Congressional Leadership: Crash Course Government and Politics #8

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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=====Introduction=====

Hi, I'm Craig and this is Crash Course Government and Politics, and today we're going to examine the leadership structure of Congress! I know, pretty exciting stuff! Now calm down, let me explain.

Intro Music Plays

=====Continued Introduction=====

(00:22) (to eagle) Are you ready to talk about Congressional leadership? You better be.

So, the Congressional leadership are the Congresspersons with titles like Majority Leader and Minority Whip, and they have a lot to do with political parties, so we're going to talk about what the political parties do in Congress as well. Even if you don't follow politics, you probably have heard of the name and titles, if not the functions, of the various leaders. I'm going to need some help on this one, so... Let's go the Clone Zone!

=====The Clone Zone=====

(00:44) In the Clone Zone today I've got House Clone and Senate Clone to help me explain Congressional leadership. House Clone in the house! Take it away.

House Clone: The leader of the House of Representatives is the Speaker of the House, and he or she is the third most powerful person in the country. The speaker is always elected by whichever party is in the majority. These elections take place every two years, because the whole House is elected every two years. That's a lot of elections! At the time of the shooting of the episode the Speaker of the House is John Boehner from Ohio, known for his tan, tears, and tacos.

Craig: Ya, he's oddly really good at making tacos. I had the barbecue pork at his house one time....

House Clone: Yeah, I had the beef taco! He called it la lengua.

Craig: Interesting choice.

House Clone: Ya. The speaker has two assistants to help run the house. The Majority Whip has the primary task of counting votes on important pieces of legislation, and making the party members vote along with their party. Whipping them into line, I suppose. (makes whipping noise). The third in line is the House Majority Leader, who helps the majority and probably does other stuff, but mainly he's chosen by the speaker because he's popular with particular factions within the party. The Minority Party, that's the one with fewer members elected in a term, duh (scoffs), also has a Minority Leader, and a Minority Whip, but no speaker. The Minority Leader is the de facto spokesperson for the minority party in the House, which is why you often see him or her on TV, or on your phone, or, on your iPad, or your pager. I don't think you can see it on your pager.

Craig: Hey, that was some pretty good stuff you said there House Clone. What's the deal with the Senate, Senate Clone?

Senate Clone: Things are simpler over in the Senate because we have only 100 august members and not the rabble of 435 to try to "manage." The leader of the Senate is the Majority Leader and he (so far it's always been a he) is elected by the members of his party, which by definition is the majority party, the one with 51 or more members. There's also a Minority Leader, which, like the Minority Leader in the House, is the party's spokesperson. The Vice President presides over the Senate sessions when he doesn't have anything better to do, even though it's one of his few official constitutional duties. When the veep is off at a funeral, or undermining the president with one of his gaffes, the President pro tempore presides. The President pro tem is a largely ceremonial role that is given to the most senior member of the majority party. Senior here means longest serving, not necessarily oldest, although it can be the same thing. No one would want to be a Congressional leader if there was no power involved, so it's important to know what powers these folks have, and how they exercise them. Also, I'm not supposed to do this, but let's go to the thought bubble.

Craig: (lets out a sound of protest) I love saying that!

=====Thought Bubble=====

(03:03) The primary way that leaders in both the House and Senate exercise power is through committee assignments. By assigning certain members to certain committees, the leadership can ensure that their views will be represented on those committees. Also, leaders can reward members with good committee assignments, usually ones that allow members to connect with their constituents, or stay in the public eye, or punish wayward members with bad committee assignments. Like the committee for cleaning the toilets or something. The Speaker of the House is especially powerful in his role assigning Congressmen to committees.

Congressional leaders shape the agenda of Congress, having a huge say in which issues get discussed and how that discussion takes place. The Speaker is very influential here, although how debate happens in the House is actually decided by the House Rules Committee, which makes this a rather powerful committee to be on. The Senate doesn't have a rules committee, so there's no rules! Aw, yeah! There's rules. The body as a whole decides how long debate will go on, and whether amendments will be allowed, but the Majority Leader, if he can control his party, still has a lot of say in what issues will get discussed.

Agenda setting is often a negative power, which means that it is exercised by keeping items *off* the agenda rather than putting them on. It's much easier to keep something from being debated at all than to manage the debate once it's started, and it's also rather difficult for the media to discuss an issue that's never brought up, no matter how much the public might ask, "But why don't you talk about this thing that matters a lot to me?" Thanks, thought bubble.

=====The Media=====

(04:12) Speaking of the media, Congressional leaders can also wield power because they have greater access to the press and especially TV. That's the thing people used to watch. Instead of YouTube.

This is largely a matter of efficiency. Media outlets have only so many reporters, and they aren't going to waste resources on the first-term Congressman from some district in upstate New York. No one even goes to upstate New York. Is there anyone in upstate New York? Has anyone ever gone to upstate New York?

When the Speaker calls a press conference reporters show up, and the Majority Leader can usually get on the Sunday talk shows if he wants. Media access is a pretty handy way to set an agenda for the

public.

=====Campaigning, Elections, and Political Parties=====
(04:43) Finally, Congressional leaders exercise a lot of power through their ability to raise money and to funnel it into their colleague's campaign. I want colleagues like that. Each House of Congress has a special campaign committee and whoever chairs it has the ability to shift campaign funds to the race that needs it most, or to the Congressperson he or she most wants to influence. The official leadership has little trouble raising money since donors want to give to proven winners who have a lot of power, and get the most bang for their buck. Since the leaders usually win their races easily, this is more true in the House than the Senate. They frequently have extra campaign money to give. Often the donations are given to political action committees, or PACs, which we'll talk about in another episode.

We're going to spend a lot of time talking about political parties, and probably having parties of our own in later episodes, especially their role in elections, but they are really important once Congress is in office too. One way that parties matter is incredibly obvious if you stop to think about it. It's contained in the phrase "majority rules." This is especially true in the House, where the majority party chooses the Speaker, but it's also the case in the Senate. This is why ultimately political parties organize and raise so much money to win elections: if one of the parties controls both houses and the presidency, as the Democrats did in 2008 through 2009, that party is much more likely to actually get things done.

The party that's the majority in each house is also the majority on all that house's committees, or at least the important ones, and, as we saw in the last episode, committees are where most of the legislative work in Congress gets done. Gets did. As you probably figured out, the majority party chooses the committee chairs, too, so it's really got a lock on that sweet legislative agenda. Parties also can make Congress more efficient by providing a framework for cooperation. The party provides a common set of values, so a Republican from Florida and one from Wyoming will have something in common, even if their constituents don't. These common values can be the basis of legislation sometimes, but sometimes (punches eagle) that happens.

Political parties also provide discipline in the process. When a party is more unified it's easier for the leader to set an agenda and get the membership to stick to it. (to eagle) Right? Unified.

Lack of party unity can make it difficult for the leadership. In 2011 a large group of very conservative newbie Congressmen associated with the Tea Party Movement made it difficult for Speaker Boehner to put forward an agenda.

The Tea Party caucus felt Boehner compromised too much with the Democrats, even though his agenda was, by some standards, pretty conservative. As a result, Congress wasn't able to get much done, except make itself unpopular.

=====Conclusion=====

(06:54) So, if you combine all this with the stuff we learned about Congressional committees, you should have a pretty good understanding of how Congress actually works. Yay! Understanding!

As this course progresses and you fall in love with politics, and myself, be on the lookout for how the leadership sets the agenda and pay attention to what issues might be floating around that aren't getting discussed in Congress.

Understanding who the Congressional leaders are, and knowing their motivations, can give you a sense of why things do and don't get done by the government. And, if you're lucky, you live in a district represented by a member of leadership. In that case, the person you vote for will be in the news all the time, which is kind of satisfying, I guess. I voted for that guy! Yeah! And now he's on the TV! Yeah!

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next week. (to eagle) What do you think, can we be unified? Can we get things done? (punches eagle) We can't.

=====Credits=====

(07:39) Crash Course Government and Politics is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Support for Crash Course US Government comes from Voqal. Voqal supports non-profits that use technology and media to advance social equity. Learn more about their mission and initiatives at voqal.org. Crash Course was made by all of these nice people.

Thanks for watching. Someday, maybe the eagle and I will get along. Not today. Not today.