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How Legislation Is Brought to the House Floor: A Snapshot of Parliamentary Practice in the 114th Congress (2015-2016)

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Summary

The House of Representatives has several different parliamentary procedures through which it can bring legislation to the chamber floor. Which of these will be used in a given situation depends on many factors, including the type of measure being considered, its cost, the amount of political or policy controversy surrounding it, and the degree to which Members want to debate it and propose amendments. This report provides a snapshot of the forms and origins of measures that, according to the Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress, received action on the House floor in the 114th Congress (2015-2016) and the parliamentary procedures used to bring them up for initial House consideration.

In the 114th Congress, 1,200 pieces of legislation received floor action in the House of Representatives. Of these, 907 (76%) were bills or joint resolutions, and 293 (24%) were simple or concurrent resolutions. Of these 1,200 measures, 1,068 originated in the House, and 132 originated in the Senate.

During the same period, 62% of all measures receiving initial House floor action came before the chamber under the Suspension of the Rules procedure, 16% came to the floor as business “privileged” under House rules and precedents, 14% were raised by a special rule reported by the Committee on Rules and adopted by the House, and 7% came up by the unanimous consent of Members. One measure was processed under the procedures associated with clause 2 of Rule XV, the House Discharge Rule.

When only lawmaking forms of legislation (bills and joint resolutions) are counted, 78% of measures receiving initial House floor action in the 114th Congresses came before the chamber under the Suspension of the Rules procedure, 18% were raised by a special rule reported by the Committee on Rules and adopted by the House, and 5% came up by unanimous consent. No lawmaking forms of legislation received House floor action via the Discharge Rule or by virtue of being “privileged” under House rules.

The party sponsorship of legislation receiving initial floor action in the 114th Congress varied based on the procedure used to raise the legislation on the chamber floor. Sixty-nine percent of the measures considered under the Suspension of the Rules procedure were sponsored by majority party Members. All but one of the 172 measures brought before the House under the terms of a special rule reported by the House Committee on Rules and adopted by the House were sponsored by majority party Members.

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The House of Representatives has several different parliamentary procedures through which it can bring legislation to the chamber floor. Which will be used in a given situation depends on many factors, including the type of measure being considered, its cost, the amount of political or policy controversy surrounding it, and the degree to which Members want to debate it and propose amendments.

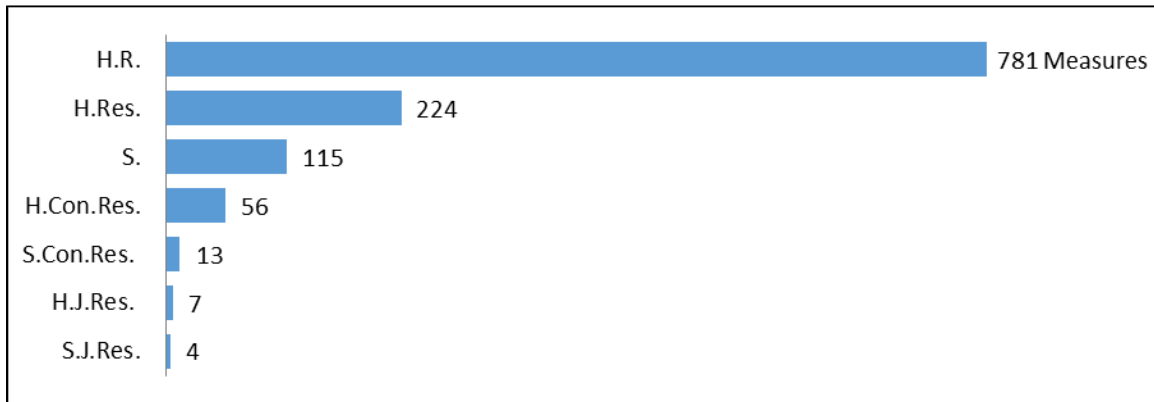
According to the Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress (LIS), in the 114th Congress (2015-2016), 1,200 pieces of legislation received House floor action. This report provides a statistical snapshot of the forms, origins, and party sponsorship of these measures and of the parliamentary procedures used to bring them to the chamber floor during their initial consideration.

Form of Measures

Legislation is introduced in the House or Senate in one of four forms: the bill (H.R./S.), the joint resolution (H.J.Res./S.J.Res.), the concurrent resolution (H.Con.Res./S.Con.Res.), and the simple resolution (H.Res./S.Res.). Bills and joint resolutions can become law, but simple and concurrent resolutions cannot; they are used instead for internal organizational or procedural matters or to express the sentiment of one or both chambers.¹

In the 114th Congress, 1,200 pieces of legislation received floor action in the House of Representatives. Of these, 907 (76%) were bills or joint resolutions, and 293 (24%) were simple or concurrent resolutions.

Figure 1. Form of Legislation Receiving House Floor Action
114th Congress (2015-2016)



Source: CRS analysis of data from the Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress.

Origin of Measures

Of the 1,200 measures receiving initial House floor action in the 114th Congress, 1,068 originated in the House, and 132 originated in the Senate.

¹ For more information on the forms and uses of legislation, see CRS Report 98-728, *Bills, Resolutions, Nominations, and Treaties: Characteristics, Requirements, and Uses*, by Richard S. Beth. Also see CRS Report 98-825, *“Sense of” Resolutions and Provisions*, by Christopher M. Davis.

Party Sponsorship of Measures

It is generally accepted that the House considers more legislation sponsored by majority party Members than measures introduced by minority party Members. This was borne out in practice in the 114th Congress. As is reflected in **Table 1**, 78% of all measures receiving initial House floor action in the last Congress were sponsored by Members of the Republican Party, which had a majority of seats in the House. When only lawmaking forms of legislation are considered, 76% of measures receiving House floor action in the 114th Congress were sponsored by Republicans, 24% by Democrats, and none by political independents.

**Table 1. Political Party Sponsorship of Measures Receiving House Floor Action:
Sorted by Form of Measure**
114th Congress (2015-2016)

Form of Measure	Democratic Sponsor	Republican Sponsor	Independent Sponsor	Total
H.R.	179 (23%)	602 (77%)	0	781
S.	42 (37%)	73 (63%)	0	115
H.J.Res.	0	7 (100%)	0	7
S.J.Res.	0	4 (100%)	0	4
H.Res.	32 (14%)	192 (86%)	0	224
H.Con.Res.	11 (20%)	45 (80%)	0	56
S.Con.Res.	4 (31%)	9 (69%)	0	13
Total	268 (22%)	932 (78%)	0	1,200

Source: Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress.

Notes: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. Table reflects initial House consideration of legislation.

The ratio of majority to minority party sponsorship of measures receiving initial House floor action in the 114th Congress varied widely based on the parliamentary procedure used to call up the legislation on the House floor. As noted in **Table 2**, 69% of the measures considered under the Suspension of the Rules procedure were sponsored by Republicans, 31% by Democrats, and none by political independents. That measures introduced by Members of both parties were considered under Suspension is unsurprising in that (as discussed below) Suspension of the Rules is generally used to process non-controversial measures for which there is wide bipartisan support. In addition, passage of a measure under the Suspension of the Rules procedure, in practice, usually requires the affirmative votes of at least some minority party Members.

The ratio of party sponsorship on measures initially brought to the floor under the terms of a special rule reported by the House Committee on Rules and adopted by the House was far wider. Of the 172 measures the Congressional Research Service identified as being initially brought to the floor under the terms of a special rule in the 114th Congress, all but one were sponsored by majority party Members.

The breakdown in party sponsorship on measures initially raised on the House floor by unanimous consent was uneven, with majority party Members sponsoring 76% of the measures brought up in this manner.

**Table 2. Political Party Sponsorship of Measures Receiving House Floor Action:
Sorted by Parliamentary Procedure Used to Consider Measure**

114th Congress (2015-2016)

Mode of Consideration	Republican Sponsor	Democratic Sponsor	Independent Sponsor	Total
Suspension of the Rules	514 (69%)	229 (31%)	0	743
Privileged Business	180 (91%)	17 (9%)	0	197
Special Rule	171 (99%)	1 (1%)	0	172
Unanimous Consent	66 (76%)	21 (24%)	0	87
Discharge Petition	1 (100%)	0	0	1
Total	932 (78%)	268 (22%)	0	1,200

Source: Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress.

Notes: Percentages may not total 100 percent due to rounding. Table reflects initial House consideration of legislation.

Floor Procedures Used in the 114th Congress

The following section documents the parliamentary mechanisms that the House used to bring legislation to the floor for initial consideration during the 114th Congress. In doing so, it does not make distinctions about the privileged status such business technically enjoys under House rules. Most appropriations measures, for example, are considered “privileged business” under clause 5 of House Rule XIII (as detailed in the section on “Privileged Business” below). As such, they do not need a special rule from the Rules Committee to be adopted for them to have floor access. In actual practice, however, in the 114th Congress the House universally provided for the consideration of these measures by means of a special rule, which, in general, could also provide for debate to be structured, amendments to be regulated, and points of order against the bills to be waived. Thus, appropriations measures considered in the 114th Congress are counted in this analysis as being raised by special rule, notwithstanding their status as “privileged business.”

Suspension of the Rules

In recent Congresses, most legislation has been brought up on the House floor by Suspension of the Rules, a parliamentary device authorized by clause 1 of House Rule XV that waives the chamber’s rules to enable the House to act quickly on legislation that enjoys widespread (even if not necessarily unanimous) support. The main features of the Suspension of the Rules procedure include (1) a 40-minute limit on debate, (2) a prohibition against floor amendments and points of order, and (3) a two-thirds vote of Members present and voting for passage. The suspension procedure is in order in the House on the calendar days of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; during the final six days of a congressional session; and at other times by unanimous consent or special order.² In the 112th Congress (2011-2012), the House leadership announced additional policies that restrict the procedure for certain “honorific” legislation, generally require measures considered under Suspension to have been available for three days prior to their consideration,

² For more information on Suspension of the Rules, see CRS Report 98-314, *Suspension of the Rules in the House: Principal Features*, by Elizabeth Rybicki.

and require the sponsor of the measure to be on the floor at the time of a measure's consideration.³ These policies continued in force in the 114th Congress (2015-2016).

In the 114th Congress, 743 measures, representing 62% of all legislation receiving House floor action, were initially brought up using the Suspension of the Rules procedure. This includes 703 bills or joint resolutions and 40 simple or concurrent resolutions. When only lawmaking forms of legislation are counted, 78% of bills and joint resolutions receiving floor action in the 114th Congress came up by Suspension of the Rules. Eighty-nine percent of measures brought up by Suspension of the Rules originated in the House. The remaining 11% were Senate-passed measures.

Privileged Business

House rules and precedents place certain types of legislation in a special “privileged” category, which allows measures to be called up for consideration when the House is not considering another matter. Bills and resolutions falling into this category that saw floor action in the 114th Congress include the following:

- **Order of business resolutions.** Procedural resolutions reported by the House Committee on Rules affecting the “rules, joint rules, and the order of business of the House” are themselves privileged for consideration under clause 5 of House Rule XIII. Order of business resolutions are commonly known as “special rules” and are discussed below in more detail.⁴
- **Committee assignment resolutions.** Under clause 5 of House Rule X and the precedents of the House, a resolution assigning Members to standing committees is privileged if offered by direction of the party caucus or conference involved.⁵
- **Providing for adjournment.** Under Article I, Section 5, clause 4, of the Constitution, neither house can adjourn for more than three days without the consent of the other. Concurrent resolutions providing for such an adjournment of one or both chambers are called up as privileged.⁶
- **Questions of the privileges of the House.** Under clause 2 of House Rule IX, resolutions raising a question of the privileges of the House affecting “the rights of the House collectively, its safety, dignity, and the integrity of its proceedings” are privileged under specific parliamentary circumstances described in the rule.⁷ Such resolutions would include the constitutional right of the House to originate revenue measures and resolutions impeaching government officials.
- **Bereavement resolutions.** Resolutions expressing the condolences of the House of Representatives over the death of a Representative, President, or former President have been treated as privileged.
- **Measures related to House organization.** Certain organizational business of the House—such as resolutions traditionally adopted at the beginning of a session to

³ House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, *Legislative Protocol*, <http://www.majorityleader.gov/protocols>.

⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Constitution, Jefferson's Manual, and Rules of the House of Representatives*, H.Doc. 113-181, 113th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: GPO, 2015), §853.

⁵ *Ibid.*, §757.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, §699.

notify the President that the House has assembled and to elect House officers, as well as concurrent resolutions providing for a joint session of Congress—have been treated as privileged business.

- **Correcting enrollments.** Under clause 5 of House Rule XIII, resolutions reported by the Committee on House Administration correcting errors in the enrollment of a bill are privileged.⁸

In the 114th Congress, 197 measures, representing 16% of the measures receiving floor action, came before the House on their initial consideration by virtue of their status as “privileged business.” All of these 197 measures were simple or concurrent resolutions. The most common type of measure brought up in the House as “privileged business” during the 114th Congress was special orders of business (special rules) reported by the Rules Committee, followed by resolutions assigning Representatives to committees.⁹

By Special Rule

A special rule is a simple resolution that regulates the House’s consideration of legislation identified in the resolution. Such resolutions, as noted above, are sometimes called “order of business resolutions” or “special orders,” although most Members and staff simply refer to them as “rules.” Special rules enable the House to consider a specified measure and establish the terms for its consideration—for example, how long the legislation will be debated, what (if any) amendments may be offered to it, and whether points of order against the measure or any amendments to it are waived. Under clause 1(m) of House Rule X, the Committee on Rules has jurisdiction over the “order of business” of the House, and it reports such procedural resolutions to the chamber for consideration. In current practice, although a relatively small percentage of legislation comes before the House via special rule, most measures that might be characterized as significant, complicated, or controversial are brought up in this way.

In the 114th Congress, 172 measures, or 14% of all legislation receiving House floor action, were initially brought before the chamber under the terms of a special rule reported by the Rules Committee and agreed to by the House. Of these, 163 (95%) were bills or joint resolutions, and nine (5%) were simple or concurrent resolutions. When only lawmaking forms of legislation are counted, 18% of bills and joint resolutions receiving floor action in the 114th Congress came up by special rule. Ninety-one percent of the measures considered under a special rule during the 114th Congress originated in the House, 9% being Senate legislation. As noted above, all but one measure—a Senate bill—brought before the House using this parliamentary mechanism were sponsored by majority party Members.

Unanimous Consent

In current practice, legislation is sometimes brought before the House of Representatives for consideration by the unanimous consent of its Members. Long-standing policies announced by Speakers of both parties regulate unanimous consent requests for this purpose. Among other things, the Speaker will recognize a Member to propound a unanimous consent request to call up

⁸ *Ibid.*, §853.

⁹ For more information, see CRS Report 98-315, *Privileged Business on the House Floor*, by James V. Saturno.

an unreported bill or resolution only if that request has been cleared in advance with both party floor leaders and with the bipartisan leadership of the committee of jurisdiction.¹⁰

In the 114th Congress, 87 measures, or 7% of all legislation identified by LIS as receiving House floor action, were initially considered by unanimous consent. Of these, 41 (47%) were bills or joint resolutions, and 46 (53%) were simple or concurrent resolutions. When only lawmaking forms of legislation are counted, 5% of bills and joint resolutions receiving floor action in the 114th Congress came up by unanimous consent. Of the measures initially considered by unanimous consent during the 114th Congress, 66% originated in the House.

Discharge Petition

House Rule XV, clause 2 (sometimes called the “discharge rule”), establishes a means by which a majority of the House can bring to the floor for consideration a bill or resolution that has not been reported from House committee.¹¹ Discharging a committee in this manner is a lengthy, multi-step process that is rarely successful. If a measure has been referred and pending in committee for at least 30 legislative days, any Member may submit a petition to discharge the committee of its further consideration. If 218 Members—a majority of the House—sign such a petition, a motion to discharge the committee of consideration of the measure may then be offered on the floor. This discharge motion can be made only on a second or fourth Monday that occurs after the petition is filed, and such a motion may not be made in the last six days of a congressional session. The motion to discharge is debatable for 20 minutes, and if it is adopted, a Member may then move that the House consider the legislation in question. In modern practice, it has become common for Members to introduce a special rule establishing unique terms of debate and amendment for an unreported measure and then file a discharge petition on that resolution after it has been pending before the Rules Committee for at least seven legislative days.

In the 114th Congress, one measure—a special rule introduced by a majority party Member providing for the consideration of an unreported bill—was brought to the House floor by the procedures contained in the discharge rule.

Other Parliamentary Mechanisms

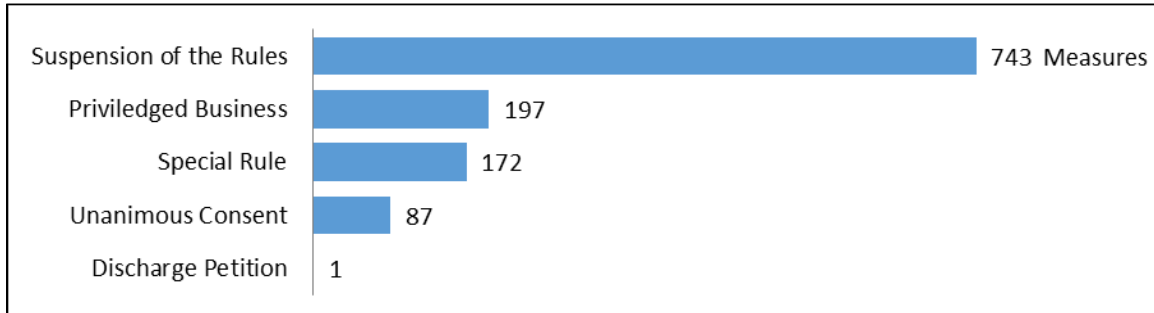
The House of Representatives has established special parliamentary procedures to bring private legislation to the chamber floor and consider legislation dealing with the business of the District of Columbia. It has also created the Calendar Wednesday procedure, where the standing committees are recognized in turn to call up measures that have been reported but not granted a rule by the Rules Committee.¹² These procedures are infrequently used, and no legislation was brought before the House in the 114th Congress by any of these three parliamentary mechanisms.

¹⁰ William Holmes Brown, Charles W. Johnson, and John V. Sullivan, *House Practice, A Guide to the Rules, Precedents and Procedures of the House* (Washington: GPO, 2011), pp. 892-893.

¹¹ For more information, see CRS Report 98-394, *Discharge Procedure in the House*, by Richard S. Beth.

¹² For more information on these procedures, see CRS Report 98-315, *Privileged Business on the House Floor*, by James V. Saturno and CRS Report 98-628, *Private Bills: Procedure in the House*, by Richard S. Beth.

Figure 2. Procedures Used to Bring Measures to the House Floor
114th Congress (2015-2016)



Source: Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress.

Note: Chart reflects initial House consideration of all legislation, regardless of legislative form.

Table 3. Parliamentary Procedures Used to Bring Measures to the Floor of the U.S. House of Representatives114th Congress (2015-2016)

Parliamentary Procedure/Percentage of Measures Considered	H.R.	S.	H.J.Res.	S.J.Res.	H.Res.	H.Con.Res.	S.Con.Res.	Total
Suspension of the Rules/62%	619	82	2	0	28	11	1	743
Privileged Business (197 Total)/16%								
Special orders of business (including those tabled)	0	0	0	0	128	0	0	128
Committee assignment resolution	0	0	0	0	25	0	0	25
Question of privileges of the House (including “blue-slipped” Senate bills, authorizing the Speaker to appear as amicus curiae in a court case, and impeachment resolutions)	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	5
Providing for adjournment/recess	0	0	0	0	0	10	4	14
Chamber organizational related	0	0	0	0	16	1	0	17
Providing for a joint session or meeting	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Bereavement resolution	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	4
Correcting engrossment or enrollment	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3
Granting deposition authority to a committee	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Privileged by rule making statute	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dismissing election contest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ethics investigation/discipline	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
By Special Rule/14%	146	10	3	4	3	5	1	172
Unanimous Consent/7%	16	23	2	0	14	25	7	87
Discharge Petition/<1%	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Call of the Private Calendar; D.C. Days; Calendar Wednesday/0%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	781	115	7	4	224	56	13	1,200

Source: Congressional Research Service analysis of data from the Legislative Information System of the U.S. Congress.**Notes:** Table reflects initial House consideration of measures receiving floor action between January 6, 2015, and January 3, 2017. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

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