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Delegates to the U.S. Congress: History and Current Status

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Summary

Delegates, representing territories that had not yet achieved statehood, have served in the House since the late 1700s. In the 20th century, the concept of delegate grew to include representation of territories where the United States exercises some degree of control but were not expected to become states.

In the 114th Congress, the U.S. insular areas of American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, the Virgin Islands, and the federal municipality of the District of Columbia are each represented in Congress by a delegate to the House of Representatives. In addition, Puerto Rico is represented by a resident commissioner, whose position is treated the same as a delegate.

This report provides historical background on the development of the position of delegate to Congress and on the rights of a delegate once seated.

The Constitution makes no provision for territorial representation, and early laws providing for territorial delegates to Congress did not specify the duties, privileges, and obligations of these representatives. It was left to the House and the delegates themselves to define their role. On January 13, 1795, the House took an important step toward establishing the functions of delegates when it appointed James White, the first territorial representative, to membership on a select committee. In subsequent years, delegates continued to serve on select committees as well as on conference committees. The first assignment of a delegate to standing committee occurred under a House rule of 1871, which gave delegates places as additional members on two standing committees. In these committees, the delegates exercised the same powers and privileges as they did in the House; that is, they could debate but not vote.

In the 1970s, delegates gained the right to be elected to standing committees (in the same manner as Members of the House) and to exercise in those committees the same powers and privileges as Members of the House, including the right to vote. Today, delegates enjoy powers, rights, and responsibilities identical, in most respects, to those of House Members from the states. Like these Members, delegates can speak, introduce bills and resolutions, and offer amendments on the House floor; they can speak, offer amendments, and vote in House committees. Under the rules for the 114th Congress, delegates may not vote when the House is meeting as the Committee of the Whole nor when the House is operating as the House of Representatives.

This report will be updated as events warrant.

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Introduction

The office of territorial delegate predates the Constitution, having been created by the Continental Congress through the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The Constitution itself is silent on the issue of territorial representation, but this statutory authority was extended under the Constitution, and territorial delegates have been a regular part of congressional operations since. Through most of the 19th century, territorial delegates represented areas that were ultimately on the way to statehood.

With U.S. acquisition of overseas territories following the 1898 Spanish-American War, however, Congress created the post of resident commissioner to represent those areas that had, by treaty or law, a different relationship to the federal government. Congress used the office of resident commissioner to permit representation in the House in only two instances. The Philippine Islands were represented by two resident commissioners until independence was declared in 1946. Puerto Rico has been represented by a single resident commissioner since 1902.¹

Following the admission of Alaska and Hawaii to the Union in 1959, Puerto Rico was left as the only territory represented in Congress. Beginning in the 1970s, however, Congress returned to the concept of delegate to provide representation to other territories and the District of Columbia.²

In the 114th Congress, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia are each represented in Congress by a delegate to the House of Representatives.³ The delegates enjoy many, but not all, of the powers and privileges of House Members from the states.

Evolution of Territorial Delegates

Northwest Ordinance

The office of delegate—sometimes called “nonvoting delegate”—dates to the late 1700s, when territories bound for statehood were granted congressional representation. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which was enacted under the Articles of Confederation in order to establish a government for the territory northwest of the Ohio River, provided for a territorial delegate.⁴ Earlier, the Ordinance of 1784 had made provision for territorial representation in Congress, but it had never been put into effect.⁵

¹ See CRS Report RL31856, *Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico*, by R. Eric Petersen. This report also touches on the resident commissioner from the Philippines.

² For more on the delegate from the District of Columbia, see CRS Report RL33824, *The Constitutionality of Awarding the Delegate for the District of Columbia a Vote in the House of Representatives or the Committee of the Whole*, by Kenneth R. Thomas, and CRS Report RL33830, *District of Columbia Voting Representation in Congress: An Analysis of Legislative Proposals*, by Eugene Boyd.

³ In the case of Puerto Rico, the congressional representative is called a resident commissioner. Today, the offices of resident commissioner and delegate are essentially the same, though the resident commissioner is elected to a four-year term, while delegates are elected to two-year terms. The term *delegates* as used in this report includes the Puerto Rican resident commissioner, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ “The Northwest Ordinance: An Annotated Text,” in *The Northwest Ordinance, 1787*, ed. Robert M. Taylor Jr. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1987), pp. 51-53.

⁵ *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd, vol. 6 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 615. Still earlier references to territorial representation in Congress can be found in a 1776 letter from Silas Deane to the Select Committee of Congress and in Thomas Paine’s *Public Good* (1780). *Ohio in the Time of the Confederation*, ed. Archer (continued...)

Following ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the first Congress reenacted the Northwest Ordinance.⁶ The ordinance specified that the government of the Northwest Territory would initially consist of a governor and other officials appointed by Congress. According to Section 9, once the free adult male population in the district⁷ reached 5,000, qualified voters would be able to elect representatives from their counties or townships to a house of representatives.⁸ This territorial house, together with an appointed legislative council, would elect a delegate to Congress. As stated in Section 12 of the Northwest Ordinance:

As soon as a legislature shall be formed in the district, the Council and house assembled in one room, shall have authority by joint ballot to elect a Delegate to Congress, who shall have a seat in Congress, with a right of debating, but not of voting, during this temporary Government.⁹

The delegate's duties, privileges, and obligations were otherwise left unspecified.

First Delegate

In 1790, Congress extended all the privileges authorized in the Northwest Ordinance to the inhabitants of the territory south of the Ohio River and provided that “the government of the said territory south of the Ohio, shall be similar to that which is now exercised in the territory northwest of the Ohio.”¹⁰

Four years later, the territory south of the Ohio River sent the first territorial delegate to Congress.¹¹ On November 11, 1794, James White presented his application to the House of Representatives for seating in the Third Congress.¹² A House committee reported White's application favorably and submitted a resolution to admit him, touching off a wide-ranging discussion on the House floor about the delegate's proper role.¹³

An immediate question arose as the House considered the issue: Should the delegate serve in the House or in the Senate? The Northwest Ordinance, which had been enacted by the unicameral Congress under the Articles of Confederation, had only specified a “seat in Congress.” Some Members of Congress argued that the proper place for Delegate White was the Senate since his method of election, by the territorial legislature, was similar to that of Senators. Others suggested that perhaps White should sit in both chambers. Proposals for seeking Senate concurrence in the matter of admitting Delegate White and for confining his right of debate to territorial matters were rejected. On November 18, 1794, the House approved the resolution to admit Delegate

(...continued)

Butler Hulbert (Marietta, OH: Marietta Historical Commission, 1918), pp. 1, 3, 6, 12.

⁶ Act of August 7, 1789, ch. 8, 1 Stat 50-53. The act made some modifications to the original ordinance in order to adapt it from the government operating under the Articles of Confederation to that operating under the Constitution.

⁷ The ordinance established the territory as one district but allowed for subdivision in the future, as expedient. “The Northwest Ordinance: An Annotated Text,” p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰ Act of May 26, 1790, ch. 14, 1 Stat 123.

¹¹ The Northwest Territory did not send a delegate to Congress until 1799, when they sent William Henry Harrison, who later became the ninth President of the United States.

¹² *Annals of Congress*, vol. 4, 3rd Cong., 2nd sess., November 11, 1794, p. 873.

¹³ Everett S. Brown, “The Territorial Delegate to Congress,” in *The Territorial Delegate to Congress and Other Essays* (Ann Arbor, MI: George Wahr Publishing Company, 1950), pp. 4-5.

White to a nonvoting seat in that body.¹⁴ At least one delegate has served in every Congress since, with the single exception of the Fifth Congress (1797-1799).

House floor debate surrounding Delegate White's taking the oath further revealed House Members' various perceptions of his status. Some Members believed that White should be required to take the oath. Representative James Madison disagreed:

The proper definition of Mr. White is to be found in the Laws and Rules of the Constitution. He is not a member of Congress, therefore, and so cannot be directed to take an oath, unless he chooses to do it voluntarily.¹⁵

Describing Delegate White as “no more than an Envoy to Congress,” Representative William Smith maintained that it would be “very improper to call on this gentlemen to take such an oath.” He characterized White as “not a Representative from, but an Officer deputed by the people of the Western Territory.” In making the case that it “would be wrong to accept his oath,” Representative Jonathan Dayton emphasized White's lack of voting power: “He is not a member. He cannot vote, which is the essential part.” Representative Dayton compared Delegate White's influence in the House to that of a printer who “may be said to argue and influence, when he comes to this House, takes notes, and prints them in the newspapers.”¹⁶

Ultimately, the House decided that since White was not a Member, he was not required to take the oath.¹⁷ The decision not to administer the oath to Delegate White, however, did not become precedential. All delegates after White have taken the oath.¹⁸

Congress also granted, by law, to White the same franking privileges and compensation as Members of the House,¹⁹ and thus the White case did establish several precedents for the treatment of future delegates. In 1802, Congress passed legislation that extended the franking privilege to, and provided for the compensation of, “any person admitted, or who may hereafter be admitted to take a seat in Congress, as a delegate.”²⁰ Like White, all future delegates would sit in the House. This practice was written into law in 1817. The law stated, in part:

[S]uch delegate shall be elected every second year, for the same term of two years for which members of the house of representatives of the United States are elected; and in that house each of the said delegates shall have a seat with a right of debating, but not of voting.²¹

Subsequent statutes authorizing delegates also specified service in the House.

The question of what constituted a territory was raised in conjunction with the acquisition and control of Alaska. While the United States signed the treaty purchasing the land later known as Alaska in 1867, it was not until 1884 that Congress passed, and the President signed, legislation

¹⁴ *Annals of Congress*, vol. 4, 3rd Cong., 2nd sess., November 18, 1794, pp. 884-889.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 889-890.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 890.

¹⁸ The act of June 1, 1789, 1 Stat. 23, requires all taking federal office to swear an oath to support the Constitution. While the law does not specifically include delegates among those required to take the oath, the law is referenced in the minutes of the House just before the Speaker administered the oath to the second delegate to appear before the House, William Henry Harrison. *Annals of Congress*, December 2, 1799, pp. 187-188.

¹⁹ Act of December 3, 1794, ch. 2, 1 Stat. 403-404.

²⁰ Act of February 18, 1802, ch. 5, 2 Stat. 130-131.

²¹ Act of March 3, 1817, ch. 42, 3 Stat. 363.

creating a form of government for the area.²² Benjamin Harrison, then a Senator from Indiana and later the 23rd President of the United States, managed the bill on the Senate floor and noted that Congress was intentionally not establishing a full territorial government for Alaska. Because of the small population in the area, there was not support for establishing a territorial government of Alaska, he said. The bill explicitly barred the seating of a delegate from Alaska.

I want to say to the Senate that we are attempting here some legislation that is *sui generis* in some respects in the organization of this great Territory of Alaska. It was not believed that we should confer upon the few people residing there a full territorial organization. We have described the Territory as a civil district and have organized it for a government simple in form.... We have made it simple and inexpensive because we supposed it would better meet the views of those who feel the necessity for some form of government for Alaska, but do not believe we should go to the expense of a full Territorial administration.²³

From the 49th Congress forward, bills were introduced regularly to grant Alaska a delegate, and in 1906, in the 59th Congress, Congress enacted legislation to do so.²⁴

Congress enacted legislation in 1900 creating a territorial government for the Hawaiian Islands, which included a provision creating a delegate from Hawaii.²⁵ There was no floor debate in either the House or the Senate on including the delegate provision in the bill.²⁶

Unincorporated Territories

After the U.S. acquisition of overseas territories following the 1898 Spanish-American War, the Supreme Court put forth a new concept of territorial status. In a series of cases known as the Insular Cases (1901-1922), the Court distinguished between “incorporated” and “unincorporated” territories. Incorporated territories were considered integral parts of the United States to which all relevant provisions of the U.S. Constitution applied. They were understood to be bound for eventual statehood. The territories acquired during the Spanish-American War were considered unincorporated, not destined for statehood, and as such, only the “fundamental” parts of the Constitution applied of their own force. The political status of unincorporated territories, the Court said, was a matter for Congress to determine by legislation.²⁷

Congress did grant representation to two of the territories acquired from Spain—Puerto Rico and the Philippines. It did so, however, in a way that distinguished their situation from that of statehood-bound territories. Rather than authorizing delegates, Congress provided for resident commissioners to the United States from Puerto Rico²⁸ and the Philippines²⁹ who were to be

²² Act of May 17, 1884, ch. 53, 23 Stat. 24.

²³ Senator Benjamin Harrison, “Government for Alaska,” Senate debate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 15 (January 23, 1884), p. 594.

²⁴ Act of May 7, 1906, 34 Stat. 169.

²⁵ Act of April 3, 1900, 31 Stat. 148.

²⁶ Inclusion of the provision is noted in remarks on the bill, but there was no debate on the question. Rep. William Knox, “Government for the Territory of Hawaii,” House debate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 33 (April 3, 1900), p. 3709.

²⁷ Frederick R. Coudert, “The Evolution of the Doctrine of Territorial Incorporation,” *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 26 (November 1926), pp. 823-850. For more on the insular cases and Puerto Rico, see CRS Report R42765, *Puerto Rico’s Political Status and the 2012 Plebiscite: Background and Key Questions*, by R. Sam Garrett.

²⁸ Act of April 12, 1900, ch. 191, 31 Stat. 77, 86.

²⁹ Act of July 1, 1902, ch. 1369, 32 Stat. 691, 694.

entitled to “official recognition as such by all departments.” According to political scientist Abraham Holtzman:

[N]o reference to Congress or the House of Representatives was made in the authorizing statutes. Apparently, it was Congress’s intent that the mandate of these representatives be broader than service in the U.S. legislature.... This suggests a role for resident commissioners more akin to that of a foreign diplomat than that of a legislator. Nevertheless, the representatives from these two territories did serve in the House.³⁰

The resident commissioners from Puerto Rico and the Philippines did not initially enjoy the same privileges as the prior non-voting delegates, and they were not even allowed on the House floor. In 1902 and 1908, respectively, the House of Representatives granted them the right to the floor but not the right to speak.³¹ In 1904, the Puerto Rican resident commissioner was given the “same powers and privileges as to committee service and in the House as are possessed by Delegates” and was deemed “competent to serve on the Committee on Insular Affairs as an additional member.”³² The resident commissioners from the Philippines, however, were never permitted to serve on standing committees.

The posts of resident commissioners differed from those of delegates in other significant ways. Initially, the Philippines, owing to its substantially larger population and dispersed land mass, was authorized two resident commissioners who served for three-year terms. It was not until the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934,³³ setting a timetable leading to the ultimate independence of the Philippines, that the second resident commissioner position was abolished. The resident commissioner from Puerto Rico was initially chosen for a two-year term, but in 1917, Congress, at the initiative of the Puerto Rican government, extended it to four years beginning with the election of 1920.³⁴

For 11 years following the admission of Hawaii to the Union in 1959, the resident commissioner from Puerto Rico was the only territorial representative serving in Congress. Then, in 1970, the District of Columbia was authorized to elect a delegate.³⁵ The delegates’ ranks grew with the authorization of congressional representation for the territories of Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1972. And through further amendment of House rules, “each Delegate to the House” was given the same committee assignment rights and committee powers and privileges as Members of the House. In 1978, the territory of American Samoa likewise gained the right to send a delegate to the House. According to the authorizing statute:

Until the Rules of the House of Representatives are amended to provide otherwise, the Delegate from American Samoa ... shall be entitled to whatever privileges and immunities that are, or hereinafter may be, granted to the nonvoting Delegate from the Territory of Guam.

³⁰ Abraham Holtzman, “Empire and Representation: The U.S. Congress,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 11 (May 1986), p. 253.

³¹ Debate in House, *Congressional Record*, vol. 35 (June 28, 1902), p. 7608; Debate in House, *Congressional Record*, vol. 42 (February 4, 1908), p. 1540.

³² Debate in House, *Congressional Record*, vol. 38 (February 2, 1904), pp. 1523, 1529.

³³ Formally known as the Philippine Independence Act, P.L. 73-127, 48 Stat 456.

³⁴ Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico, by R. Eric Petersen. Act of March 2, 1917, ch. 145, 39 Stat. 951, 963.

³⁵ P.L. 91-405, Sept. 22, 1970, 84 Stat. 845, 848. Congress had previously authorized a DC Delegate (Act of February 21, 1871, ch. 62, 16 Stat. 419, 426) but soon afterward repealed that provision (Act of June 20, 1874, ch. 337, 18 Stat. 116).

Similar language was used again in the 110th Congress to authorize the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands to send a delegate to Congress, beginning with the 111th Congress.³⁶

Delegates' Rights and Responsibilities

Since the first delegate was sent to Congress, the House has struggled with the role delegates should play. Some Members, noting that the Constitution, in Article I, Section 2, requires that the House be made up of representatives “chosen every second Year by the People of the several States,” have expressed concerns that allowing delegates to have the same rights and responsibilities as Members would be unconstitutional. Because delegates, by definition, do not represent states, Members have on several occasions debated what rights such delegates should exercise in the House.³⁷

One example of this debate is the variation in the role delegates have been allowed to play in committees. For significant periods, delegates were not appointed to standing committees and could not vote during committee consideration of measures or matters even on those committees where they were permitted to serve. Which committees delegates could serve on, and their rights on those committees, have been debated periodically in Congress over the last 200 years. This debate also spread to questions about whether delegates could vote while the House was acting as the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union, a parliamentary device used by the House to facilitate debate and amendment of legislation. That question has been hotly contested in the House since the 103rd Congress.³⁸

Currently, delegates enjoy powers, rights, and responsibilities identical, in many respects, to those of House Members from the states. Delegates can speak and introduce bills and resolutions on the floor of the House, offer amendments and most motions on the House floor, and speak and vote in House committees. Delegates are not, however, Members of the House. They cannot vote on the House floor; consequently, they cannot offer motions to reconsider a vote during floor debate, and they are not counted for quorum purposes in the House. Delegates are currently not permitted to vote in or preside over either the Committee of the Whole or the House.

Committee Assignments and Voting

The House began to define the functions of delegates when, on January 13, 1795, it appointed White to serve as a member of a select committee to investigate better means of promulgating the

³⁶ P.L. 110-229, 122 Stat 868, the Consolidated Natural Resources Act of 2008 (S. 2739). During World War II, the United States took control of the Northern Mariana Islands from the Japanese. Following the war, the United States administered the Northern Mariana Islands at the request of the United Nations. In 1975, the United States and representatives of the islands reached an agreement, known as the “Covenant to Establish a Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in Political Union with the United States of America,” and in 1986 residents of the Northern Mariana Islands were granted U.S. citizenship. See also U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, *Northern Mariana Islands Covenant Implementation Act*, Report to accompany H.R. 3079, 110th Cong., 2nd sess., April 10, 2008, S.Rept. 110-324 (Washington: GPO, 2008).

³⁷ For a current summary of the rights of delegates and the resident commissioner, see CRS Report R40170, *Parliamentary Rights of the Delegates and Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico*, by Christopher M. Davis.

³⁸ For more on the Committee of the Whole, see CRS Report RS20147, *Committee of the Whole: An Introduction*, by Judy Schneider. The rights of delegates and the resident commissioner are currently found in House Rule III, clauses 3(a) and 3(b). U.S. Congress, *Constitution, Jefferson's Manual and the Rules of the House of Representatives*, prepared by Thomas J. Wickham, parliamentarian, 113th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 113-181 (Washington: GPO, 2015), pp. 378-383.

laws of the United States.³⁹ During several subsequent Congresses, the House continued the practice of allowing delegates to serve on select committees. William Henry Harrison, the first delegate to represent the Northwest Territory (and later, the ninth President of the United States), served on a number of select committees—some of which had been created at his initiative—that addressed issues such as public land laws and the judiciary in the territories.⁴⁰ According to historians, in December 1799, Harrison became the first delegate to chair a select committee.⁴¹ An active participant in House debates, Delegate Harrison likewise served as a House conferee in disputes with the Senate.⁴²

The first regular assignment of a delegate to standing committee occurred under a House rule adopted in December 1871. The rule directed the Speaker of the House to appoint a delegate as an additional member of the Committee on the Territories and to appoint the DC delegate as an additional member of the Committee for the District of Columbia.⁴³ Additional committee assignments were authorized in 1876, 1880, and 1887.⁴⁴ Describing the concurrent development of the delegates' non-legislative role, historian Earl S. Pomeroy wrote:

The territorial delegate increased in stature appreciably between 1861 and 1890. Without the formal powers of a congressman, he acquired more of a congressman's influence and general functions. He was disseminator of information, lobbyist, agent of territorial officers, of the territorial legislature, and of his constituency, self-constituted dispenser of patronage. He interceded at times in almost every process of control over the territories, and generally no one challenged his right to intercede.⁴⁵

Along with the right to sit on a standing committee, the House has also debated what rights delegates could exercise once on the committees. Historians differ on whether delegates were allowed to vote in committees prior to the early 1970s. One account states that as “additional members” of standing committees from 1871 through 1971, delegates did not have the right to vote in committee.⁴⁶

Some evidence, however, suggests that delegates were allowed to vote in committee in an earlier period. According to a September 3, 1841, report of the Committee of Elections:

With the single exception of voting, the Delegate enjoys every other privilege and exercises every other right of a Representative. He can act as a member of a standing or

³⁹ *Annals of Congress*, vol. 4, 3rd Cong., 2nd sess., January 13, 1795, p. 1082.

⁴⁰ See, for example, *Annals of Congress*, vol. 10, 6th Cong., 1st sess., December 1799–April 1800, pp. 193, 197–198, 209–210, 477, 510, 513, 660.

⁴¹ There is disagreement, however, over which select committee Delegate Harrison was first appointed to chair. See Dorothy Burne Goebel, *William Henry Harrison* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1974), pp. 44, 49; and Jo Tice Bloom, “Early Delegates in the House of Representatives,” in *The American Territorial System* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1973), p. 67.

⁴² U.S. Congress, House, *The Journal of the House of Representatives*, vol. 4, 6th Cong., 1st sess. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazer, 1977), pp. 187, 372.

⁴³ *Congressional Globe*, vol. 102, 42nd Cong., 2nd sess., December 13, 1871, pp. 117–118. This was during the short period (1871–1874) during which the District of Columbia was first granted a delegate. P.L. 91–405, September 22, 1970, 84 Stat. 845, 848. Congress had previously authorized a DC delegate (Act of February 21, 1871, ch. 62, 16 Stat. 419, 426) but soon afterward repealed that provision (Act of June 20, 1874, ch. 337, 18 Stat. 116).

⁴⁴ *Hinds' Precedents of the House of Representatives*, 60th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 1907), vol. II, §1297, p. 864, (hereafter *Hinds' Precedents*). In committee, the delegates had the same powers and privileges as on the floor of the House (and, thus, could not vote) and could make any motion except to reconsider (which presumes that the mover had previously voted).

⁴⁵ Earl S. Pomeroy, *The Territories and the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1947), p. 80.

⁴⁶ Holtzman, “Empires and Representation,” p. 261.

special committee and vote on the business before said committees, and he may thus exercise an important influence on those initiatory proceedings by which business is prepared for the action of the House. He is also required to take an oath to support the Constitution of the United States.⁴⁷

Even if the delegates at one point had that right, they clearly did not have it in the 1880s. On February 23, 1884, a proposition was made in the House that delegates be allowed to vote in committee. The proposition was referred to the Committee on Rules, but no action was taken.

The right of delegates to vote in committee resurfaced as an issue in the 1930s. After a lengthy investigation, a House committee reported that neither the Constitution nor any statutes supported such a committee vote. Although a House rule provided for the appointment of territorial delegates as additional members on certain committees, the report noted that “the House could not elect to one of its standing committees a person not a Member of the House.” According to the report:

The designation “additional member” applied to a Delegate clearly indicates the character of the assignment. Expressly the Delegate shall exercise in the committee ... the same powers and privileges as in the House, to wit, the “right of debating, but not the right of voting.”⁴⁸

In the 1970s, the system of territorial representation in Congress underwent significant change as more territories were granted delegates and as delegates were given increased powers.⁴⁹ In 1970, Congress enacted the Legislative Reorganization Act, which contained a provision to amend the House rule on delegates to read:

The Resident Commissioner to the United States from Puerto Rico shall be elected to serve on standing committees in the same manner as Members of the House and shall possess in such committees the same powers and privileges as the other Members.⁵⁰

The provision was offered in a floor amendment by Puerto Rico’s Resident Commissioner Jorge Cordova.

My amendment would abolish this privilege [service on a committee as an “additional member”]. It would provide for the election of the Resident Commissioner to standing committees in the same manner as Members of the House are elected. This would mean, in effect, that the Resident Commissioner may be fortunate to secure election to one of the three committees on which he now serves. But my amendment would also provide that the Resident Commissioner have the same rights in committee as other members, which means, of course, that he would have the right to vote within the committee.

Representative Thomas S. Foley, who later served as Speaker of the House, supported the amendment, claiming that the grant of voting rights in committee to delegates was within the power of the House.

The committees of the House of Representatives are creatures of the House of Representatives. They can be extinguished at will and created at will. It does not even require concurrence of the other body when we take such an action. Depriving members of the right to vote in a committee is fully within the power of the House, by abolishing

⁴⁷ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Elections, *David Levy*, 27th Cong., 1st sess., September 3, 1841, H.Rept. 10, p. 5. This case concerned whether David Levy, from the territory of Florida, was a citizen of the United States. The committee held that Levy was not a citizen and, as such, could not serve as a delegate.

⁴⁸ *Hinds’ Precedents*, vol. 2, §1300, p. 865.

⁴⁹ Debate in House, *Congressional Record*, vol. 75 (January 18, 1932), pp. 2163-2164.

⁵⁰ P.L. 91-510, Oct. 26, 1970, 84 Stat. 1140, 1161.

the committee. Giving them additional rights to vote is within the power of the House by creating a new committee.... Nothing that the Resident Commissioner could do in a committee vote could become a final decision unless a majority of the elected Members of Congress supported his position. However, in the standing committee itself I think that the Member from Puerto Rico should have a vote. I think the House has the constitutional authority to give him a vote in that limited area.

The amendment was opposed by Representative B. F. Sisk, the floor manager of the bill and a senior member of the House Rules Committee. Sisk asked rhetorically whether the Cordova amendment “would be interpreted so that he would be entitled to vote in the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union.” In response, sometime later, Cordova observed that “The amendment which I have offered refers expressly to the standing committees. I believe the Committee of the Whole House is not a standing committee.” The Cordova amendment was agreed to by voice vote.⁵¹

In 1971, the House rewrote its rules according the rights in committee set forth in the Legislative Reorganization Act to the resident commissioner from Puerto Rico as well as to the newly authorized DC delegate.⁵² In 1973, the House again changed its rules to provide for the election of all delegates to the House to standing committees, reflecting the creation of new delegate positions from American Samoa and Guam in 1972.⁵³

Committee of the Whole Voting Rights

Since at least the 103rd Congress, there has been debate in the House on whether delegates should vote when the House is acting as the Committee of the Whole. Delegates were first granted this right during the 103rd Congress, and it has changed several times as majority party control of the House has changed. Delegates were permitted to vote in the Committee of the Whole in the 103rd Congress, the 110th Congress, and the 111th Congress. The House in the 114th Congress does not allow floor votes by delegates.

In the 103rd, 110th, and 111th Congresses, House rules also provided that, if the votes of the delegates were decisive—that is, if the result of the vote would have changed but for the voting of the delegates—then the Committee of the Whole would immediately rise, and the House itself, where delegates may not vote, would vote on the question. Once the question was settled, the Committee of the Whole would resume its work.⁵⁴

Following initial adoption of the rule allowing delegates to vote in Committee of the Whole in 1993, a group of House Members filed a lawsuit challenging the change. They argued that the rule change violated Article I of the Constitution by granting legislative power to delegates who were not “Members [of the House of Representatives] chosen every second Year by the People of the several States.” They took issue with the characterization of the Committee of the Whole as a committee and maintained, instead, that it was tantamount to the full House. In their complaint, the plaintiffs stated:

⁵¹ The full debate on the Cordova amendment can be found in *Congressional Record*, vol. 116 (September 15, 1970), pp. 31843-31852.

⁵² Debate in House, *Congressional Record*, 92nd Cong. 1st sess., vol. 117 (January 21, 1971), pp. 14, 143-144.

⁵³ “House Rules,” Debate in the House, *Congressional Record* (January 3, 1973), pp. 17-27.

⁵⁴ During the periods when the House has permitted delegate voting in Committee of the Whole, the authority was included in House Rule III, clause 3(a), and permission for the delegates to preside over the Committee of the Whole was located in House Rule XVIII, clause 1.

[N]on-member voting in the Committee of the Whole impairs and dilutes the constitutional rights of the plaintiff-Representatives, both as Members of the House and as voters who enjoy the right to full, fair and proportionate representation in the House of Representatives.⁵⁵

They further alleged that the House did not have the authority to unilaterally expand the powers of the delegates.

The House defendants⁵⁶ countered that the House of Representatives was constitutionally empowered to “determine the Rules of its Proceedings.”⁵⁷ They argued that the Committee of the Whole, like other congressional committees, was an advisory body created by the House and was not subject to the requirements in Article I. They rejected the plaintiffs’ contention that the Committee of the Whole effectively controlled action in the House, citing both the preliminary nature of its proceedings and the provision for an automatic revote in cases in which delegate votes were decisive.⁵⁸

In March 1993, Judge Harold H. Greene of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia upheld the changes to the House rules. As his opinion made clear, however, he did so only because of the automatic revote provision. “If the only action of the House of Representatives had been to grant to the Delegates from the District of Columbia, Guam, Virgin Islands, and American Samoa, and the Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico the authority to vote in the Committee of the Whole,” he wrote, “its action would have been plainly unconstitutional.”⁵⁹ His opinion further stated:

[W]hile the action the House took on January 5, 1993 undoubtedly gave the Delegates greater stature and prestige both in Congress and in their home districts, it did not enhance their right to vote on legislation.... [B]y virtue of Rule XXIII they [the votes of the Delegates] are meaningless. It follows that the House action had no effect on legislative power, and that it did not violate Article I or any other provision of the Constitution.⁶⁰

In January 1994, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit upheld the constitutionality of the House rule changes.⁶¹

Table I. Statutes Providing for Territorial Representation in Congress

Territory	Statute	Year
Northwest of the river Ohio	1 Stat. 50	1789 ^a
South of the river Ohio	1 Stat. 123	1790
Mississippi	1 Stat. 549	1798
Indiana	2 Stat. 58	1800

⁵⁵ Michel v. Anderson, No. 93-0039 (HHG), Complaint for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief, at 4 (D.D.C. January 7, 1993).

⁵⁶ The defendants were the Clerk of the House, the delegates, and the resident commissioner.

⁵⁷ U.S. Constitution, Art. I, §5.

⁵⁸ Michel v. Anderson, No. 93-0039 (HHG), House Defendants’ Memorandum in Support of Motion to Dismiss and in Opposition to Preliminary Injunction (D.D.C. February 2, 1993).

⁵⁹ Michel v. Anderson, 817 F.Supp. 126, 147 (D.D.C. 1993).

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 147-148.

⁶¹ Michel v. Anderson, 14 F.3d 623 (D.D. Cir. 1994).

Territory	Statute	Year
Orleans	2 Stat. 322	1805
Michigan	2 Stat. 309	1805
Illinois	2 Stat. 514	1809
Missouri	2 Stat. 743	1812
Alabama	3 Stat. 371	1817
Arkansas	3 Stat. 493	1819
Florida	3 Stat. 354	1822
Wisconsin	5 Stat. 10	1838
Iowa	5 Stat. 10	1838
Oregon	9 Stat. 323	1848
Minnesota	9 Stat. 403	1849
New Mexico	9 Stat. 446	1850
Utah	9 Stat. 453	1850
Washington	10 Stat. 172	1853
Nebraska	10 Stat. 277	1854
Kansas	10 Stat. 283	1854
Colorado	12 Stat. 172	1861
Nevada	12 Stat. 209	1861
Dakota	12 Stat. 239	1861
Arizona	12 Stat. 664	1863
Idaho	12 Stat. 808	1863
Montana	13 Stat. 853	1864
Wyoming	15 Stat. 178	1868
District of Columbia	16 Stat. 426	1871
Oklahoma	29 Stat. 81	1890
Puerto Rico	31 Stat. 86	1900
Hawaii	31 Stat. 141	1900
Philippine Islands	32 Stat. 694	1902
Alaska	34 Stat. 169	1906
District of Columbia	84 Stat. 848	1970
Virgin Islands	86 Stat. 118	1972
Guam	86 Stat. 118	1972
American Samoa	92 Stat. 2078	1978
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	122 Stat. 868	2008

Source: "Non-voting delegates to the House," *Congressional Record*, vol. 124 (October 3, 1978), p. 33287; P.L. 110-229.

- a. This measure from the First Congress re-enacted the provisions of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, with the changes made necessary by ratification of the Constitution. The original Northwest Ordinance had been enacted under the Articles of Confederation.

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