

Daily session

A typical daily session of the Senate begins quietly—and ritualistically. Ten minutes before the scheduled time for convening, legislative clerks sit at their places at the rostrum. While casually arranging papers, they speak in low tones to party floor staff. Senate pages have already stacked each of the one hundred members' desks with bills, reports and other items that pertain to the day's legislative calendar and they now take up positions at three of the chamber's main entrance doors. As the occasional senator and staff member approach those doors, the pages pull the door inward to allow an unimpeded entrance. Just minutes away from the convening bell, a page places a glass of iced water on the presiding officer's desk. At the appointed moment, bells sound one long ring in the chamber, throughout the Senate side of the Capitol, and in each of the three Senate office buildings. At that instant, two pages swing open the double doors along the chamber's northeast wall to allow three persons to enter. The Senate chaplain leads the way followed closely by the presiding officer and the secretary of the Senate. On certain days, substitutes appear for these officials, including a guest chaplain, a senator designated to serve on behalf of the elected president pro tempore, and the assistant secretary of the Senate.

The presiding officer picks up the two-and-one-half-inch tall solid ivory gavel and strikes it sharply to formally convene the Senate and to present the chaplain. The presiding officer, in a show of deference to the chaplain, steps down from the rostrum to allow the chaplain to command that space. As everyone in the chamber, both on the floor and in the galleries, rises, the chaplain delivers his prayer. Following the prayer, which typically lasts about ninety seconds, the presiding officer turns—in a recently instituted ritual—to the flag of the United States, which is placed on a standard just to the right of the president's desk, and leads the still-standing audience in the pledge of allegiance. The presiding officer pauses for the chaplain to leave the rostrum and takes the seat at the president's desk. Another crack of the gavel signals the start of the day's business.