United Nations Issues: Congressional Representatives to the U.N. General Assembly

The annual session of the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly is held at U.N. Headquarters in New York City. The President generally appoints one Democrat and one Republican to serve as U.S. representatives to the session, alternating each year between the House and Senate. The 75th session opened in September 2020 and operated remotely due to the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic; congressional representatives from the Senate did not appear to participate. The 76th session began on September 14, 2021, and has been conducted mostly in-person. Congressional representatives to the session are Representatives Barbara Lee and French Hill.

Overview of the U.N. General Assembly
The U.N. General Assembly is composed of all 193 U.N. member states, including the United States. It is the primary deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the United Nations. Each country, including the United States, has one vote. A two-thirds majority vote is required for decisions related to key issues such as peace and security, admission of new members, and the budget. A simple majority vote applies for all other matters.

The Assembly’s annual regular session opens in September and runs for one year. The main part of the session, from September to December, includes most of the work of the Assembly’s six committees. The annual meeting of heads of state and government, often referred to as the “general debate,” is held at the beginning of the Assembly session. Members of Congress generally serve as representatives during this time.

Most of the 76th Assembly session is being held in person. Previously, the 75th session was virtual, with most high-level speeches delivered via video link. Members used a “silence procedure” to adopt resolutions. Under this procedure, the president of the Assembly circulated a draft resolution and members had at least 72 hours to raise objections. If there were no objections, the president then circulated a letter stating that the resolution was adopted.

History of Congressional Representation
The concept of congressional representation to the U.N. General Assembly emerged from extensive participation by both Senators and Representatives in the 1945 San Francisco Conference on International Organization, which led to the adoption of the U.N. Charter. The practice began at the first Assembly session in 1946, when Members of the Senate and House held positions as representatives and alternate representatives, respectively. Since that time, with few exceptions, each year two Senators have alternated with two Representatives—with the Senate typically serving in years when the House holds elections. In most cases, both parties have been represented and, when possible, the Administration and Congress have aimed to select Members who have not previously served as delegates. (See Table 1 for a list of congressional representatives since 2006.)

Legislative Authority
After the adoption of the U.N. Charter, Congress enacted the United Nations Participation Act of 1945 (UNPA; 22 U.S.C. 287 et seq.), which provides legislative authority for U.S. engagement in the United Nations. UNPA does not require congressional participation in sessions of the General Assembly, but anticipates and permits participation of Members of Congress, among other U.S. representatives, in such sessions. Section 2 of the act sets out the authorities for U.S. representation the United Nations. Specifically, Section 2(a) specifies that the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, shall designate not more than five U.S. representatives to attend a specified session or specified sessions of the General Assembly. UNPA does not specify whether Members are eligible to be appointed as U.S. representatives; however, Section 2(g) prohibits compensation for Members serving as U.S. representatives, signaling that Members might serve.

Role and Responsibilities
The role and duties of congressional representatives are not formalized; thus, the level and extent of congressional engagement during the Assembly session depends on the interests and priorities of individual Members. Delegates generally travel to New York at the beginning of the regular session. In the past, some Members have attended the general debate and the President’s reception for visiting heads of state, while others have stayed for several additional days or returned for other parts of the Assembly session. Congressional representatives have also followed the activities of one of the General Assembly’s six main committees, with at least one Member tracking the work of the fifth committee, which is responsible for administrative and budgetary matters related to the organization. Before or during the session, Members may also schedule appointments on policy issues of interest; these might include one-on-one visits with heads of state, foreign representatives, or U.N. officials.

Congressional representatives have often received support from congressional committee staff and State Department officials. For example, staff from the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) and Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) might write statements, provide background materials and briefings, or arrange meetings for Members. State Department officials generally coordinate meetings and brief Members on U.S. policy and key issues.

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facing the Assembly. The Department also provides
Members with office space and services in the U.S. Mission
to the United Nations in New York City.

**Appointment Process**
As outlined in UNPA, the President, with the advice and
consent of the Senate, may designate congressional
representatives. In practice, SFRC has developed a policy
of not holding hearings for temporary or part-time
positions, including General Assembly representatives.
Instead, both HFAC and SFRC have annually provided the
President with their choices, who are then nominated by the
President and confirmed by vote of the full Senate.
Nominees for the 72nd (2017) and 73rd (2018) Assembly
sessions were confirmed by the Senate by voice vote. From
2013 to 2016, however, it appears that while SFRC reported
out nominees, the full Senate did not vote on the
nominations. For the 74th (2019) and 75th (2020) sessions,
President Trump did not transmit nominations to SFRC,
and thus no committee or full Senate consideration took
place. In each of those years, Members of Congress served
as representatives to the Assembly (with the exception of
2020 due to COVID-19). President Biden transmitted the
nominations to the Senate for the Assembly’s 76th (2021)
session, which were then referred to SFRC.

**Committee Selection**
Although both HFAC and SFRC have at different times
documented procedures for selecting congressional
representatives, in practice the process appears to be
informal and has varied over time depending on the
priorities and preferences of committee leadership.

**House of Representatives.** HFAC does not appear to have
a formal process for selecting congressional representatives
to the General Assembly. Based on past practice, it has
assigned one Member from each political party on the basis
of seniority, starting with those who have not served as
representatives; however, in recent years HFAC members
have increasingly selected participants based on the
Member’s level of interest in U.N.-related issues and
availability to attend the session.

**Senate.** SFRC also does not appear to have a formal
process for selecting congressional representatives to the
Assembly. In practice, the chairperson and ranking member
select the representatives, who are usually chosen from
among SFRC members. Similar to the House, congressional
representatives from the Senate appear to be selected based
on their interest in U.N. issues and availability.

**Role of the Executive Branch**
In accordance with the President’s authority to appoint U.S.
representatives to the U.N. General Assembly, the
executive branch is responsible for sending a letter of
invitation to the individual Member appointing him or her
to the U.S. delegation. At the same time, it customarily
forwards the names of the selected Members to the Senate
for confirmation, and encloses a full list of participants on
the U.S. delegation. The first public notice is usually a press
statement from individual members, a White House
announcement, or a notice of intention to nominate as part
of the General Assembly delegation, subject to Senate
confirmation.

The State Department provides funding for U.S.
representatives to the General Assembly, including per
diem, transportation, and lodging expenses. These activities
are typically financed through the Diplomatic & Consular
Programs account, which funds the Office of International
Conferences in the International Organization Affairs
Bureau (IO/C). IO/C is responsible for accrediting,
instructing, and managing U.S. delegates to multilateral
conferences, including the General Assembly.

### Table 1. Congressional Representatives to U.N.
General Assembly Sessions: 2008 to 2021

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Assembly Main Sessions</th>
<th>Representatives or Senators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rep. French Hill</td>
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<tr>
<td>75th (Sept. 14-Dec. 27, 2020)</td>
<td>None due to COVID-19 pandemic.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers</td>
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<td>73rd (Sept. 18-Dec. 22, 2018)</td>
<td>Sen. Ron Johnson</td>
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<td>Sen. Jeff Merkley</td>
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<td>Rep. Christopher Smith</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sen. Ron Johnson</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rep. Christopher Smith</td>
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<tr>
<td>69th (Sept. 16-Dec. 29, 2014)</td>
<td>Sen. Ben Cardin</td>
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<td>Sen. Ron Johnson</td>
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<td>Rep. Mark Meadows</td>
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<td>Sen. Patrick Leahy</td>
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<td>Rep. Russ Carnahan</td>
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<td>Sen. Roger Wicker</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rep. Christopher Smith</td>
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<tr>
<td>63rd (Sept. 16-Dec. 23, 2008)</td>
<td>Sen. Bob Corker</td>
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<td>Sen. Bill Nelson</td>
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**Sources:** CRS, White House and congressional press releases.

**Notes:** The dates represent the end of the main part of the
Assembly session. They do not represent the entire session, which
typically concludes the following September, the day before the next
session begins.

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