



Roles and Duties of a Member of Congress: Brief Overview

R. Eric Petersen

Specialist in American National Government

November 9, 2012

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RL33686

CRS Report for Congress

Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

Summary

The duties carried out by a Member of Congress are understood to include representation, legislation, and constituent service and education, as well as political and electoral activities. The expectations and duties of a Member of Congress are extensive, encompassing several roles that could be full-time jobs by themselves. Despite the acceptance of these roles and other activities as facets of the Member's job, there is no formal set of requirements or official explanation of what roles might be played as Members carry out the duties of their offices. In the absence of formal authorities, many of the responsibilities that Members of Congress have assumed over the years have evolved from the expectations of Members and their constituents.

Upon election to Congress, Members typically develop approaches to their jobs that serve a wide range of roles and responsibilities. Given the dynamic nature of the congressional experience, priorities placed on various Member roles tend to shift in response to changes in seniority, committee assignment, policy focus, district or state priorities, institutional leadership, and electoral pressures. In response, the roles and specific duties a Member carries out are often highlighted or de-emphasized accordingly.

Although elements of all the roles described can be found among the duties performed by any Senator or Representative, the degree to which each is carried out differs among Members. Each Member may also emphasize different duties during different stages of his or her career. With no written requirements, each Member is free to define his or her own job and set his or her own priorities.

This report is one of several CRS reports that focus on congressional operations. Others include CRS Report RL34545, *Congressional Staff: Duties and Functions of Selected Positions*, by R. Eric Petersen; CRS Report RL33209, *Casework in a Congressional Office: Background, Rules, Laws, and Resources*, by R. Eric Petersen; and CRS Report RL33213, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: An Overview and Resources for Outreach and Management*, by R. Eric Petersen.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Member and Public Expectations	2
Roles of Members of Congress.....	5
Representation	5
Legislation	6
Constituency Service.....	7
Oversight and Investigation.....	8
Advice and Consent (Senators Only)	8
Congressional Leadership	8
Personal Office Management	9
Electoral and Political Activity.....	9
Conclusion	10

Tables

Table 1. Roles and Duties of a Member of Congress Identified by Members of the House of Representatives.....	3
Table 2. Jobs, Duties, and Functions the Public Expects a Member of Congress to Perform	4

Contacts

Author Contact Information.....	10
---------------------------------	----

Introduction

The U.S. Constitution establishes qualifications for Representatives and Senators, but it is silent about the roles and duties of an individual Member of Congress.¹ House and Senate rules require only that Members be present and vote on each question placed before their chamber.² The job of a Member of Congress has been characterized as “a license to persuade, connive, hatch ideas, propagandize, assail enemies, vote, build coalitions, shepherd legislation, and in general cut a figure in public affairs.”³ Beyond voting requirements, there is no formal set of expectations or official explanation of what roles or duties are required, or what different Members might emphasize as they carry out their work. In the absence of such formal authorities, many of the responsibilities that Members of Congress have assumed over the years have evolved from the expectations of Members and their constituencies.⁴

Today, the roles and duties carried out by a Member of Congress are understood to include representation, legislation, and constituent service and education, as well as political and electoral activities. In a typical week, Members may oversee constituent services in the state or district, travel between their state or district to Washington, DC, to participate in committee activities, greet a local delegation from the home state, meet with lobbyists, supervise office staff, speak on the floor, conduct investigations, interact with the news media, and attend to various electoral duties, including fundraising, planning, or campaigning for election. Given that no precise definition exists for the role of a Member, upon election to Congress, each new Member is responsible for developing an approach to his or her job that serves a wide range of roles and responsibilities. One observer of Congress notes that the first job of a Member is to come

to grips with the dimensions of [their] role and develop a personal approach to [their] tasks. Given the many challenges, the overall conclusion is readily apparent: the key to effectiveness in Congress is the ability to organize well within a framework of carefully selected priorities. It is not possible, however, to construct a grand master plan such that priorities and the time devoted to each will neatly mesh, for legislative life is subject to sudden and numerous complications.⁵

¹ Art. I, Sec. 2 of the Constitution requires that a Member of the House of Representatives be at least 25 years old, a citizen of the United States for at least seven years, and a resident of the state from which they are elected at the time they are elected. Article I, Section 3 requires that a Senator be at least 30 years old, a citizen of the United States for at least nine years, and resident of the state from which they are elected at the time they are elected.

² House Rule III, sec. (1); Senate Rule VI (2) and Rule XII (1).

³ David R. Mayhew, *America's Congress: Actions in the Public Sphere, James Madison Through Newt Gingrich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 9.

⁴ For general treatments of the work of Members of Congress, see Lee H. Hamilton, *How Congress Works and Why You Should Care* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Roger H. Davidson and Walter J. Oleszek, *Congress and its Members*, 9th ed. (Washington: CQ Press, 2004), pp. 119-150; Steven S. Smith, *The American Congress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), pp. 94-102; Thomas E. Kavanagh, “The Two Arenas of Congress,” in Joseph Cooper and G. Calvin Mackenzie, eds., *The House at Work* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 56-77; Lewis Anthony Dexter, “The Job of a Congressman,” in Raymond E. Wolfinger, ed. *Readings on Congress* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), pp. 69-89; Roger H. Davidson, *The Role of a Congressman* (New York: Pegasus, 1969); Donald Tacheron and Morris K. Udall, *The Job of the Congressman: An Introduction to Service in the U.S. House of Representatives* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966); Charles L. Clapp, *The Congressman: His Work as He Sees It* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964); and Donald R. Matthews, *U.S. Senators and Their World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960).

⁵ Gerald D. Sturges, “The Freshman Faces Congress,” in Sven Groenning and Jonathon P. Hawley, eds., *To Be a Congressman: The Promise and the Power* (Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, Ltd, 1973) p. 35.

Observers note that after identifying and organizing priorities, a Member typically carries out some of the resulting duties personally, and delegates others to congressional staff who act on his or her behalf. The staff may work in the Member’s individual office, on committees to which the Member is assigned, in offices connected to leadership posts the Member may hold, and in the separate political and reelection operations the Member may maintain. In this understanding, the Member sets broad policies to fulfill his or her duties, and the appropriate staff act to carry them out.⁶ The distribution of responsibility will vary according to the preferences and priorities of the Member at the center of the effort. Nevertheless, the work carried out by staff is typically attributed to the effort of the Member.⁷

Many scholars of Congress see these Member choices and delegation arrangements as dependent in part on their goals. Generally, these observers suggest that Members pursue three primary goals: gaining reelection, securing influence within Congress, and making good public policy. The relative priority a Member may assign to these goals can affect a wide range of choices regarding a congressional career, including (1) the emphasis given to different roles and duties; (2) activities in the Washington, DC, and district or state offices; (3) staffing choices in Member and committee offices; and (4) preference for committee assignments. It can also affect a Member’s approaches to legislative work, constituent relations, media relations, party issues, and electoral activities.⁸ Given the dynamics of the congressional environment, the priorities that Members place on various roles may change as their seniority increases, or in response to changes in committee assignments, policy focus, district or state priorities, institutional leadership, or electoral pressures.

Member and Public Expectations

As part of a broader evaluation of House administrative practices in the mid-1970s,⁹ the House Commission on Administrative Review surveyed Members of the House and asked them to

⁶ For a discussion of staff roles and duties, see CRS Report RL34545, *Congressional Staff: Duties and Functions of Selected Positions*, by R. Eric Petersen; For historical staffing data, see CRS Report R41366, *House of Representatives and Senate Staff Levels in Member, Committee, Leadership, and Other Offices, 1977-2010*, by R. Eric Petersen and Amber Hope Wilhelm.

⁷ See Davidson and Oleszek, *Congress and its Members*, pp. 140-145; Robert H. Salisbury and Kenneth A. Shepsle, “U.S. Congressman as Enterprise,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 6, November 1981, pp. 559-576; and Burdett A. Loomis, “The Congressional Office as a Small (?) Business: New Members Set Up Shop,” *Publius*, vol. 9, Summer 1979, pp. 35-55.

⁸ See Gregory J. Wawro, *Legislative Entrepreneurship in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000); George Serra and David Moon, “Casework, Issue Positions, and Voting in Congressional Elections: A District Analysis,” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 56, Feb., 1994, pp. 200-213; R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Morris P. Fiorina, *Congress, Keystone of the Washington Establishment*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Bruce Cain, John Ferejohn, and Morris Fiorina, *The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 1987); John R. Johannessen, “Explaining Congressional Casework Styles,” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 27, Aug. 1983, pp. 530-547; Glenn R. Parker, “Cycles in Congressional District Attention,” *Journal of Politics*, vol. 42, May, 1980, pp. 540-548; Richard F. Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (New York: Harper Collins, 1978); and David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁹ See U.S. Congress, House, Commission on Administrative Review, *Final Report of the Commission on Administrative Review*, 2 vols., H. Doc. 95-272, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 1977). While these observations are somewhat dated, there has been no similar study conducted more recently. There appears to be no reason to believe that the roles have changed since the survey was carried out in the mid-1970s. At the same time, it is (continued...)

describe the major jobs, duties, and functions that they believed they were expected to perform. At the same time, the commission hired the research firm Louis Harris and Associates to conduct a survey of the public to gauge its expectations of Congress and its Members.

The Member survey found that the three most frequently mentioned duties and activities were the drafting and introduction of legislation; helping constituents solve problems; and representing the interests of their districts and constituents. Other expectations included position taking and constituent education.¹⁰ **Table 1** summarizes the responses received by role categories established by the commission.

According to the public survey conducted by the commission, the most common expectations of Members were to represent the people and district according to the wishes of the majority; to solve problems in the district; and to keep in contact with the people in the district through regular visits and meetings in the district and polls or questionnaires. Other public expectations included regular attendance in legislative sessions and voting on legislation. **Table 2** summarizes the most frequently mentioned responses to the public survey.

Table 1. Roles and Duties of a Member of Congress Identified by Members of the House of Representatives

Role	Duties and Activities	% of Members Identifying Role ^a
Legislative	Draft and introduce legislation	87
Constituency Servant	Help constituents solve their problems	79
Education/Communication	Articulate and take positions on issues; educate and inform constituents about legislation	43
Representative	Represent and advocate the district's and constituents' interests	26
Political	Campaigning, party leadership, and reelection	11
Oversight	Determine that laws are administered as Congress intended	9
Institutional	Interact with the executive branch, interest groups and other levels of government	7
Office Management	Oversight of personal office	6
Everything	"Jack-of-all-trades"	6
Other	Other varied expectations	4

Source: U.S. Congress, House, Commission on Administrative Review, *Final Report of the Commission on Administrative Review*, H. Doc. 95-272, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 1977), vol. 2, pp. 874-875.

- a. Percentages are based on 146 responses by Members of the House to the question, "... what would you say are the major kinds of jobs, duties or functions you feel you are expected to perform as an individual Member of Congress?" Many Members mentioned more than one job, duty, or function.

(...continued)

possible that the emphasis placed on each role may shift over time.

¹⁰ Findings are based on 146 responses by Members of the House to the question, "... what would you say are the major kinds of jobs, duties or functions you feel you are expected to perform as an individual Member of Congress?"

Despite differences in point of view, both the Member and public survey results describe common interests in local representation, constituency services, legislative activity, and regular contact between the Member and the district. The differences between Member and public expectations may reflect the different perspectives on the work of a Member of Congress. Where Members are daily confronted with representational, legislative, and institutional duties, the public focuses on representational, legislative, and service responsibilities, apparently without recognizing a broader underlying institutional, procedural, and operational framework in which Members of Congress operate. Some observers suggest that this narrow public focus is in part a reflection of the attention the public gives, or does not give, to political matters in general.¹¹

Common Member and public interest in local representation, constituency service issues, legislative activity, and regular contact between the Member and the constituency may partially explain how individual Members of Congress receive broad public satisfaction or approval of their performance while Congress as an institution, where Members engage the procedural and operational barriers the public disdains, routinely trails the executive and judicial branches in public approval.

Table 2. Jobs, Duties, and Functions the Public Expects a Member of Congress to Perform

Job Duty or Function	% of Public Identifying Job, Duty, or Function ^a
Work to solve problems in the district, help the people, and respond to the issues and needs of the district	37
To represent the people and district, and to vote according to the wish of the majority of their constituents	35
Keep in contact with the people, visit the district, know the constituents	17
Find out what the people need, want, and think; send out polls and questionnaires	12
Attend all or as many sessions as possible; be there to vote on legislation	10
Be honest, fair, as truthful as possible, keep promises, and be of good character	10
Work on improving the economy, lowering prices and creating more jobs	10
Don't know	10

Source: U.S. Congress, House, Commission on Administrative Review, *Final Report of the Commission on Administrative Review*, H. Doc. 95-272, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 1977), vol. 2, pp. 822-823.

- a. Percentages are based on 1,518 public responses to the question, "what kinds of jobs, duties, or functions do you expect a good Congressman to perform?" This table identifies all responses that were mentioned by 10% or more of the respondents. An additional 15 responses encompassing a range of Member jobs, duties, or functions were identified by 9% or fewer of the respondents to the citizen survey.

¹¹ See John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, "What the Public Dislikes About Congress," in Lawrence C. Dodd, and Bruce Oppenheimer, *Congress Reconsidered 8th ed.* (Washington: CQ Press, 2005), pp.55-76; Roger H. Davidson, "Public Prescriptions for the Job of a Congressman," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Nov. 1970) pp. 648-666.

Roles of Members of Congress

The responses to the Member and public surveys suggest that the roles and duties of a Member of Congress can be identified in part as an outgrowth of congressional and public expectations.

These congressional roles may be described by focusing on some of the underlying tasks typically required to carry them out. Because some of the duties are complex, and some of the underlying tasks often overlap, some of the roles may overlap. The roles described below are derived from

- congressional duties mentioned in the Constitution;
- responses to the House surveys of Members and the general public; and
- scholarly studies.

Representation

Broadly, a system of representative government assumes that the will of the people is consulted and accommodated when making public policies that affect them. Consequently, representational activity is present in all of the roles of a Member of Congress. Representational activity is seen in the legislative process, constituent service, oversight, and investigation duties that Members carry out. In Congress, Members are elected to represent the interests of the people in their congressional district or state. In addition, they represent regional and national interests in matters which might come before Congress.

On the local level, Members of the House represent congressional districts of populations ranging approximately from 527,000 (Rhode Island’s two congressional districts) to 994,000 (Montana’s single district) constituents.¹² Senators represent states that range in population from 568,000 (Wyoming) to more than 37.7 million (California).¹³ In the nation’s capital, Members serve as advocates for the views and needs of their constituents as well as stewards of national interests. Representational work may involve legislative activity, such as analyzing the provisions of proposed legislation for their potential impact on the area represented, or constituent service activity, such as assisting individuals, local governments, and organizations in obtaining federal grants and benefits.

Styles of representation differ. Some Members might view themselves as responding to instructions from their constituents—sometimes called the “delegate” style. Others might prefer to act upon their own initiative and rely upon their own judgment—sometimes called the “trustee” style. In practice, when considering new legislation or the effects of implementing existing law, the opinion of their constituency often may be uppermost in a Member’s mind. Constituent views, however, may vary in intensity from issue to issue, or fall on several sides of an issue, and the Member would typically take into account opinions from other sources as well. Consequently, most Members typically balance or reconcile these competing viewpoints with

¹² More information on apportioning seats in the House is available in CRS Report R41382, *The House of Representatives Apportionment Formula: An Analysis of Proposals for Change and Their Impact on States*, by Royce Crocker.

¹³ Population totals are based on 2011 estimated population. See U.S. Census Bureau, *State and County Quick Facts*, at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/>.

their own judgment when casting their votes, providing constituent service, or conducting oversight.¹⁴

Another facet of representation involves presenting a view of government activity to constituents and the broader American public. Members of Congress regularly draw attention to policy issues and federal government activities in order to educate constituents and other citizens and to encourage more robust citizen participation in public affairs. This educational function is typically performed through newsletters and special mailings sent to residents in the district or state, or through a variety of media outlets, which may include a Member website, and appearances and interviews on local television and radio programs.

Legislation

In developing and debating legislative proposals, Members may take different approaches to learn how best to represent the interests of their district or state, together with the interests of the nation. This may require identifying local, national, and international issues or problems which need legislative action, and proposing or supporting legislation which addresses them. Throughout the legislative process, Members of Congress routinely attend committee hearings and briefings, hold meetings and conversations with executive branch officials and with lobbyists representing various interested groups, and have discussions with congressional colleagues. In addition, many Members receive staff briefings based on a broad range of sources, including congressional support agencies, local and national media outlets, specialized policy-oriented literature, and background material on legislative issues, among others.

An important venue for congressional activities is the committee, through which much of the work of Congress is organized. Committees typically are the first place in which legislative policy proposals receive substantive consideration. Members of Congress are assigned to a number of committees and subcommittees simultaneously, and are expected to develop issue expertise in the policy areas that come before these panels. Typically, each Senator is assigned to three committees and at least eight subcommittees. With the exception of Members who serve on committees that their party has designated as exclusive, each Representative is typically assigned to two standing committees and four subcommittees. Committee members usually participate in hearings to question witnesses; engage in markup sessions to draft, amend, and refine the text of legislation; and vote on whether to send specific measures to the floor of their chamber. Members also testify before other congressional committees on matters of interest to their district or state, or on matters in which the Member has developed expertise. In addition to these duties, Senate committee membership involves review of executive and judicial nominations and may include consideration of treaties.

Some Members, generally those with more seniority, also participate in conference committees. Conference committees are convened to work out differences when the House and Senate pass

¹⁴ See Lee Hamilton, "What I Wish Political Scientists Would Teach about Congress," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 33, December 2000, pp. 757-759; and Burdett Loomis, *The Contemporary Congress* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 6-10. For a discussion of the trustee and delegate theories of representation, see Hannah Fenichel Pipkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967); and Heinz Eulau, John C. Wahlke, William Buchanan, and Leroy C. Ferguson, "The Role of the Representative: Some Empirical Observations on the Theory of Edmund Burke," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 53, Sept., 1959, pp. 742-756.

different versions of the same bill. Members of conference committees participate in the final resolution of policy disputes, legislative-executive bargaining, and significant policy decisions.

Members generally participate in floor debate most fully when measures of importance to their home district or state are involved, or when matters reported from their legislative committees are under consideration. Floor activity might include preparing statements, conducting research to defend or deter provisions of a bill, and offering amendments. It may also mean debating other Members, in an effort to persuade the undecided, and engaging in extensive informal political negotiations to advance legislative goals.¹⁵

Constituency Service

The constituency service role is closely related to the representative and educational roles of a Member of Congress. Frequently, when constituents or local firms or organizations need assistance from the federal government, they contact their Representative or Senators. Members then act as representatives, ombudsmen, or facilitators, and sometimes as advocates, in discussions with the federal government. The constituency service role may be highly varied, and involve several activities, provided to individual constituents, including

- outreach, in which Members introduce themselves and inform constituents of the services typically provided;
- gathering information on federal programs;
- casework, in which congressional staff members provide assistance in obtaining federal benefits or in solving constituents' problems with agencies;¹⁶
- providing nominations to United States service academies;¹⁷ and
- arranging visits or tours to the Capitol or other Washington, DC, venues.

Assistance on behalf of firms and organizations may involve providing letters and other communication in support of grant or other applications for federal benefits. The constituency service role also allows a Member the opportunity to see how government programs are working, and what problems may need to be addressed through formal oversight or legislation.

¹⁵ Discussions of the debate and informal negotiating process in Congress can be found in Joseph Bessette, "Deliberation in American Lawmaking," *Philosophy and Public Policy*, vol. 14, Winter/Spring 1994, pp.18-23. For a discussion of different types of deliberation and their use in the legislative process, see George E. Connor and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, "Deliberation: An Untimed Value in a Timed Game," in Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered*, 5th ed. (Washington: CQ Press, 1993), pp. 315-320. Also, see Lawrence C. Dodd, "Congress and the Politics of Renewal," in Dodd and Oppenheimer, *Congress Reconsidered*, pp. 426-427.

¹⁶ See CRS Report RL33209, *Casework in a Congressional Office: Background, Rules, Laws, and Resources*, by R. Eric Petersen; and John R. Johannes, "Casework in the House," in Cooper and Mackenzie, *The House at Work*, pp. 78-96.

¹⁷ See CRS Report RL33213, *Congressional Nominations to U.S. Service Academies: An Overview and Resources for Outreach and Management*, by R. Eric Petersen.

Oversight and Investigation

In addition to its legislative responsibilities, Congress is responsible for seeing that the laws are administered according to congressional intent. While some Members receive feedback on the success of public policies through constituency service and the experiences of constituents who seek casework assistance, most of the oversight and investigation duties of Members are carried out through committees. Committees and Members can review the actions taken and regulations formulated by departments and agencies through hearings, studies, and informal communication with agencies and those affected by a program or policy.

Oversight and investigation can take several forms. In addition to casework activity, the process of authorizing and appropriating funds for executive branch departments and agencies in committee hearings also affords Members and committees the opportunity to review the adequacy of those agencies' organization, operations, and programs. Investigatory hearings are often conducted in response to an emerging crisis or scandal. At various points in the oversight and investigative process of Congress, individual Members can participate in the proceedings, for example, by questioning executive branch leaders, or reporting the experiences constituents have had with particular programs or agencies.¹⁸

Advice and Consent (Senators Only)

The Constitution places upon the Senate, but not the House, the responsibility for confirming nominations of individuals for appointive federal office, federal judicial nominations, and to ratify treaties negotiated by the executive branch with foreign nations. Individual Senators typically participate in hearings to determine the suitability of candidates nominated for executive office and the adequacy of the provisions of treaties.¹⁹ Senators may also participate in the floor debate on these matters.

Congressional Leadership

Some Members of Congress hold leadership positions within their chamber. Leadership responsibilities include leading negotiations within the party to formulate party positions on legislative issues, mediating political conflicts among Members of the same party, persuading Members to join in voting coalitions, keeping count as voting blocs form, participating in decisions to set the legislative agenda for the chamber, and negotiating agreements on when to schedule, and how to consider, specific bills on the floor. Representatives and Senators may also hold the position of chairman or ranking minority Member on a committee or subcommittee, and have responsibility, or participate in the process of, scheduling of that committee's business and selecting the issues that will compose the committee or subcommittee's agenda. Some Representatives and Senators also participate in a leadership capacity in their respective party caucus or conferences.

¹⁸ See CRS Report RL30240, *Congressional Oversight Manual*, by Todd Garvey et al..

¹⁹ In addition, Senators on the appropriate committees are sometimes asked to "advise" on the terms of a treaty as it is being negotiated. They do so by consulting with executive branch officials, and by observing, and sometimes participating in, the treaty negotiations in progress between the U.S. and foreign delegations.

Leadership duties may be carried out both by Members who hold formal leadership positions and those who do not. Issues on which individual Members have recently taken informal leadership roles include campaign finance reform, planning for the continuity of Congress, and lobbying and ethics reform.

Personal Office Management

Members of Congress are supported by a personal office in which staff perform legislative research, prepare materials for the Member to study, provide constituency service, manage constituency correspondence, handle media relations, and perform administrative and clerical functions. Staff and office facilities are provided through funds appropriated annually, and allocated to Members according to the procedures of each chamber.²⁰ The precise duties and tasks carried out in a Member office will vary with the Member's personal preferences, which are typically informed by seniority, committee assignment, policy focus, district or state priorities, institutional leadership, and electoral considerations.

Each Member is allocated public funds to maintain office payroll and expense accounts, and typically supervises work carried out in Washington, DC, and state or district offices.²¹ Every Representative is authorized to have up to 18 full-time and 4 half-time positions to assist them in their duties. In the Senate, the number of authorized staff varies according to the population of the state a Senator represents.

Electoral and Political Activity

An integral part of the work of Members of Congress, their reelection plans, is separate from their official congressional duties. For those Members of Congress running for reelection, activities may include organizing and maintaining a personal campaign staff, campaigning, and raising funds for reelection or election to another office. Members may also be significant political leaders of their party, as public spokespersons, and as fund raisers for themselves and other congressional candidates. At the state or district level, they may also aid and influence the candidacies of state and local government officials. In addition, some Members also hold leadership posts within their national political parties, such as serving on their party's congressional campaign committee. House and Senate rules mandate that with very limited exceptions, political and campaign activities must be conducted outside of federal facilities, including congressional offices.²²

²⁰ See CRS Report RL30064, *Congressional Salaries and Allowances*, by Ida A. Brudnick; and CRS Report R40962, *Members' Representational Allowance: History and Usage*, by Ida A. Brudnick.

²¹ See Steven S. Smith, *The American Congress*, pp.102-111; Susan Webb Hammond, "The Management of Legislative Offices," in Cooper and Mackenzie, *The House at Work*, pp. 183-209; and David W. Brady, "Personnel Management in the House," *Ibid.*, pp. 151-182.

²² U.S. House Committee on Ethics, *Campaign Activity*, at <http://ethics.house.gov/campaign-activity>; U.S. Senate, Committee on Ethics, *Campaign-Related Questions: Quick Reference*, available at <http://ethics.senate.gov/downloads/pdffiles/campaign.pdf>; and Federal Election Commission, *Federal Election Commission Campaign Guide: Congressional Candidates and Committees*, Washington, DC, August 2011, <http://www.fec.gov/pdf/candgui.pdf>.

Conclusion

With no formal or definitive requirements, each Member of Congress is free to define his or her own job and set his or her own priorities. Although elements of each of the roles described can be found among the duties performed by any Senator or Representative, the degree to which each is carried out differs among Members as they pursue the common goals of seeking reelection, building influence in Congress, and making good public policy. Each Member may also emphasize different duties during different stages of his or her career as other conditions of the Member's situation change. For example, some may focus on outreach, constituent service, and other state or district activity. Others may focus on developing influence in their chamber by developing policy expertise or advancing specific legislation. No Member, however, is likely to focus on any one role or duty at the exclusion of another, because the extent to which a Member successfully manages all of those roles is the basis on which his or her constituents may judge the Member's success.

Author Contact Information

R. Eric Petersen
Specialist in American National Government
epetersen@crs.loc.gov, 7-0643