegraph to the internet.

Voting Boards Votes are registered on the panels above the House Chamber’s Press Gallery. When Members are not voting, the panels are disguised as brocade fabric.
U.S. Flag  By tradition, the U.S. flag hangs behind the Speaker’s chair on the rostrum.

Speaker’s Rostrum  This three-tiered structure dominates the Chamber. The Speaker presides, with the assistance of the Parliamentarian, from atop the rostrum; staff who assist with Floor operations occupy the lower tiers of the rostrum. Relief carvings of laurel wreaths and the words Union, Justice, Tolerance, Liberty, and Peace adorn the front.

Bronze Fasces  Two bronze fasces—symbols of civic authority since Roman times—are mounted on the wall behind the rostrum. Laurel branches, representing victory, twine around them.

Mace  The House Sergeant at Arms uses the mace—a symbolic weapon which, like the fasces, represents authority—to bring the Chamber to order and to end altercations. The mace currently in use, with its silver American bald eagle and shaft of bound ebony rods, dates to 1841. The original House mace was destroyed when the British burned the Capitol in 1814.

Portrait of George Washington  In 1834 the House commissioned John Vanderlyn to paint George Washington’s likeness for display in the Chamber on the opposite side of the rostrum from his comrade-in-arms, the Marquis de Lafayette. The portrait depicts Washington in his role as statesman, with his sword concealed and hand resting on books and documents.

Portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette  Artist Ary Scheffer gave his portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette to the House in honor of the Marquis’ 1824 visit to the United States. A hero of the American Revolution, Lafayette was the first foreign dignitary to address the House.

Lecterns  Members address the House from a pair of lecterns. Traditionally Democrats speak from the lectern on the left and Republicans from the lectern on the right.

Well  The area directly in front of the rostrum is called the well of the House. Members speak from the lecterns. Seated in the center, Official Reporters transcribe House proceedings.

Bill Hopper  Representatives introduce bills by placing them in the bill hopper attached to the side of the rostrum. The term derives from an agricultural storage bin used to house grain. Bills are retrieved from the hopper and referred to Committees with the appropriate jurisdiction.

Leadership Tables  From these tables, Representatives from each party, called floor managers, control the flow of debate on bills before the House.

Members’ Seats  Members are free to choose any seat in the Chamber. By tradition, Republicans generally sit on one side of the aisle and Democrats on the other. From the perspective of this photograph, Republicans are on the right and Democrats on the left.

Speaker’s Lobby  The doors facing the Members’ seats lead to the Speaker’s Lobby, where Members can congregate privately while Congress is in session.
Completed in 1857, the Capitol’s new wing—with its marble floors, bronze staircases, and frescoed ceilings—added to the stately atmosphere of the House. The ornate Speaker’s Lobby, behind the doors flanking the rostrum, has huge windows that face south and open onto a balcony. The lobby, where Representatives gather to discuss issues and current events, was originally divided into offices and a hallway. In the 1870s, the House knocked out walls to improve ventilation, creating one grand, airy space. In the nineteenth century, citizens would meet their Representatives near the Speaker’s Lobby to advocate for a cause or bill. This practice is now called lobbying.

Speakers’ Portraits

The service of former Speakers of the House is commemorated with portraits displayed in the Speaker’s Lobby and adjoining Members’ staircases. This tradition began in 1852, when artist Giuseppe Fagnani donated his portrait of Henry Clay in remembrance of the former Speaker’s death.

In 1891, supporters of legendary Speaker Thomas Brackett Reed commissioned a portrait by John Singer Sargent, the most prominent American portraitist of his day. The contrast of Reed’s renowned wit and his “impassive and inward turned eye,” as Sargent described it, made this work a particular challenge.

Bronze Stair Railing

The Members’ staircases, built in 1857, provide speedy routes from the Speaker’s Lobby to Committee rooms on the first floor of the Capitol. Sculptor Edmond Baudin took great pains with the figures in the bronze railings; a deer he used as a model lived in his studio for three weeks.