



**Congressional  
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

---

# Guide to Individuals Seated on the Senate Dais

**Valerie Heitshusen**

Specialist on Congress and the Legislative Process

Updated November 5, 2018

**Congressional Research Service**

7-5700

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

98-397

**T**he Senate meets in the Senate chamber of the Capitol. Seated at the head of the chamber on the top of a two-tiered dais is the presiding officer. Members are assigned to the 100 desks that are arranged in a semicircle facing the presiding officer. The center aisle in the Senate chamber divides the political parties. Facing the presiding officer, Republicans sit to the right of the center aisle, Democrats to the left. Senior Members usually sit the closest to the dais and along the center aisle, although some choose other desks. The party floor leaders occupy the front aisle desks, which may also be used by Senators who are managing floor consideration of a bill or nomination. Seated around the presiding officer are various officers and employees of the Senate who have defined roles, some of which are prescribed in Senate rules and others of which are derived from precedent. A photograph of the Senate chamber can be found at <http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-buildings/senate-chamber>.

## **Top Tier**

### **Presiding Officer**

Pursuant to Article 1, Section 3, of the U.S. Constitution, the Vice President of the United States is the President of the Senate and its presiding officer. He usually assumes this role only during ceremonial functions, when key Administration issues are being debated, or in the case of certain votes expected to be close (since the Constitution provides that he may vote to break a tie). In his absence, the President pro tempore—the senior Senator from the majority party, in current practice—fills the role of presiding officer. However, other members of the majority party usually serve as the presiding officer on a rotating basis throughout a day’s session. The presiding officer sits in the front of the chamber on the upper tier of the dais.

## **Lower Tier**

### **Sergeant at Arms**

The Sergeant at Arms or a deputy is seated to the left of the presiding officer (as viewed from the rear of the chamber). The Sergeant at Arms is the chief law enforcement and protocol officer in the Senate and is responsible for preserving order and decorum on the Senate floor and in the galleries. This officer is also the principal manager of many of the Senate’s support services.

### **Secretary of the Senate**

This chief administrative and budgetary officer of the Senate is seated to the right of the presiding officer (as viewed from the rear of the chamber). Except for ceremonial and other special occasions, the Secretary spends very little time on the dais. The Secretary’s office oversees a variety of services that support the legislative operation of the Senate, including record keeping and document management. In the absence of the Vice President and pending the election of the President pro tempore, the Secretary performs the duties of the chair.

### **Secretary to the Majority and Secretary to the Minority**

The seat slightly behind and to the right of the presiding officer (as viewed from the rear of the chamber) is reserved for the Secretary to the Majority; behind and to the left is the seat for the

Secretary to the Minority.<sup>1</sup> These two officials, selected by their parties and elected by the Senate, are responsible for providing support services to their respective leadership and Members. Their floor-related duties include supervision of their party cloakrooms and briefing Senators on pending votes and issues. Seated next to each party secretary is the assistant secretary to the majority or the assistant secretary to the minority, respectively.

Seated directly in front of the presiding officer are four legislative officials who are under the supervision of the Secretary of the Senate. They are the journal clerk, the Parliamentarian, the legislative clerk, and the assistant secretary of the Senate.

## Journal Clerk

To the far left of the dais is the journal clerk, who records the daily minutes of the Senate and prepares them for publication in the *Senate Journal*, the official record of proceedings required by the Constitution. The journal clerk also prepares a history of bills and resolutions for inclusion in the *Senate Journal*.

## Parliamentarian

Seated to the right of the journal clerk is the Senate Parliamentarian (or one of her assistants). The parliamentarian maintains and provides advice on the precedents and practices of the Senate for the presiding officer and other Senators and assists in the referral of bills to Senate committees. The parliamentarian is also the Senate's official timekeeper.

## Legislative Clerk

The legislative clerk, seated to the right of the parliamentarian, is the reading clerk of the Senate. This clerk calls and records the roll for all votes and quorum calls, maintains official copies of measures pending before the Senate, receives all proposed and adopted amendments, and, at the direction of the presiding officer, reads aloud all bills and amendments, presidential messages, House messages, and other pending business.

## Assistant Secretary or Assistant Legislative Clerk

The assistant secretary of the Senate has a seat at the far right of the lower tier of the dais. The assistant secretary is the Secretary's chief assistant and supervises the day-to-day administration of the office. Typically, however, this seat is occupied by the assistant legislative clerk.

## Front of Dais

### Party Tables

Directly in front of the dais are two tables controlled by the parties. The table on the left side of the well (as viewed from the rear of the chamber) is reserved for the Democrats and the one on the right for the Republicans. Staff at these tables assist the floor leaders and party secretaries; Senators sometimes consult staff at these tables on the pending business or an ongoing vote tally.

---

<sup>1</sup> These relative placements of each party secretary apply in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress; when majority party control of the chamber changes, the placement is reversed. In other words, each party's secretary sits on the side corresponding to her or his party's side of the chamber.

## **Author Contact Information**

Valerie Heitshusen  
Specialist on Congress and the Legislative Process  
vheitshusen@crs.loc.gov, 7-8635

## **Acknowledgments**

An earlier version of this report was written by Mildred Amer, former Specialist on the Congress. The listed author has updated the report and can respond to inquiries from congressional clients on the subject.