

Glossary of Political Terms

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News about political and economic issues often contains terms unfamiliar to many people. Regular news stories don't usually define these terms because their purpose is to report events, not to explain them. That's one of the purposes of this column. So, here are some of the most common political terms.

The US and state constitutions give Congress and the legislatures the power to write their own operating rules. These are the most common leadership positions. The members vote to choose people for each position. Local councils are so small that they don't have these positions.

Speaker of the House

The speaker manages the daily business of the House – scheduling sessions, controlling debates, appointing committee members, etc. The speaker can advance, delay, or kill a bill just by scheduling – or refusing to schedule – a vote. Her/his personality, priorities, and politics play a significant role in public events. Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-CA is the Speaker of the US House of Representatives. Rep. Dennis M. O'Brien, R-Phila., is the Speaker of the Pennsylvania House.

President Pro Tem

According to the US constitution, the vice president is the official president of the senate. Lieutenant governors hold the position in the states. Since the vice president and lieutenant governors don't usually attend senate sessions, the president pro tempore (a Latin term meaning *for a time*) performs the same duties as the speaker of the house. Sen. Robert Byrd, D-WV is President Pro Tem of the US Senate. Rep. Joseph B. Scarnati III, R-Warren, is the President Pro Tem of the Pennsylvania Senate.

Majority and Minority Leaders

The majority party has the most members in the legislature, and the minority has fewer members. The members of each party elect their leaders. The role of the party leader is to act as spokesperson for the party on the floor during debates and with the public and media. The leader also encourages members to vote along party lines, plans legislative agendas, and consults with members to gauge their attitudes on public issues. Currently, the Democratic Party holds a majority in both houses of the US Congress. In Pennsylvania, the Republicans hold the majority in the Senate and the Democrats in the House. The federal and state legislative party leaders are:

US House Majority Leader – Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-MD

US House Minority Leader – Rep. John Boehner, R-OH

US Senate Majority Leader – Sen. Harry Reid, D-NV

US Senate Minority Leader – Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-KY

PA House Majority Leader – Rep. H. William DeWeese, D-Waynesburg

PA House Minority Leader – Rep. Samuel H. Smith, R-Punxsutawney

PA Senate Majority Leader – Sen. Dominic Pileggi, R-Media

PA Senate Minority Leader – Sen. Robert J. Mellow, D-Peckville

Majority and Minority Whips

The party whips serve as assistants to the leaders. Their role is to mobilize the party votes, act as liaison between the members and the party leadership, and to coordinate party strategy. The current whips are:

US House Majority Whip: Rep. James Clyburn, D-SC

US House Minority Whip: Rep. Roy Blunt, R-MO

US Senate Majority Whip: Sen. Richard Durbin, D-IL

US Senate Minority Whip: Sen. John Kyl, R-AZ

PA House Majority Whip: Rep. Keith R. McCall, D-Lansford

PA House Minority Whip: Rep. David G. Argall, R-Tamaqua

PA Senate Majority Whip: Sen. Jane Clare Orie, R-Pittsburgh

PA Senate Minority Whip: Sen. Michael A. O’Pake, D-Reading

Committee Chair

Legislatures are divided into many committees, and each member serves on several of them. Committee chairs are responsible for examining pending legislation and voting on whether to send it to the floor for a vote of the entire membership. Part of that examination includes holding hearings to gather testimony from government officials responsible for the subject matter. Committees are also supposed to oversee the operations of the executive branch of government, although Congress hasn’t been living up to that part of its job during the last seven years. A legislative body may have as many as two dozen committees. Check the Web sites below to find the members of the committees in which you are interested.

Ranking Member

The ranking member of a committee is the member of the minority party with the most seniority. The ranking member usually becomes the committee chair when the majority party changes hands. Check the Web sites below to find the members of the committees in which you are interested.

For more information:

All federal, state, and local government matters: www.usa.gov

US House of Representatives: www.house.gov

US Senate: www.senate.gov

PA General Assembly: www.legis.state.pa.us

I’d like to thank my family, friends, and neighbors for their help and support during my recent illness and recovery.

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