

Renewing the House of Representatives

How a More Participatory Legislative Process Could Benefit Both Members and Leaders.

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Protect Democracy United is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing American democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government.

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Executive Summary

The U.S. House of Representatives has become nearly impossible to lead, deeply frustrating to serve in, and, worst of all, unable to effectively represent the American people. Reviewing a century and a half of House procedure, this report finds that legislative rules are a substantial contributor to the problem. Power over the legislative agenda is concentrated in the speaker's office to a degree with little precedent in the chamber's history, even though more participatory arrangements have consistently produced a more engaged and less rebellious membership — without costing the majority party its agenda. Today's centralization has delivered strikingly little in return for the widespread frustration it causes. The report therefore recommends four “pressure relief valves”: reforms that give broadly supported measures an orderly, predictable path to the floor while leaving leadership's core tools intact.

- **A workable alternative to the discharge petition:** designated calendar days for considering member petitions with substantial bipartisan backing or support from groups that represent a potential chamber majority.
- **Guaranteed amendment votes:** an up-or-down floor vote for germane amendments cosponsored by a fixed number of members of each party.
- **A voice for groups of members in the budget:** floor votes on alternative budget resolutions and an expanded motion to recommit on appropriations bills.
- **A standing select committee on reform:** an empowered body that studies further improvements and places its proposals directly on the floor on a set schedule.

Modest as they are, these changes would make the House easier to lead, and a more rewarding place to serve.

Introduction

There is widespread, bipartisan frustration with the way that the U.S. House of Representatives is currently operating. House leaders are often frustrated by the actions of rank-and-file members, while the rank-and-file often feel sidelined by leadership. The public, meanwhile, is deeply dissatisfied with the whole institution.

All of these perspectives have some merit. Leading the House has become a nearly impossible job. Party leaders are expected to pass robust legislative agendas with extremely narrow majorities, and without ever relying on votes from the opposing party. This requires them to almost perfectly reconcile the increasingly diverse views (and growing frustrations) within their caucus, and to do so across many issues at a relentless pace. When leaders inevitably fall short, they are lambasted by the press, by the opposition, and by colleagues who didn't entirely get their way.

Rank-and-file members of the House, meanwhile, often feel shut out from the legislative process entirely. They hail from diverse constituencies with highly variable policy demands, yet power over the legislative agenda is more centralized in the speaker's office than at most other points in congressional history. As those demands are funneled through leadership, members without leadership roles often find themselves with little notice about what measures will be considered, little input into their content, and no opportunity to offer amendments. They are nonetheless often expected to vote in lockstep with their copartisans regardless of what they or their constituents think about the underlying legislation. Each Congress, rank-and-file House members introduce thousands of bills — some with considerable support — that never receive serious consideration. It is little wonder that a record number have simply decided to retire from Congress.¹

To restore some semblance of functionality to the House — for its leadership, for its members, and above all, for the American people — this report argues the rules of the legislative process need to change. The bulk of the report looks back on prior eras of House history, finding that House rules have often given members considerably more access to the legislative agenda. Generally, those opportunities for member participation produced a more engaged and less rebellious membership without compromising the majority party's ability to pursue its policy goals.

Though much of this report will focus on these historical lessons, the later pages will also offer a series of modest reform proposals, which may be best understood as “pressure relief valves.” Each creates a limited opportunity for members to advance measures for which they have mustered substantial support, via an orderly, predictable path to the floor. The intent is to

¹ Meg Kinnard and Maya Sweedler, “Tracking the Retirement Announcements of Members of Congress,” AP News, accessed August 30, 2026, <https://apnews.com/projects/2026-congressional-retirements-tracker/>.

channel the energy and frustration now venting through failed rules, discharge petitions, and periodic revolts against the speaker into a process that is productive — and one that leadership can anticipate and plan around rather than one that repeatedly catches it by surprise. These changes, we contend, will make the House easier, not harder to lead. They will also allow the House to do more of what the Founders intended: solving problems collectively on behalf of the American people.

The Current Era of Centralization

Today's House of Representatives is in many ways a historical outlier, perhaps most notably in that power over the agenda is very highly centralized. Restrictive rules that bar or narrowly limit amendments have become the norm, and open rules — under which any member may offer a germane amendment — have all but vanished. The House has not adopted a single open rule since the 114th Congress (2015–16), sharply curtailing members' ability to shape legislation on the floor (see Figure 1). At the same time, committees can no longer count on floor time for the measures they mark up and report. In most cases, a small circle of party leaders decides what the chamber will and will not take up. Frustration with this closed process extends across party lines.²

And these strains have become highly visible in the chamber's daily operation. The current Republican majority has at times even struggled to get special rules out of committee despite holding a 9–4 majority on the Rules Committee.³ When rules do get reported from committee, the party has struggled to corral enough votes to pass them through the chamber. This has necessitated either recessing for the week or negotiating with the minority party to pass measures via suspension of the rules, which requires a two-thirds vote in the chamber. Meanwhile, fed-up members have increasingly gone around the leadership entirely, forcing votes through a record number of successful discharge petitions, and holding the House hostage by withholding support for routine and must-pass measures. These are signs that the majority is struggling to control the floor as legislative pressure escapes through whatever cracks it can find. And there is reason to expect that the House will continue to face these challenges regardless of which party holds the majority.

² To take just one example from a member of each party, Representative Andy Biggs (R-A), argues that closed rules “get in the way” of representing constituents, whereas Representative Julie Johnson (D-TX), who saw nearly every amendment she offered blocked, calls the current process “a disservice to the institution.” See Andy Biggs and Julie Johnson, quoted in “Influence Shrinks as House Limits Members’ Power to Change Bills,” Bloomberg Government, January 9, 2026, <https://news.bgov.com/bloomberg-government-news/influence-shrinks-as-house-limits-members-power-to-change-bills>.

³ Leadership recently had to cancel one committee vote entirely; another was successful only after a 22-hour overnight session. Scott Wong, Kyle Stewart, and Syedah Asghar, “House Cancels Last Day of Votes before Summer Break as Epstein Consumes Capitol Hill,” NBC News, July 22, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/house-cancels-votes-fight-jeffrey-epstein-files-rcna22023>; Mychael Schnell and Emily Brooks, “House Rules Committee Advances Trump Agenda Bill after Nearly 22-Hour Hearing,” The Hill, May 21, 2025, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/5313061-house-rules-committee-advances-trump-agenda-bill/>.

Prior Eras of House Procedure

Procedural arrangements in the House have not always been as centralized as they are today. The chamber has repeatedly reallocated agenda power, swinging toward the leadership and away from it as members' demands and circumstances changed. Today's concentration of power in the speaker's office sits at the far end of a pendulum that has swung back and forth for a century and a half.⁴

The earliest sustained centralization was a remedy for genuine chaos. In the closely divided House of the 1880s, the minority could paralyze the chamber through the "disappearing quorum." By sitting silent on the floor, present but refusing to answer a quorum call, a minority could deny the majority the numbers to conduct any business at all. In 1890, Speaker Thomas Reed of Maine directed the clerk to record as present the members who sat mute during an election dispute, and after weathering furious objections he had the practice written into the rules.⁵ This was also the era in which special rules first became a tool for the majority to guarantee its priorities a timely path to the floor. "Reed's Rules" as they were known, gave the majority the power to govern by preventing a determined minority from obstructing the chamber indefinitely.

Two decades later the pendulum swung back. Under Speaker Joseph Cannon of Illinois, the speaker's power reached its zenith. Cannon chaired the Rules Committee, controlled committee assignments, and used both to bury legislation he opposed.⁶ In March 1910, a coalition of insurgent Republicans and Democrats, led by Representative George Norris, stripped the speaker of his seat on the Rules Committee and his grip on the floor. The decisive vote was 191 to 156, with more than 40 Republicans breaking from their own speaker. The revolt exposed the core principle that Reed's Rules had established — power in the House belongs to a majority of its members, not to a party or the leaders who act in their name. Effective leaders work to shape and influence majority rule; when they instead simply try to thwart the will of majorities, members eventually find ways to reclaim control of the chamber's business. Echoes of that dynamic are starting to emerge in today's House as members refuse to assent to special rules and increasingly turn to discharge petitions to force measures to the floor.

After Cannon's fall, House Democrats tried to govern through binding votes in the party caucus. If two-thirds of the caucus adopted a position, every Democrat was expected to support it on the floor, and the caucus rules permitted expulsion for disloyalty. The experiment worked when

⁴ Sarah A. Binder, *Minority Rights, Majority Rule: Partisanship and the Development of Congress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵ Binder, *Minority Rights, Majority Rule*; Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism*.

⁶ Joseph Cooper and David W. Brady, "Institutional Context and Leadership Style: The House from Cannon to Rayburn," *American Political Science Review* 75, no. 2 (1981): 411–425; Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism*.

the party already agreed, but failed as a general method of governing.⁷ Exceptions were freely granted, since members could cite constitutional objections or prior promises to constituents, and expulsion was never once attempted. The reason the caucus could not bind its members is the same reason every scheme of centralization ultimately fails — House members answer to their constituents, not to their fellow partisans.

The most durable arrangement was the most decentralized. For most of the 20th century, much of the power in the House ran through its committees rather than being overwhelmingly concentrated in its party leadership. Committees controlled the flow of legislation, members built expertise and influence over a defined jurisdiction, and the speaker coordinated floor action at the behest of committee chairs and the party's rank-and-file, but did not try to dictate floor action to the degree we see today. Scholars later named this arrangement the "textbook Congress," the committee-government system so settled that the midcentury textbooks all described it in the same terms.⁸ It was decentralized by design, and it worked.

Nelson Polsby captured that version of the House at its height. In a classic 1968 analysis, he showed that the chamber had, over its history, become a professionalized institution.⁹ Careers lengthened, the speakership became a specialized office reached only after long service, and a dense committee system allowed the House to process an enormous workload. The lesson Polsby drew is important to consider today. Institutional strength came from an active and engaged membership with predictable procedural regularity not from inflexible centralized command. Polsby even anticipated the cost of centralization. Restoring discretion to the speaker or to centralized party agencies, he warned, might "reduce the effectiveness of Congress far below the level anticipated, because the House would come to be less valued in and of itself, its division of labor would provide less of a power base for subject matter specialists, and the incentives to stay within the organization would sharply decline."¹⁰

Polsby's warning was prescient. As committee influence has waned and individual members have fewer levers to affect policy, fewer qualified members of the public seem willing to run for a seat in the House.¹¹ Members in the prime of their careers head for the exits, some for ostensibly lesser county-level offices.¹²

To be sure, the decentralized committee system was far from a perfect or optimally efficient arrangement. Chairs advanced by seniority rather than merit, which occasionally handed great power to members badly out of step with their party and the country as a whole. Representative Howard "Judge" Smith of Virginia, who chaired the Rules Committee from 1955 to 1967, used the post to smother civil rights and other legislation favored by majority party Democrats. But the

⁷ Matthew N. Green, "Institutional Change, Party Discipline, and the House Democratic Caucus, 1911–19," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2002).

⁸ Kenneth A. Shepsle, "The Changing Textbook Congress," in *Can the Government Govern?*, ed. John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1989), 238–266.

⁹ Nelson W. Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 1 (1968): 144–168.

¹⁰ Polsby, "Institutionalization of the House of Representatives."

¹¹ Molly E. Reynolds, "Why Members of Congress Choose Not to Run for Re-election," Brookings Institution, May 12, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/congressional-retirements/>.

¹² Anthony J. Chergosky and Jason M. Roberts, "The De-Institutionalization of Congress" *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 3 (2018): 475–495.

system eventually corrected itself. In 1961, Speaker Sam Rayburn enlarged the Rules Committee from 12 members to 15, diluting Smith's control of the crucial agenda-setting committee. In the 1970s, the Democratic Caucus went further, making chairmanships subject to a secret-ballot vote; in 1975 it removed three sitting chairmen, and those who remained had new incentives to work with their colleagues.¹³ Reform has long been the House's method for keeping power answerable to its members. Changing the rules is not a break with the House's history; it is a consistent feature of that history.

The pressure relief valve in action

The clearest illustrations of the usefulness of decentralized processes are the moments when distributed floor access has rescued the majority party from its own choke points. In 1938, the federal minimum wage — among the most popular and durable achievements of the New Deal — was stalled in the Rules Committee by a coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats, despite being a signature priority of a president whose party held an overwhelming House majority. Labor Committee Chair Mary Norton turned to the discharge petition; when the petition opened for signature in the spring of 1938, it gathered the required 218 names in two hours and 20 minutes, and the Fair Labor Standards Act went on to become the last major statute of the New Deal.¹⁴ The safety valve did not weaken the majority party. It delivered the party's own promise to voters when its internal gatekeepers could not, and spared the leadership a bruising internal war in the process.

A quarter century later, the valve worked without even being opened. When Chairman Smith made clear that he intended to bury the Civil Rights Act, Judiciary Chairman Emanuel Celler filed a discharge petition in December 1963. It never reached 218 — it gathered 178 signatures — but the visible, growing threat of being bypassed was enough. Smith relented in early January, the Rules Committee cleared the bill within the month, and the House passed it 290 to 130.¹⁵ The credible threat of member-driven floor access disciplined a wayward gatekeeper without the leadership spending any capital to break him. The lesson of these episodes is not that the discharge petition is a good tool — today it is a blunt instrument that leaders rightly dislike — but that a predictable path around a choke point can serve the majority's own goals at far lower political cost.

From committee government to party government

The reforms of the 1970s set the stage for a resurgence of centralized party control of the House. As the conservative southern Democrats who had long anchored the committee system gave way to a more uniformly liberal Democratic caucus, the majority grew willing to hand its leaders tools it would never have granted a generation earlier. Scholars called the resulting

¹³ David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, "Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938: Maximum Struggle for a Minimum Wage," <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/flsa1938>; U.S. House of Representatives, History, Art & Archives, "The Fair Labor Standards Act," <https://history.house.gov/Education/NHD/NHD-Fair-Labor-Standards/>.

¹⁵ National Archives, "Discharge Petition to Move the Civil Rights Bill Out of the Rules Committee, December 12, 1963," <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/civil-rights-1964/discharge-petition.html>.

bargain “conditional” party government. The idea was simple: when a majority party is internally cohesive and has policy goals distinct from the minority, its members empower strong central leadership to act on their behalf.¹⁶ The speaker gained firmer control of the Rules Committee, the caucus reviewed and occasionally removed chairs, and the leadership began to structure floor debate far more tightly than the textbook Congress ever had.

Part of what drove the majority to tighten its grip was a change in the minority party’s tactics. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 introduced recorded teller voting in the Committee of the Whole, and electronic voting followed in 1973. This meant that for the first time, amendments offered in the Committee of the Whole could be recorded and publicized rather than being subject to a teller vote that only reported the vote totals. Minority party Republicans used this change to their electoral benefit. They offered a flood of amendments designed less to change the underlying legislation than to force majority Democrats to take public positions on politically difficult questions, a strategy that Newt Gingrich and his Conservative Opportunity Society sharpened into open confrontation through the 1980s.¹⁷ The Democratic majority responded by using special rules to restrict which amendments reached the floor at all.¹⁸ The restrictive rule, once an occasional device, became a routine instrument of majority control. The biggest casualty of this change was the ability of members to participate in the legislative process by offering floor amendments.

The process accelerated sharply when Republicans captured the House in the 104th Congress (1995) and made Gingrich speaker. Under Gingrich’s leadership, power was centralized in the speaker’s office to a degree not seen since Cannon. He passed over senior members to hand committee gavels to loyalists, imposed six-year term limits on chairs, and made clear that a gavel would turn on fidelity to the party program and its fundraising demands rather than on seniority or policy expertise.¹⁹ Committees became instruments of the leadership rather than semi-autonomous policy incubators. Subsequent leaders, Republican and Democratic alike, have kept the tools they inherited and continued to concentrate power in the leader’s office. Agenda power has ratcheted steadily upward across three decades and more than a dozen Congresses. The concentration of control described at the outset of this report is the accumulated product of that ratchet, not the invention of any single speaker, nor the decision of any particular House majority.

¹⁶ David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*; John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde, “The Logic of Conditional Party Government: Revisiting the Electoral Connection,” in *Congress Reconsidered*, 7th ed., ed. Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001), 269–292.

¹⁷ Jason M. Roberts and Steven S. Smith, “Procedural Contexts, Party Strategy, and Conditional Party Voting in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1971–2000,” *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (2003): 305–317.

¹⁸ Stanley Bach and Steven S. Smith, *Managing Uncertainty in the House of Representatives: Adaptation and Innovation in Special Rules* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1988); Barbara Sinclair, *Majority Leadership in the U.S. House* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

¹⁹ Barbara Sinclair, *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2016).

The Case for Reform

The pressure is unlikely to decline

It would be easy to claim that the current struggles to govern are unique to this Republican majority. But we contend that the pressures the current Republican leadership faces are likely to persist into the next Congress regardless of which party holds the majority. Current district alignments have produced, and will likely continue to produce, razor-thin majorities. Recent Congresses have been run on margins of a handful of seats, at times as few as three, and neither party has managed to build the kind of durable majority that once gave leaders room to maneuver around recalcitrant members.²⁰ At the same time, both parties retain diverse coalitions whose members answer to very different kinds of districts. A speaker working with a narrow majority and a heterogeneous conference confronts the same arithmetic no matter which party wins in November. The pressures that make the House hard to govern in a top-down manner are unlikely to abate anytime soon.

That is precisely why leaders, as well as rank-and-file members, should be interested in reform. With narrow majorities and a diverse caucus, a leader who is expected to control every outcome is being set up to fail, as the current Congress demonstrates. A House without pressure relief valves does not become more governable. It becomes more prone to the explosive, all-or-nothing confrontations that have twice in recent memory cost a sitting speaker his job. Reform, we contend, should not be seen as a concession to difficult members, but as a tool that makes the chamber easier to lead.

The burden the current arrangement places on the leader is not abstract. A recent profile of Speaker Mike Johnson found him unable to put his phone down — buried under some 1,477 unread text messages and 829 unheard voicemails, fielding member demands and late-night calls from the president — and describing himself as “a triage surgeon in an active battlefield” in which “there’s an emergency every 10 minutes.”²¹ That is the predictable result of an institutional arrangement that routes every demand through one office. When leadership monopolizes the agenda, it also monopolizes the pressure. It monopolizes the blame as well: when every outcome is understood to be the speaker’s personal choice, every disappointment becomes the speaker’s personal fault. As a result, any member who wants a vote must extract it from the speaker personally, and the speaker must say no to most of them. The reforms proposed below cut the other way. By adopting clear, bipartisan thresholds for floor access, they shift the work of managing bills pushed by individual members from the leader to the members themselves. A member who wants a vote no longer needs a private audience with the speaker; instead they

²⁰ Frances E. Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

²¹ Olivia Beavers, “We Went on the Road With Mike Johnson and His 1,477 Unread Text Messages,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/mike-johnson-house-speaker-republican-e81b9c1e>.

need to build a coalition to support their legislation. This gets members more involved in the legislative process and takes pressure off the leadership.

Reform could also make serving in the House more fulfilling for its members. Exit interviews with departing members provide a strong indictment of the current conditions. “This place has just devolved into this bickering and nonsense,” said Representative Ken Buck of Colorado, who resigned in the middle of his term.²² Representative Mike Quigley of Illinois described the prevailing mood among his colleagues without embellishment: “The most common line I hear from people now, my colleagues, is: ‘We can’t get anything done and I hate being here.’ That’s the most common refrain. So it’s a recipe for people leaving.”²³ Representative Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin, a rising star who left after seven years, put the institutional decline more pointedly still: “We’ve turned Congress into a green room for Fox News and MSNBC, instead of being the key institution of government.”²⁴

The departing members also identified the cause. Representative John Sarbanes of Maryland, leaving after nine terms, observed that both parties have centralized decision-making in the leadership and taken it away from the rank-and-file, a response to narrow majorities and nationalized politics that has made it harder for members to legislate, build coalitions, or work across the aisle. “You need more party discipline if you’re at war every day. So there’s a kind of grudging acceptance of the fact that you need to get marching orders and just execute on them.”²⁵

A chamber that offers its most capable members little more than marching orders should not be surprised when they conclude, as a striking number have, that the work is no longer worth doing. This is not a new worry. As noted above, more than half a century ago, at the height of a very different House, Nelson Polsby predicted precisely this danger.

Centralization has not paid off for majorities

The centralization at the heart of this story is not an abstraction; it can be measured directly, and its clearest single gauge is the fate of the open rule — the procedure that once let any member offer a germane amendment on the floor. Open rules were routine into the 1990s, when the House adopted as many as 91 in a single Congress. Their number then collapsed, and the House has not adopted a single open rule since the 114th Congress (2015–16).

²² Ken Buck, quoted in “Exit Interviews: Congressmen Bid Farewell to D.C.,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, September 24, 2024, <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/retiring-congressmen-ken-buck-ken-gallagher-john-sarbanes-derek-kilmer>; remark originally to CNN, March 2024.

²³ Mike Quigley, quoted in “Republican Dysfunction Drives a Wave of House Retirements,” *NBC News*, February 21, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/republican-dysfunction-drives-wave-house-retirements-rcna139642>.

²⁴ Mike Gallagher, quoted in *The Washington Post*, August 2024; reprinted in “Exit Interviews: Congressmen Bid Farewell to D.C.,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, September 24, 2024, <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/retiring-congressmen-ken-buck-ken-gallagher-john-sarbanes-derek-kilmer>.

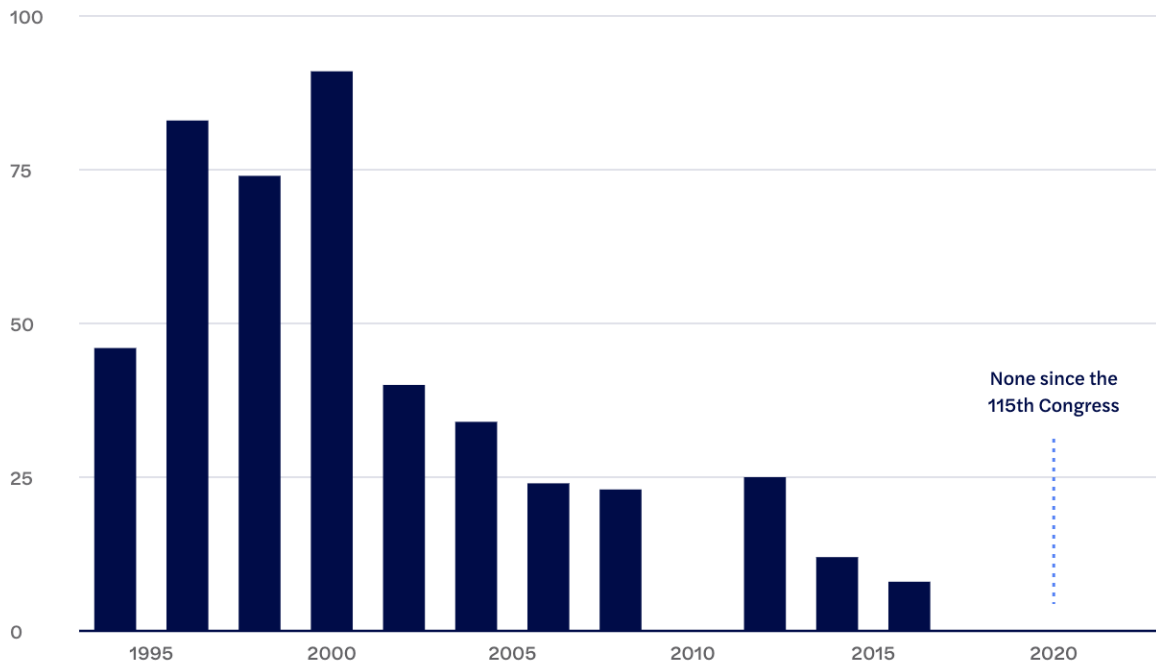
²⁵ John Sarbanes, quoted in “Exit Interviews: Congressmen Bid Farewell to D.C.,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, September 24, 2024, <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/retiring-congressmen-ken-buck-ken-gallagher-john-sarbanes-derek-kilmer>.

FIGURE 1

Open rules adopted by the House, 1993–2022

Open rules were a routine feature of House floor debate through the 1990s but the House has not adopted a single open rule since the 115th Congress (2017–2018).

Open rules adopted



Source: Bipartisan Policy Center (Wolfensberger), House Rules Data, Table 1. Open = any germane amendment permitted

Importantly, the increase in centralization does not appear to have increased the ability of majority parties to enact their policy agendas. Political scientists Frances Lee and James Curry conducted a careful and thorough study of how successful majority parties have been at accomplishing their stated goals. Examining lawmaking from 1973 to 2018, they found that today's majorities are no more effective at passing their core priorities than the majorities of the 1970s and 1980s, and that bipartisan coalitions remain as necessary to success as ever.²⁶ The concentration of procedural power has brought more messaging votes that are designed to fail on the floor and has produced more gridlock in certain areas, but has not created a greater capacity to govern.

Other productivity metrics also suggest that centralization is, if anything, negatively correlated with legislative productivity. Consider the most basic output of a legislature: laws. The 84th Congress (1955–1956) enacted 1,028 public laws and the 89th (1965–1966) enacted 810. Recent Congresses have struggled to reach a third of that total, passing 333 public laws in the 104th Congress (1995–1996), 283 in the 112th (2011–2012), and just 274 in the 118th (2023–2024) — the fewest of any Congress in the postwar era.

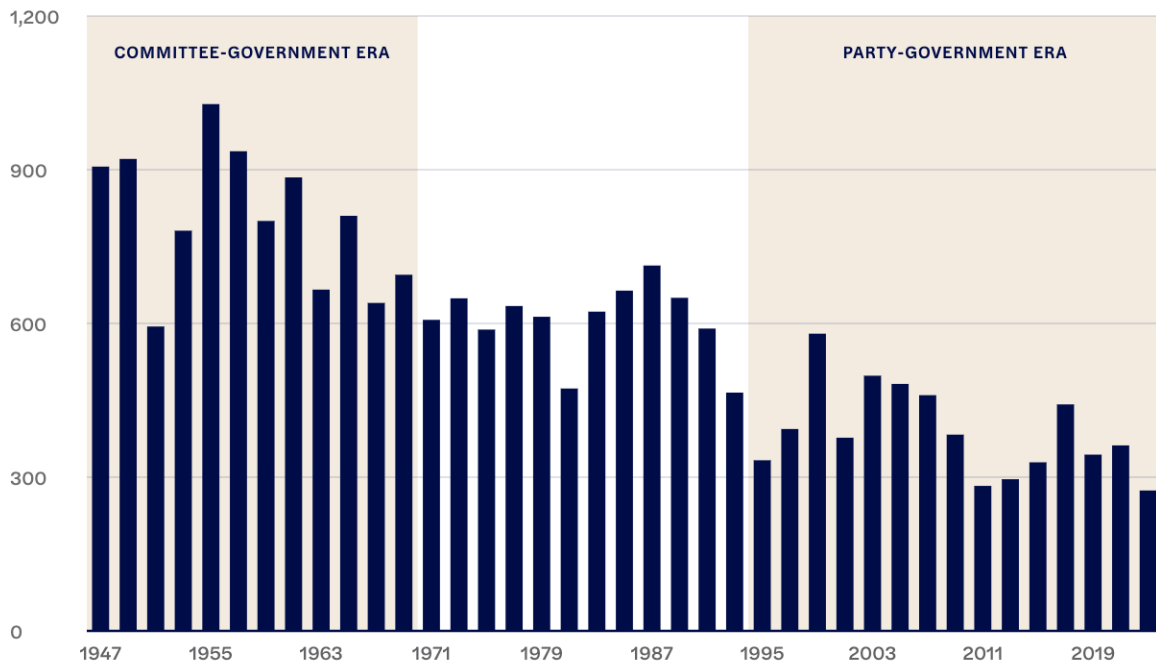
²⁶ James M. Curry and Frances E. Lee, *The Limits of Party: Congress and Lawmaking in a Polarized Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

FIGURE 2

Public laws enacted per Congress, 1947–2024

Congress enacted two to three times as many public laws per term during the committee-government era as it has during the party-government era, which began with Speaker Gingrich and the 104th Congress.

Public laws enacted



Source: Vital Statistics on Congress (Brookings, 2026 ed.), Table 6-4.

The same decline appears in the number of bills the House passes, which has fallen from well over 2,000 per Congress in the 1950s to fewer than 1,000 in most recent Congresses.

FIGURE 3

Bills passed per Congress, 1947–2024

The House passed roughly half as many bills per term during the party-government era as it did during the committee-government era.

Number of bills passed



Source: Vital Statistics on Congress (Brookings, 2026 ed.), Table 6-1.

Counting laws is an imperfect measure of productivity. Laws differ in importance, and some members would count a leaner statute book as a success rather than a failure. First, the statutes Congress does pass have grown dramatically longer even as they have grown fewer, as leaders bundle sprawling packages that few members have time to read. The average public law ran two or three pages in the 1950s; by recent Congresses it often ran 15 to 25.

FIGURE 4

Average length of statutes, 1947–2024

The party-government era has featured fewer, far longer laws, reflecting the shift to leadership-assembled omnibus packages.

Average pages per law



Source: Vital Statistics on Congress (Brookings, 2026 ed.), Table 6-4.

Second, the same downward trend shows up in measures that are harder to explain away. The House has not enacted a full set of appropriations bills on time in years, governing instead through last-minute omnibus packages and continuing resolutions.²⁷ Public regard for Congress has also remained quite low during this period of centralized control. Because systematic approval polling began only in 1974, Figure 5 cannot compare today's House with the committee era directly — but the longest-running measure available can: in 1964, 77 percent of Americans trusted the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time; by 2024, just 22 percent did.²⁸

²⁷ Chergosky and Roberts, "The De-Institutionalization of Congress"; James M. Curry, *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

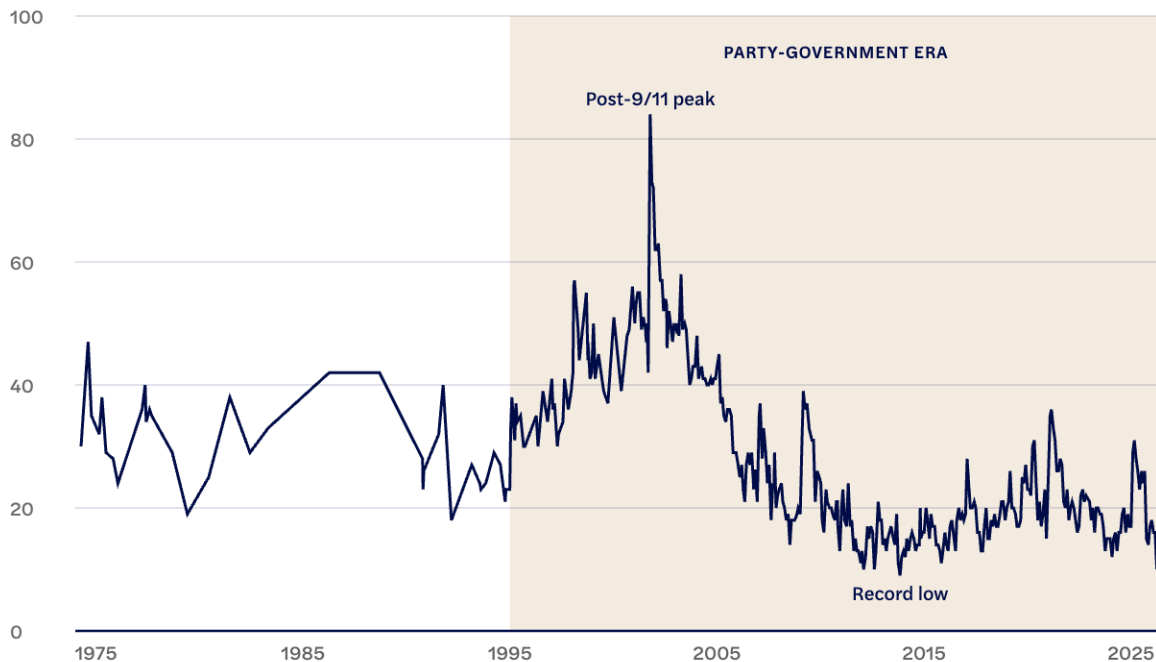
²⁸ Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2025," December 4, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/12/04/public-trust-in-government-1958-2025/>.

FIGURE 5

Public approval of Congress, 1974–2026

Public approval briefly spiked to 84 percent after the September 11th attacks, sunk to just nine percent in 2013, and has mostly languished in the teens and twenties ever since.

Percent who approve



Source: Gallup, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?" 1974–2026.

The electoral record points in the same direction. Democrats held the House for 40 consecutive years, from 1955 to 1995 — and for all but four years between 1933 and 1995 — a span coinciding almost exactly with the committee-government era, during which members of the majority used committee work and legislative accomplishment to build personal reputations that could withstand national swings against their party. In the three decades of party government since 1995, control of the chamber has changed hands four times, and neither party has held it for more than 12 consecutive years. Procedure is not the whole story, but the record flatly contradicts the fear that sharing the floor costs a majority its power.

None of this proves that decentralization alone produced good laws and public trust, and we are not claiming that reviving an old set of rules would by itself reverse either trend. Polarization, divided government, a larger policy agenda, and the nationalization of politics have all pressed on the institution at once.²⁹ The claim being made here is narrower. The premise offered in defense of the status quo, that the House cannot function unless leaders monopolize the agenda, is refuted by the institution's own history. For decades the House ran on a more open, committee-centered model and remained the most capable legislature in the world.

²⁹ Sarah A. Binder, "The Dysfunctional Congress," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 85–101.

What Reform Would Look Like

Today's House is not at all like the one that Speaker Rayburn presided over, and the point of reform is not to recreate the committee gatekeeping of the mid-20th century. Narrow majorities, weakened committees, and sharper partisanship are real lawmaking constraints that are not likely to be reversed with rules changes alone. The proposals below are designed to apply the central lesson of the history recounted above — that orderly, predictable paths to the floor have repeatedly made the House more governable, not less — to the constraints of today's chamber. And they do so in the spirit of incremental progress; these fixes are intended to make a visible and meaningful impact on the problems that afflict the House, not to revolutionize the institution overnight.

The goal is to widen access to the agenda and provide members more opportunities to participate in the legislative process while preserving leadership's core power to manage the bulk of the agenda. The proposals share a unifying principle: that floor access is earned by demonstrating broad support. A measure that can show real breadth of support among members earns a path to a vote; one that cannot does not. In that spirit, we propose the following reforms to House procedure and rules.³⁰

First, create a workable alternative to the discharge petition.

The current discharge petition process allows a chamber majority to force a vote, but the procedures for doing so are cumbersome, slow, and disruptive to the legislative process. It largely functions as a blunt instrument of last resort. A better approach would be to replace the current process with one in which designated days of the calendar are set aside for consideration of widely supported member petitions — for example, petitions with a substantial amount of bipartisan support, or backing from groups of members sufficient to constitute a potential majority.³¹ This calendar-based channel would take the pressure now escaping through discharge petitions and route it into a process leadership can plan around. It would also ease the constant demands on the speaker to block proposals from one wing of the party in order to satisfy objections from another. And it would change members' incentives: with a direct path to the floor available, they would have less to gain from trying to undermine colleagues through procedural maneuvering, and more to gain from working to persuade their colleagues of the merits of their ideas. Lastly, petition organizers should be able to collect signatures privately, with the signatures published when the petition is formally presented. That approach gives members the freedom to do the bargaining necessary to build majorities, but preserves accountability at the moment the petition becomes operative.

³⁰ Protect Democracy proposes a substantially similar list of policy suggestions, some with additional detail, in a memo on its website: congressionalrenewal.org/recommendations

³¹ The number of signatures required should be a majority of the House's current membership, accounting for vacant seats, rather than remaining fixed at 218.

Second, guarantee votes on amendments with real bipartisan backing.

Because closed rules have become the default way that significant legislation reaches the floor, the only decision available to most members on most bills is “yes” or “no.” We recommend a new default: allowing germane amendments with substantial bipartisan support — in the form of cosponsorships from a fixed number of members of each party — to receive an up-or-down vote. The bipartisan-cosponsorship threshold does two things at once. It screens out amendments offered only to send a message or to force an uncomfortable vote on the other side, since those by design cannot attract support across the aisle. And it keeps the number of amendments manageable, so leadership can still anticipate the shape of floor debate — preserving the predictability that closed rules were adopted to protect while restoring a meaningful portion of the amending process that they eliminated.

Third, give groups of members a voice in the budget.

Deciding how the federal government spends money is arguably the most consequential thing Congress does, yet most members have little say in it. Spending decisions get packaged into a few enormous bills — omnibus appropriations packages and continuing resolutions — negotiated by leadership and committee chairs, then presented to everyone else as a single up-or-down vote. We propose creating two points in the process when rank-and-file members could weigh in.

At the front end, before appropriators write actual spending bills, the House adopts a budget resolution setting overall spending and revenue targets for the year. From the 1980s through the early 2010s, groups of members — typically substantial caucuses such as the Congressional Black Caucus and the Republican Study Committee — routinely offered alternative resolutions and received floor votes on those alternatives;³² we would restore that practice and formalize it in the rules.

At the back end, when an appropriations bill reaches the floor, the last step before final passage is the motion to recommit with instructions — in effect, a single closing amendment, traditionally the minority party's prerogative. We would extend that option to groups of members that are sufficiently large as well, with a qualifying threshold fixed in advance. Both changes provide genuine, but carefully tailored, legislative opportunities: they add a limited set of votes at two predictable moments and leave the structure of the budget process intact.

³² See, e.g., H. Rept. 111-704, *Activities and Summary Report of the Committee on the Budget* (2010), describing floor consideration of substitute budget resolutions offered by the Progressive Caucus, the Republican Study Committee, and the Congressional Black Caucus.

Fourth, create a select committee to continue to study and propose additional reforms.

No single set of reforms will be sufficient to address all the problems that the House faces, problems that have been accumulating for decades. Therefore, the House should establish a select committee to study and propose additional reforms on an ongoing basis, composed of a diverse and independent group of members and empowered, on a periodic and predetermined schedule, to place its proposals directly on the floor for a vote. The Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress showed that members from both parties can reach consensus on institutional questions when given a forum designed for it; the missing ingredient was a guaranteed path from recommendation to vote. An ongoing rules-focused body that is appropriately empowered would ensure that the House continues to confront the sources of its own dysfunction rather than diagnosing them once and moving on.

To be sure, these are far from the only reforms that the House needs. If given the opportunity, members should aim to address an even broader set of issues. For example:

- Congress is badly under-resourced; members have too few staff and most congressional staffers are woefully underpaid. Groups of members — which could serve as engines of creativity and cut through tiresome, unproductive two-party conflict — not only lack funding but are prohibited from raising funds from outside sources.
- The committee system could also be meaningfully strengthened — for example, by giving committees a greater hand in selecting their own chairs, and by giving reporting committees a formal role in recommending how their legislation should be debated and amended on the floor, recommendations from which the Rules Committee should depart only with explanation.
- Members should be given the time to legislate responsibly — for any significant legislation, the current 72-hour review period is simply not sufficient; it should be extended, and any waiver should require a supermajority vote.
- Oversight of the executive branch is one of Congress's core responsibilities, and yet the House's internal rules constrain rather than empower members to carry it out. For example, any seven members of the House Oversight Committee are entitled by statute to obtain information from executive agencies (the "rule of seven"), but a standing order adopted in the 119th Congress requires the committee's chair to join any such request — effectively giving the majority a veto over a provision designed to empower rank-and-file members. Future rules packages should omit that order and restore the statute's plain "any seven members" standard, and the House should consider extending an analogous information-request mechanism to its other standing committees.
- The chamber also needs a credible means of enforcing its requests when the executive branch stonewalls; to that end, the Rules Committee should develop and publish clear procedures for invoking the House's long-dormant inherent contempt power.

- A range of procedural gamesmanship ought to be reined in, including the unilateral power of the speaker to indefinitely adjourn the House.

Important as these reforms are, however, none of them will matter without addressing the core problem the four reforms above are carefully tailored to solve: the absence of sensible pressure relief valves that let popular legislation escape the grip of partisan warfare.

Would These Reforms Make the Floor Unmanageable?

Given that past Congresses have experienced some periods in which control of the floor became too conflict-ridden and disorganized, one potential objection to these proposed reforms is that opening the floor will simply be too chaotic. Give members more access, the worry runs, and the chamber will drown in fringe amendments and messaging votes, the minority will hijack the majority's agenda, must-pass bills will be loaded with poison pills, and the leadership will lose its ability to guarantee outcomes. This concern deserves to be taken seriously, and we have been careful to do so in crafting the above recommendations.

First, the thresholds for floor access do most of the work. Every proposal here conditions access on a demonstration of broad, cross-party support. We have intentionally not stated a specific threshold for bipartisanship for floor consideration of petitions, for guaranteed votes on amendments, or for offering a budget substitute. But each threshold should be set at a level sufficient to ensure that a fringe faction cannot clear it on its own, and a purely partisan messaging exercise cannot clear it at all. The intended effect is to reward coalition-building across the aisle, while preserving the ability of party leadership to block non-serious proposals.

Second, none of the proposed reforms affects the speaker's control of the calendar, the majority's supermajority on the Rules Committee, the whip system, or the ability to write closed rules for important or time-sensitive legislation. Leaders would retain every tool they now use to advance the party's program. What the reforms add is a set of pressure relief valves, not a new veto over leadership. A measure with the bipartisan support to clear the above thresholds should be a measure that a majority of the House is reasonably likely to support.

Leaders may still worry about the party's bottom line, and here the evidence is genuinely reassuring. If centralization had markedly improved the majority party's ability to enact its agenda, dispersing some agenda control would carry a real cost. But it has not. The evidence shows that today's majorities are no more successful at passing their priorities than the majorities of the 1980s, and that the laws that do pass still depend on bipartisan coalitions.³³ The party has given up a great deal of its members' autonomy in exchange for centralized control, and has received strikingly little in return. Loosening that control at the margins threatens very little that the party actually values.

History offers the final reassurance. The House has lived under far more open rules than these, and it did not descend into anarchy; it governed, and governed productively, through a committee system that dispersed power widely. Every previous experiment in concentrating power, from Cannon's speakership to the binding caucus, eventually provoked the membership

³³ Curry and Lee, *The Limits of Party*.

to take that power back, and in each case the chamber adjusted and carried on. The reforms proposed here are far more limited than the wholesale devolution of the mid-20th century. They are calibrated adjustments, each hedged with strong guardrails, and each leaving the leadership's central tools intact. The risk they carry is small and bounded. The risk of continuing on the present course — of a chamber that passes fewer laws, funds the government by crisis, hemorrhages its most capable members, and lurches from one leadership meltdown to the next is neither.

To be sure, a more open floor is a less perfectly predictable one, and leaders would lose some ability to shield members from difficult votes and to keep certain issues bottled up for strategic reasons. These are real concessions. But the shield leaders now provide is worth less than it appears: with both parties' brands deeply unpopular, members tied exclusively to the party line sink or swim with it — and members have always built their most durable reputations by claiming credit for what they personally moved, not by avoiding difficult positions.³⁴ To the extent that these are concessions, they are concessions to the chamber's own majority, and they are modest next to what leaders would gain: a membership with a stake in the institution, a legislative process that produces durable and broadly supported laws, and a chamber that is easier, not harder, to lead.

³⁴ David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

Conclusion

The reforms proposed here are modest and targeted, yet they would have a demonstrable positive impact on both members and leaders. They give members much of what they say they want at limited risk to the leadership, and they are calibrated to work in a polarized, narrowly divided House. The pressures that make the chamber hard to govern — thin majorities and diverse conferences — will not lift with the next election, and no leader, however skilled, can manage those pressures through ever-tighter control without replicating today's frustrations. The next speaker will inherit the same arithmetic — and a choice about how to meet it. The history of the House shows that the chamber can be governed, and governed well, with power more widely shared, and that every attempt to concentrate it has eventually provoked a backlash. Leaders who embrace these changes would surrender little of substance. In return they would gain a more engaged, more productive, and less rebellious House — and an opportunity to leave behind a successful legacy.



Protect Democracy United is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing American democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government.

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