

INSIDER INTERVIEW

**Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich: Musical Chairs**

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*With the new Congress come broad changes in committee chairs and assignments, many due to the term limits imposed by the GOP in 1995. NationalJournal.com's [Anne Wagner](#) talked with former House Speaker **Newt Gingrich** about how assignments are given, this year's switches and what lies ahead for the 107th Congress.*

**Q. Give me a quick rundown of how the House committee assignments are made and what the speaker's role is in making them.**

**A.** Well, it changed from when I first came to the Congress in 1978.... Once I became speaker we had a system, which was a steering committee which was chaired by the speaker, and which had... representatives from the biggest states, representatives from the leadership and representatives from different regions. Also, some of the key committee chairmen would end up on the steering committee. And we would literally consider every possibility. We would then vote.... The speaker had the most votes in the room but did not have anything like a majority by himself.

And so you'd consider, first of all, what does a member need for re-election. For example, I wanted to get on what was then Public Works because I represented the Atlanta airport, which was the largest source of employment in my district. And it was very important as the only Republican from Georgia to be able to be effective in representing the airport. And I made a straightforward case; the way you do it when you're a new member is you go see the committee chairman [of the committee] you want to join, you go see all the members of the steering committee, and in particular you see [that] the campaign committee chairman -- **Tom Davis** in the current situation -- wants to get you re-elected. And you make the case. You think through: "What do I need?" First of all, you look at: "What would help my district? What would help me get re-elected?"

Then I would say that members break into two groups. Members who are really interested in the legislative process, in terms of they want to go to Appropriations because they're interested in how the government spends money, or they want to go to the Rules committee because they want to have an impact on how legislation comes through, or they want to go to Ways and Means... either because they care about health or international trade or about how the tax code affects the economy. So that leads you in the direction of, "What game do you want to play?" The other thing people do is they have a particular interest, and people get on the Science committee generally because they really are interested in science, and they're curious about what the American role in science is, or very often they'll get in International Relations because they have a real interest in the U.S. role in the world. They are real interested in the opportunity to go around the world and learn more. So I think those are the... primary ways in which House members end up on committees.

**Q. When do House members put in for the committees they want?**

**A.** Oh, the smart ones, if you're a freshman who is newly elected, you do it within a week or two of winning the election. If you are a member coming back and you want to change committees... I would say some of them start two to three years in advance. Certainly, they start no later than six months in advance.

It's a real process. It's a little bitty miniature campaign inside the Congress. And usually, if you're a freshman, you'll have a member from the freshman class, you'll have a member who represents

your state -- either directly if it's a big state or as part of a group if it's a smaller state -- and you'll have the chairman of the campaign committee. And their job is to represent you. You'll have sent in a letter, you'll have asked for things, you'll have gone by to see the speaker and the majority leader and the whip and the conference chairman. But then, in addition to that, you'll have these three people who will actually speak for you.

**Q. How long does it take to actually make the assignments?**

A. I would say it takes generally three long days. I've seen the room change its opinion. I've seen very close votes where it will be 16 to 15, for example. I've seen members who don't quite make it this year but then you sort of, in the back of your head, say, gee, next year or two years from now we've got to really give them a shot if they want to get back on that committee.

**Q. Before the elections, we often hear speculation about which committees a member will serve on if he or she is elected. Is there really any way to predict this?**

A. Well, I think generally if you get a letter from the speaker and the majority leader, that's a big step in the right direction. And let's say you're representing an agricultural district and it *really* matters to your district that you be on Agriculture. Well, the odds are pretty good that you're going to get there anyway. But if it will help you win the election, it's not too hard to get one of the senior leaders to come to your district for a campaign event, and at the campaign event they'll have a press conference and they'll tell the press, "I'm going to do everything I can to get them on the right committee." And that does have some effect on the election, and usually they keep their word. Usually, that's where they end up. But the leadership's pretty careful not to say that unless they can do it.

**Q. Can anything help a member get on the committee he or she wants?**

A. Sure. Hard work, proof that they will really do the job, proof that they are part of a team. That they will stick with the rest of the team. I think all of those things help. And then I think that if it is really an election necessity, that's a help. Once you get on your first committee, part of the job is to do a really good job, and prove that you're really a good member, and that helps you get on stronger committees.

**Q. How likely is it that members will get their first choices?**

A. It depends on how reasonable their first choices are. If they're freshmen and their first choices relate directly to their district, the odds are pretty high they'll get it. But if they come in and they say, "Gee, I'd like either Appropriations or Ways and Means," well, as a freshman that's not very realistic.

**Q. Are those the most popular choices?**

A. I would say the most powerful committees are -- in order -- probably Appropriations and Ways and Means are tied. And then I would say that Rules and Commerce are tied. And those four really have a tremendous amount of clout. But they're also the hardest to get on.

**Q. Do you find that most members, when they come in as freshmen, are asking for those committees?**

A. Well, some do. I'd say about a third of them do. But the others usually are pretty good about talking to senior members and saying, "What should I do?" And usually when you arrive you

have a buddy -- either somebody from your state or somebody who basically is asked to help you learn the ropes. And so you have somebody you can go to and say, "What do you think?" And all of them know the campaign committee chairman, so they'll all go to Tom Davis and ask his advice. And generally they're pretty smart. Generally they listen.

**Q. Are there any least popular committee assignments?**

A. I wouldn't mention them.

**Q. Do members usually stay on the committees they are picked for, or do you find a lot of change?**

A. You find that at least half of the members change to other committees over the course of time. Either they go to a more powerful committee or they get bored with the committee they are on, or for some reason, but I'd say that about half the members change.

**Q. Why do you think that is?**

A. I think partly it's personality. Some members see their first assignment as a stepping stone to a more powerful committee. Other members really like the topic. If you talk, for example, to the Agriculture committee members or the Infrastructure and Public Works committee members, as a group they really like what they are doing.... It's a topic that interests them. And you find a lot of members that stay there because it's really important to them. They think these issues matter.

**Q. How long does a member usually have to be in Congress before he or she gets one of those very powerful committees?**

A. At least one term, and fairly often two or three terms.

**Q. You were the speaker when the House decided to limit its chairmen to six years...**

A. One of the things I'm proudest of -- I think we got 13 new committee chairmen a week ago. I think that's a genuine change. And I'm very proud that our members didn't back off. It really does open up the system. Look at how the Democrats, like [former Ways and Means Chairman **Dan**] **Rostenkowski** and [former Commerce Chairman **John**] **Dingell**.... We had a chairman of Appropriations -- Congressman **Jamie Whitten** -- who entered the House three years before I was born, [was on] the Appropriations committee the year before I was born, and was chairman of the committee in 1993, when I was 50 years old. So that gives you some sense of how big the change is, and I'm very proud of the House Republicans. They really substantially changed the process.

**Q. What went into the decision to change it to a six-year term?**

A. Well, I think a belief that if you work your heart out for six years, that's a long time. That's a lot of energy. And maybe it's time to have new blood and new ideas and new approaches at that point. And we campaigned on a term-limits provision in the Contract With America. We didn't have the votes to pass a constitutional amendment, but we did have the votes to pass a basic rules change in the House. And I think all the members felt that was the right thing to do.

**Q. Do you think this is still the right thing?**

A. Absolutely. And I think you'll find that new energy, new excitement, new staff, that it's a very positive step toward opening up the system.

**Q. There have been a couple of instances in the news -- for example, Henry Hyde was ousted from Judiciary and moved over to International Relations even though he wanted to remain in charge of Judiciary. Do you think there will be any trouble because of things like this?**

**A.** First of all, there's nothing in the rules that prevents a member from going to a different committee. **Don Young** is going from Natural Resources to Infrastructure, for example. That's permitted under the rules. But... what it does mean is you've got a brand new chairman with a brand new set of questions. They're pretty senior people, so they're not amateurs, they're not having to learn on the job, but **Henry Hyde** will bring a fresh breath of new thoughts and new perspective to International Relations, where he has served for many years.... And again, there is a tremendous temptation in Henry's case, both because he is so widely respected and admired and because he spent over a year on the impeachment process, and he had a good case to make, but I am really proud that they stuck to their guns. They gave him a good, powerful committee, but at the same time they sustained the pattern of six-year limits.

**Q. What about the role of seniority in choosing committee chairmen now?**

**A.** I think it has, appropriately, a powerful but not singular role. The bias is in favor of seniority, but that's not the only thing they consider. I think that was good. I think there are a couple places where they made real decisions, and... I'm not going to second guess them. I think that's what they have to do. The leadership is a little like the coaches of a football team or a basketball team. They've got to put on the field the best team they can field, and if they think there's a substantial advantage in the second- or third-ranking guy becoming the chairman, I think they have an obligation to the rest of the team -- particularly in a setting like we've got now, which is so narrow -- to field the strongest team they can field.

**Q. Finally, let's talk about the close partisan balance of the new Congress. What do you think this will mean in terms of getting things done?**

**A.** It will mean that ideas matter a lot, being able to attract people to a new idea or attract people to a new solution. It's going to have to be bipartisan. Remember, the Democratic Congress that took control in 1954 -- that was the beginning of 40 years of Democratic control -- was a narrower majority than this was. So, we've had narrow majorities before. Sometimes they lead you to lose control. Sometimes they lead you to establish 40 years of one party being in charge. And I think **Denny Hastert's** doing a very good job. The House is a much more manageable institution than the Senate. The rules are much more practical. But it's not nearly as difficult a problem as the Senate.

**Q. What do you think the effect will be with the split panels on the Senate?**

**A.** Well, I think it's a recognition of reality. I just listened to Chairman **Jesse Helms** this morning, and he was exactly on target when he said, the truth is, if you don't have a 60-vote majority so that you can have cloture, you always have to have a bipartisan group to get anything done. And so that's just going to mean that they... will consistently do one of two things -- they will either have a bipartisan majority, or the president will be sustained on a veto. And that will happen over and over again.