Congressional Committees

Inquire: How Does the Committee System in Congress Function?

Overview
There are 100 senators, each elected in a statewide race pitting the top Democrats against the top Republicans. The winners are strong-willed, intelligent, successful, and used to being in control. There are 435 representatives, each one ambitious and successful both in their professional lives and in the political arena.

In the movie 1776, John Adams makes the statement:

"I have come to the conclusion that one useless man is called a disgrace; that two are called a law firm; and that three or more become a Congress!"

To overcome gridlock, Congress works in committees: groups that focus on various aspects of the government and are small enough to actually get something done. In this lesson, we will discuss the types of committees in Congress, and the membership and leadership of these committees.

Big Question: With its large size, how does Congress accomplish anything?

*1776; Released 1972; Written by: Peter Stone; Directed by Peter H. Hunt; Produced by Jack L. Warner; Columbia Pictures

Watch: Committees and the Speaker of the House

The vice president of the United States essentially has three jobs:
1. To gavel the Senate into order at the beginning of each new session;
2. In the case of presidential incapacity, along with a majority of the Cabinet members, temporarily remove the president from office;
3. Wait for the president to die so he or she can become president.

While the ultimate impact of the last two roles is fairly catastrophic, because they very rarely happen, the vice president tends to be a somewhat impotent position.

Real power — perhaps the most powerful person in the United States besides the president — lies with the speaker of the House of Representatives. Remember, the speaker has the power to:

1. Assign bills to committees and decide when a bill will be presented to the floor for a vote (without his support, a bill might actually never get to a vote);
2. Rule on House procedures, often delegating authority for certain duties to other members;
3. Appoint members and chairs to committees and create select committees to fulfill a specific purpose and then disband;
4. Preside over joint House and Senate sessions, because they are usually held in the House of Representatives;
5. Appoint the party’s other leaders.

The speaker’s power over committees — the membership, the chairmanships, and the bills which are assigned to each committee — means the speaker holds the fate of both Congress members and bills in his or her hands. He can banish a member to an unimportant committee that will hurt the member’s chances at re-election. He can elevate a relatively unknown member to national prominence by giving him or her the chairmanship of an important committee in the middle of important hearings.

Controlling which bills are assigned to which committees and which bills actually reach the floor of the House after they come out of committee essentially makes the speaker the “gatekeeper” of the entire legislative process.

Power? Well, there is no denying the primary power of the president of the United States. But, who is second? It is easy to make a case for the speaker of the House.

Read: Congress in Committee

With 535 members in Congress and a seemingly infinite number of domestic, international, economic, agricultural, regulatory, criminal, and military issues to deal with at any given moment, there is no way the whole group can be efficient in its efforts to meet the country’s needs.

Instead, the two chambers must divide their work based on specialization. Congress does this through the committee system. Bills originate and most of the work that sets the congressional agenda takes place in specialized committees, or subcommittees, in both the House and the Senate. Committees are roughly approximate to a bureaucratic department in the executive branch. There are well over 200 committees, subcommittees, select committees, and joint committees in Congress.

Members of both parties compete for positions on various committees. These positions are typically filled by majority and minority members to roughly approximate the ratio of majority to minority members in the respective chambers, although committees are chaired by members of the majority party. Committees and their chairs have a lot of power in the legislative process, including the ability to stop a bill from going to the floor (the full chamber) for a vote. Indeed, most bills die in committee. But, when a committee is eager to develop legislation, it takes a number of methodical steps. It will reach out to relevant agencies for comment on resolutions to the problem at hand; for instance, committees can hold hearings with experts to collect information. In the Senate, committee hearings are also held to confirm presidential appointments. After information has been collected, a committee meets to discuss amendments and legislative language. Finally, a committee will send the bill to the full chamber along with a committee report. The report provides the majority opinion about why the bill should be passed, a minority view to the contrary, and estimates of the proposed law’s cost and impact.

Members of Congress bring a variety of specific experiences, interests, and levels of expertise to their roles, and try to match these characteristics to committee positions. For example, House members from states with large agricultural interests will typically seek positions on the Agriculture Committee. Senate members with a background in banking or finance may seek positions on the Senate Finance Committee. Members can request these positions from their chambers’ respective leadership, and the leadership also selects the committee chairs.
Committee chairs are very powerful. They control the committee’s budget and choose when the committee will meet, when it will hold hearings, and even whether it will consider a bill. A chair can convene a meeting when members of the minority are absent or adjourn a meeting when things are not progressing as the majority leadership wishes. Chairs can even hear a bill when the rest of the committee objects.

In the past, chairs of the various committees were chosen on the seniority system, meaning the person on the committee from the majority party who had been in the House or the Senate the longest was the chairman. This could be problematic in that there is no guarantee the person with the longest tenure is well-versed in the subject matter of the committee. There is also no guarantee that a chairman chosen by seniority is respected by the committee members or that he or she has any skill at running a committee.

The shortcomings of the seniority system and the growing power of the Congressional leadership, especially in the House, led to some changes. There is still some importance placed on the length of service, but it is no longer the overriding factor when appointing these very powerful chair positions.

Another change that has come about more recently is the idea of term limits for chairmen in the committees, ensuring they do not remain in these powerful positions indefinitely. In the House, rules prevent committee chairs from serving more than six consecutive years and from serving as both a committee chair and a subcommittee chair at the same time. A senator may serve only six years as a specific committee chair but may, in some instances, also serve as a chair or ranking member of another committee.

Because the Senate is much smaller than the House, senators hold more committee assignments than representatives. There are 16 standing committees in the Senate, and each position must be filled. In contrast, in the House with 435 members and only 20 standing committees, committee members have time to pursue more in-depth reviews of policies. House members historically defer to the decisions of committees, while senators tend to view committee decisions as recommendations, often seeking additional discussion that could lead to changes.

Reflect: One Committee, Two Committee, Three Committee, Four...

Poll
Below are five of the House of Representatives’ standing committees. Which would you choose to serve on if you were in Congress?

- Agriculture
- Budget
- Appropriations
- Banking and Financial Service
- Armed Services
Discover

Bills begin and end their lives in committees, whether they are passed into law or not. Hearings from interest groups and agency bureaucrats are held at the committee and subcommittee levels, and committee members play key roles in the floor debates about the bills that they foster.

Committees help to organize the most important work of Congress: considering, shaping, and passing laws to govern the nation. 8,000 bills or so go to committee annually, but fewer than ten percent of those bills make it out for consideration on the floor.

Types of Committees

There are four types of congressional committees:

1. **Standing committees**, which continue from one Congress to the next, are probably the most important type of committee because they consider and shape the vast majority of proposed laws. Standing committees can be combined or discontinued, but most have been around for many years. Standing committees also conduct investigations, such as the Senate Banking Committee's investigation of President Bill Clinton's Whitewater investments. There are 20 standing committees in the House and 16 in the Senate.

2. **Select committees** are temporarily formed for specific purposes, often to study a particular issue. They usually do not draft legislation. Some, like the select committees to investigate the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, are obviously intended to have limited lives. Others, like the Select Committee on Aging and the Select Committee on Indian Affairs, have existed for a number of years and actually produce legislation. Sometimes long-standing select committees eventually become standing committees.

3. **Joint committees** have similar purposes to select committees, but they are made up of members from both the House and the Senate. They are set up to conduct business between the houses and to help focus public attention on major issues. Some joint committees handle routine matters, such as supervising the Library of Congress.

4. **Conference committees** are specially created when the House and the Senate need to reconcile different versions of the same bill. A conference committee is made up of members from the House and Senate committees that originally considered the bill. Once the committee agrees on a compromise, the revised bill is returned to both houses of Congress for their approval.

Committee Assignments

After each congressional election, political parties assign newly elected representatives and senators to standing committees. They consider a member's own wishes in making the assignments, but also assess the needs of the committees, in terms of region of the country, personalities, and party connections.

Since the House has 435 members, most representatives only serve on one or two committees. On the other hand, senators often serve on several committees and subcommittees.

Committee assignment is one of the most important decisions for a new member’s future work in Congress. Usually, members seek appointment on committees that will allow them to serve their districts or states most directly. However, a member from a "safe" district — where his or her reelection is not in
jeopardy — who wants to be a leader in Congress, may want to be named to a powerful committee, such as Foreign Relations, Judiciary, or the House Ways and Means. There, they are more likely to come into contact with current leaders and perhaps even gain some media attention.

### Standing Committees of Congress

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### Lesson Toolbox

**Additional Resources and Readings**

Congressional Committees: Crash Course Government and Politics #7
- A video discussing the role of committees in Congress
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evLR90Dx79M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evLR90Dx79M)
Lesson Glossary

congressional committees: legislative sub-organizations in the United States Congress that handle a specific duty, rather than the general duties of Congress
subcommittees: a subdivision of a United States congressional committee that considers specified matters and reports back to the full committee
committee hearings: a meeting or session of a Senate, House, joint, or special committee of Congress, usually open to the public, to obtain information and opinions on proposed legislation, conduct an investigation, or oversee the activities of a government department or the implementation of a federal law
standing committees: a permanent legislative committee that meets regularly
select committees: a small legislative committee created to fulfill a specific purpose and then disbanded; also called an ad hoc committee or special committee
joint committees: a legislative committee consisting of members from both chambers that investigates certain topics but lacks bill referral authority
conference committees: a special type of joint committee that reconciles different bills passed in the House and Senate, resulting in a single bill

Check Your Knowledge

1. Although members of both parties compete for positions on various committees, they are chaired by members of the minority party.
   A. True
   B. False

2. Since the Senate is much smaller than the House, senators hold more committee assignments than representatives.
   A. True
   B. False

3. Senators often serve on several committees and subcommittees.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
Citations

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