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One-Minute Speeches: Current House Practices

Judy Schneider

Specialist on the Congress

Updated January 27, 2017

Congressional Research Service

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www.crs.gov

RL30135

Summary

Recognition for one-minute speeches (commonly called “one minutes”) in the House of Representatives is the prerogative of the Speaker. A period for one minutes usually takes place at the beginning of the legislative day after the daily prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and approval of the previous day’s *Journal*. During this time, Representatives ask unanimous consent to address the House for one minute on a topic of their choice. In addition, one-minute speeches are often permitted after legislative business ends, but before special order speeches begin.

The rules of the House do not provide for one-minute speeches. Instead, one minutes have evolved as a *unanimous consent practice* of the chamber. During one-minute speeches, Members must abide by the rules of the House, the chamber’s precedents, and the “Speaker’s announced policies,” in that order. The term Speaker’s announced policies refers to the Speaker’s policies on certain aspects of House procedure, such as recognition for one minutes.

Representatives seeking recognition for one minutes sit in the first row on their party’s side of the chamber. From the chair’s vantage point, Republican Members sit on the left side of the chamber and Democratic Members on the right side. The chair moves from his right to left in recognizing Members on each side of the aisle. When recognized by the chair, individual Members ask unanimous consent to address the House for one minute and to revise and extend their remarks. Permission is almost always granted. Members deliver one-minute speeches from the well of the chamber. They are limited to one minute and cannot ask unanimous consent for additional time. Instead of delivering a one-minute speech on the House floor, a Member may ask unanimous consent to insert the speech in the House section of the *Congressional Record*.

Members need not reserve one-minute speeches in advance through their party’s leadership. Nevertheless, the party leadership communication arms—known as the “Democratic Message Group” and the “Republican Theme Team”—sometimes coordinate party Members to deliver one minutes on the issue designated as the party’s daily message. These party Members usually receive priority seating for recognition purposes.

This report will be updated if rules and procedures change.

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Introduction

One-minute speeches (commonly called “one minutes”) provide one of the few opportunities for non-legislative debate in the House, where debate is almost always confined to the pending legislative business.¹ Recognition for one-minute speeches is the prerogative of the Speaker. A period for one minutes usually takes place at the beginning of the legislative day after the daily prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and approval of the previous day’s *Journal*.² During this time, Representatives ask unanimous consent to address the House for one minute on a topic of their choice. In addition, one minutes are often permitted after legislative business ends but before special order speeches begin.

This report examines current House practices governing recognition for one-minute speeches, the delivery of one minutes, and their insertion in the *Congressional Record*. The report also discusses various uses of one minutes and reform proposals.

Governing Authorities

One-minute speeches are not provided for in the rules of the House. Instead, they have evolved as a *unanimous consent practice* of the chamber. Members must ask unanimous consent to address the House for one minute (for more information, see “Delivering One-Minute Speeches,” below).

During one-minute speeches, Members must abide by the rules of the House, the chamber’s precedents, and the “Speaker’s announced policies,” in that order. Relevant House rules include those governing debate, decorum, and the Speaker’s power of recognition. House precedents discuss how the chamber has interpreted and applied its rules.³ Under House precedents, for example, individual Members can be recognized for a one-minute speech only once each legislative day.⁴

The term Speaker’s announced policies refers to the Speaker’s policies on certain aspects of House procedure, such as decorum in debate, the conduct of electronic votes, and recognition for one minutes and special orders. These policies are usually announced on the opening day of a new Congress. The Speaker’s current policies on recognition for one minutes are those that were first announced on August 8, 1984. These policies have been followed in each succeeding Congress.⁵

¹ Under House Rule XVII, clause 1(b)(1), a Member “shall be confined to the question under debate.” Besides one-minute speeches, special orders (usually every day; five to 60 minutes in length) and morning hour debates (on Mondays and Tuesdays only; up to five minutes in length) provide other opportunities for non-legislative debate in the House.

² The *Journal* is the official record of the proceedings of the House.

³ These precedents are published in several parliamentary reference publications. For more information, see CRS Report RL30787, *Parliamentary Reference Sources: House of Representatives*, by Richard S. Beth and Megan S. Lynch.

⁴ U.S. Congress, House, *House Practice: A Guide to the Rules, Precedents and Procedures of the House*, 112th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 2011), “Consideration and Debate” chapter, Section 50, pp. 430-431.

⁵ The 1984 announcement of these policies is provided in *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 130, August 8, 1984, p. H8552. The Speaker’s announced policies for the 115th Congress continued the application of these 1984 policies. See *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 163, January 3, 2017, p. H35.

Recognition for One-Minute Speeches

Recognition for one-minute speeches is the prerogative of the Speaker. Under his power of recognition (House Rule XVII, clause 2), the Speaker decides when he will entertain unanimous consent requests to address the House for one minute, and how many one-minute speeches he will allow.

According to the Speaker's announced policies, the chair "reserves the right to limit one-minute speeches to a certain period of time or to a special place in the program on any given day, with notice to the leadership."⁶ When pressing legislative business is before the House, the Speaker may decide to limit the number of one-minute speeches, to postpone one minutes until after legislative business, or to forego them altogether.

A period for one-minute speeches (hereinafter referred to as "the one-minute speech period") usually takes place at the beginning of each legislative day after the daily prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and approval of the previous day's *Journal*. The Speaker determines the number of one minutes permitted during this period. This number varies from day to day. The Speaker might allow an unlimited number of speeches one day and then limit the number the following day (e.g., allow only 10 one minutes on each side of the aisle). The majority and minority leadership usually receive advance notification of any limitations.

A majority party Representative appointed as "Speaker *pro tempore*" usually presides in the chair during the one-minute speech period. In recent practice, the chair often announces how many one minutes will be allowed before the one-minute speech period begins.

Representatives seeking recognition for one minutes sit in the first row on their party's side of the chamber. From the chair's vantage point, Republican Members sit on the left side of the chamber and Democratic Members on the right side. In recognizing Members for one minutes, the chair observes the following announced policies of the Speaker:

The chair will alternate recognition for one-minute speeches between majority and minority Members, in the order in which they seek recognition in the well under present practice from the Chair's right to the Chair's left, with possible exceptions for Members of the leadership and Members having business requests.⁷

Because the chair moves from his right to left in recognizing Members, the Republican Member seated closest to the center aisle is recognized first on the *Republican side*, and the Democratic Member seated closest to the Speaker's lobby is recognized first on the *Democratic side*. Recognition alternates from majority to minority throughout the period for one minutes.

In addition to the one-minute speech period, Members can usually ask unanimous consent to deliver a one minute after legislative business ends but before special order speeches begin.

Coordination Role of Party Leadership

Members do not have to reserve one-minute speeches in advance through their party's leadership.⁸ Nevertheless, the party leadership communication arms—known as the "Democratic Message Group" and the "Republican Theme Team"—sometimes coordinate party Members to deliver one minutes on the issue designated as the party's daily message. On days when the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ By contrast, special order and morning hour speeches must be reserved in advance through each party's leadership.

number of one-minute speeches is limited, these party Members usually receive priority seating for recognition purposes (i.e., on the right side of the party's first row). The daily message usually presents the party's views on specific legislation before the House or its position on a policy or political issue.

Delivering One-Minute Speeches

When recognized by the chair, individual Members ask unanimous consent to address the House for one minute and to revise and extend their remarks.⁹ Permission is almost always granted. Members speak from the well of the chamber. They are limited to one minute and cannot ask unanimous consent for additional time. When the chair announces that one minute has expired, the Member can finish the sentence underway but must then stop speaking. The chair's calculation of time consumed during a one-minute speech "is not subject to challenge on a point of order."¹⁰

When Members cannot finish their remarks in one minute, the permission to extend allows them to complete their speech in writing in the *Congressional Record*. The undelivered portion of their speech appears in a distinctive typeface. Permission to extend also authorizes Members to insert extraneous material such as a newspaper article or a constituent letter during a one-minute speech. The inserted material appears in a distinctive typeface.

Joint Committee on Printing regulations for publication of the *Congressional Record* provide that "any extraneous matter included in any statement by a Member" be printed in the "Extensions of Remarks" section of the *Congressional Record* but noted in the Members' remarks.¹¹ This requirement is not always observed. A review of 10 one minutes containing extraneous matter from January to July 1997 found that in each case the extraneous matter was printed in the House section (not in the "Extensions of Remarks") of the *Congressional Record* along with the one-minute speech.

The Joint Committee on Printing's regulations also require that one-minute speeches longer than 300 words "delivered during the morning business" (i.e., during the one-minute speech period at the start of the day) be printed "following the business of the day." In practice, these one minutes usually appear in the House section of the *Congressional Record* immediately before the five-minute special orders.

Inserting One-Minute Speeches

Instead of delivering a one-minute speech on the House floor, a Member may insert the speech in the House section of the *Congressional Record* alongside the one minutes delivered on the floor that day. The Representative asks unanimous consent to insert the one-minute speech in the *Congressional Record* and yields back his time. The inserted speech is published in a distinctive typeface.

⁹ Permission to *revise* gives Members the opportunity to make technical, grammatical, and typographical corrections only. Permission to *extend* authorizes the insertion of material such as a newspaper article or constituent letter during the one-minute speech.

¹⁰ *House Practice*, "Consideration and Debate" chapter, Section 50, p. 430.

¹¹ "Extensions of Remarks" is the section where Members of the House can insert "a speech that was not actually delivered on the floor" or "extraneous materials related to the subject under discussion," with the House's permission. There are three sections in the daily *Congressional Record*: (1) the proceedings of the House; (2) the proceedings of the Senate; and (3) the "Extensions of Remarks."

The practical difference between inserting and delivering a one-minute speech is the speech's audience. *Inserted* one minutes are available to readers of the hard copy and online versions of the *Congressional Record*. By contrast, *delivered* one minutes reach a larger audience through C-SPAN's televised coverage of House floor proceedings.

Various Uses of One Minutes

The unrestricted content and short length of one-minute speeches make them an attractive communication tool for individual Members and the party leadership. In addition, the usual position of one minutes at the start of day means they can be covered by broadcast news organizations in time for evening news programs.

Individual Members often use one minutes to share information with colleagues such as announcing a new bill they have introduced or explaining a floor amendment they will offer later that day. In practice, these one minutes serve as a visual "Dear Colleague" letter. Representatives also use one-minute speeches to deliver eulogies and tributes concerning individuals and organizations in their congressional district. One minutes also provide Members with an opportunity to express their views on bills, policy issues, and local, national, and international events.

For junior Members, one-minute speeches provide a valuable debate opportunity. Representative Chabot highlighted this point in a 105th Congress one-minute speech on the importance of one minutes: "As my colleagues know, a freshman or sophomore Member might sit at a committee meeting for two hours before being able to pose one question to a witness. He or she, if lucky, might get 30 seconds to debate a pending bill on the floor. One-minute speeches give these Members and the people they represent back home a chance to be heard."¹²

Some Representatives have made one-minute speeches a regular part of their media and communication strategy. By delivering one minutes, they reach a national audience of C-SPAN television viewers and webcast users, including constituents. Some Members also disseminate their one-minute speeches through other channels, such as mailing constituents a copy of the speech printed in *Congressional Record* or providing local news organizations with a video press release.

As mentioned earlier, the Democratic Message Group and the Republican Theme Team sometimes use one-minute speeches as a vehicle for transmitting the party's daily message. The one-minute speech period provides a forum where different Members of the party can speak on the designated theme to a national audience. This use of one minutes has been criticized by some Representatives and congressional observers. During a 104th Congress special order speech on civility in the House, one Member stated that one minutes in the morning had "become theme-team efforts just to excite and aggravate, to get sound bites for television, rather than a healthy discourse on the issues."¹³

Reform Proposals

Breaches in decorum during one-minute speeches in the 104th and 105th Congresses have prompted some reform proposals that range from eliminating one minutes to postponing them

¹² Rep. Steve Chabot, "Morning 1-Minute Speeches Serve Important Function," *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 143, March 5, 1997, p. H727.

¹³ Rep. W.J. (Billy) Tauzin, remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 142, May 1, 1996, p. H 4375.

until the completion of legislative business. These proposals have been advanced in letters to the Speaker, in testimony at congressional hearings, and in the *Civility in the House of Representatives* report that was prepared for the March 1997 bipartisan retreat of House Members. The 1999 report updated the data for the 105th Congress but did not contain recommendations.¹⁴

Letters to the Speaker

In August 1996, Representative Archer and former Representative Beilenson sent a letter to the Speaker urging him to stop recognizing Members for one-minute speeches at the start of the day. Signed by a bipartisan group of 50 Members, the letter proposed that one minutes only be permitted after the completion of legislative business. The letter noted that one minutes had increasingly become “a series of sound-bite assaults often prepared not by Members themselves, but by Republican and Democratic political staff who have found this format to be highly conducive to the kinds of attacks that used to be reserved for campaign commercials.”¹⁵ Postponing one minutes until after legislative business, the letter’s signatories argued, would reduce this manner of using one minutes.

On September 5, 1996, the proposal in the letter was discussed at a joint hearing of the two subcommittees of the House Rules Committee. Representative Archer testified that “Partisan and poisonous 1-minute speeches unfavorably set the tone for our legislative business.... If we move 1-minutes to the conclusion of the day, Members will be less inclined to focus on the negative, politically charged messages, and 1-minutes would once again turn to their original positive intent.”¹⁶ In separate testimony, Representative Beilenson noted that one-minute speeches “often contain purposefully written, catchy phrases that make good sound bites.” Moving one minutes to the end of the day, he argued, would “negate their usefulness to news operations” and remove the incentive to envelop one-minute speeches in sound bites.¹⁷

At the start of the 105th Congress, a letter advancing the same reform proposal was sent to the Speaker and to the minority leader by Representatives Archer and Hamilton. A bipartisan group of 59 Members signed the letter. A similar letter was circulated in the 106th Congress.

Civility in the House of Representatives Report

Civility in the House of Representatives (hereinafter referred to as *Civility*) examined the public’s perception of rising incivility in the House and suggested ways to reduce both this perception and actual breaches in decorum. The report point out that incivility was more likely to take place during one-minute and special order speeches than during other periods of House floor proceedings.

¹⁴ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Civility in the House of Representatives* (Philadelphia: Annenberg Public Policy Center, 1997), 108 pp. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Civility in the House of Representatives: the 105th Congress* (Philadelphia: Annenberg Public Policy Center, 1999), 18 pp.

¹⁵ The full text of this letter is reprinted in: U.S. Congress, House Committee on Rules, *Congressional Reform* hearings before the Committee on Rules and joint hearings before the Subcommittee on Legislative and Budget Process and Subcommittee on Rules and Organization of the House of the Committee on Rules, *Building on Change: Preparing for the 105th Congress, 104th Cong., 2nd sess., July 17, 24 and September 5, 12, 1996* (Washington: GPO, 1996), p. 262.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 259-260.

Civility recommended that the House either eliminate one-minute speeches or move these speeches to another time of the day (i.e., to a time other than the start of the day). Holding one minutes in the morning, the report argued, “can set a hostile tone for debate.”¹⁸ The report noted the “advent of theme teams” and the concerns that some Members have about using one minutes to communicate a party’s daily message.¹⁹ External factors such as “the rise of sound-bite politics” and the incentive of media coverage were also cited as encouraging partisan attacks and breaches of decorum during House floor debate.²⁰

“Civility” Hearings

The House Rules Committee’s Subcommittee on Rules and Organization of the House held hearings on April 17, 1997, and May 1, 1997, to discuss issues raised in *Civility*. Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, author of *Civility* and dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, testified along with several other congressional experts. By coincidence, the April 17 hearing was interrupted by a House vote on the question of striking unparliamentary words spoken in a one-minute speech. Witnesses and subcommittee Members referred to this incident throughout the May 1 hearing.

Civility’s recommendation that one-minute speeches be either eliminated or postponed until after legislative business was examined at both hearings. Two alternative recommendations were advanced in testimony. First, the idea of holding one-minute speeches only once a week was proposed.²¹ Second, it was recommended that the Speaker allow one-minute speeches of a “factual nature” in the morning and those of a “political nature” after the completion of legislative business.²²

Both hearings explored reinstating the so-called Oxford-style debates—another *Civility* recommendation—as a supplementary reform to changing House practices for one minutes.²³ In testimony on April 17, 1997, Dr. Jamieson recommended that “if we move or eliminate one-minute speeches, we conventionalize Oxford debates as an additional forum available. In Oxford debate, strong partisanship would be the rule, but in an environment in which the debate structure increases the likelihood that one arbitrates evidence and doesn’t engage in personalities.”²⁴ Suggestions for improving future Oxford-style debates, such as giving these debates a different name and allowing more Members to participate in them, were offered by witnesses at both hearings.

The House Rules Committee held hearings on the 1999 report on April 29, 1999.

¹⁸ Jamieson, *Civility*, p. 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²¹ Testimony of Dr. Stephen Frantzich, chairman of the Department of Political Science, U.S. Naval Academy, May 1, 1997.

²² Testimony of Donald Wolfensberger, guest scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, April 17, 1997.

²³ Three “Oxford-style” debates, two hours of structured debate with four participants from each party, were held on an experimental basis in the 103rd Congress.

²⁴ Testimony of Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, April 17, 1997.

Author Contact Information

Judy Schneider
Specialist on the Congress
-redacted-@crs.loc.gov, 7-....

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