

## Congressional Committee System: Overview

The core work of the Congress is accomplished in committees. This is where details of bills are decided, differences are ironed out, and special investigations and specialized reporting are conducted, to name just a few functions. It is the heart and soul of the legislative process.

### Functions Directly Relating to Legislation

Select from the approximately 20,000 bills presented those that they feel merit further examination. This involves listening to opponents and supporters to determine if a bill has a chance of becoming a law.

Devise and revise legislation on a smaller scale than the full House and Senate.



**Full house's concern:**  
overall scope of bill



**Committee's concern:**  
details of legislation



**Committee in-box:**  
20,000 bills



**Committee out-box:**  
bills worth looking into



**Report**  
recommended legislation to the floor of their chamber

### More General Functions

Survey policy developments

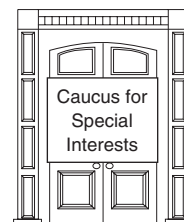
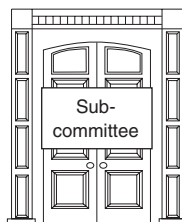
Oversee activities of executive and judicial agencies within their jurisdictions

Enable lawmakers to become specialists in areas that their committees consider

Hold public hearings to enable the populace to become more informed on key issues

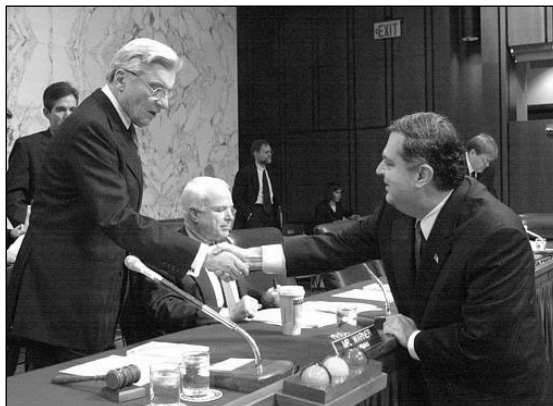
### Types of Committees

There are seven different types of committees that carry out this work



## Standing Committees, Subcommittees, Special Committees, and Caucuses

*Spencer Abraham, Department of Energy secretary (at right), with members of the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 20, 2003. In his testimony, Abraham expressed confidence that the United States could replace potential losses of crude oil resulting from the war in Iraq.*



### DURATION

#### Standing Committees

(Example: House Ways & Means Committee)

Permanent status: carry over from one Congress to another

Are written into the rules of the House and Senate

### DESCRIPTION

Have permanently authorized staff

Have broad legislative mandates

Number has increased because of the increased workload of Congress

### MEMBERSHIP

Majority party in each house controls these committees and selects chairpersons. Committee membership is in direct proportion to the number of party members in parent house.

#### Subcommittees

(Example: House Subcommittee on Labor Management Relations of the Education and Labor Committee)

Most are permanent.

Subdivisions of committees

Vary in importance; some function almost autonomously

Enable members of Congress to develop expertise in specialized fields

Number has increased because of the increased workload of Congress

Composed of members of majority and minority parties in the same proportion as on full committees

#### Select or Special Committees

(Example: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence)

Temporary: Authorized to operate for only a specific period or until the project for which they were created has been completed. May last one or two Congresses.

Usually investigate pressing problems rather than work on legislation

Examine key issues of public concern

Coordinate policy that overlaps the jurisdictions of several standing committees

Composition of committee varies

#### Caucuses for Special Interests

(Example: Congressional Black Caucus)

Temporary or Permanent

Officially known as "legislative service organizations" (LSOs)

Must be registered as an LSO to use congressional office space for meetings

Cannot receive outside contributions or must sever all ties with the House

Attempt, sometimes successfully, to influence legislation

Have proliferated during past several decades

Members of one party who hold common views on issues that are important to them and their constituents. Members are from both chambers.

## Joint Committees, Conference Committees, and Committee on Committees



### DURATION

#### Joint Committees

(Example: Joint Committee on Taxation)

Temporary or permanent

Four are permanent: Taxation, Economic, Library, and Printing

### DESCRIPTION

Coordinate the work of both houses

Members often research important matters such as defense, taxation, etc.; other times tend to routine matters

### MEMBERSHIP

Members from both houses and from both political parties

Position of chairperson usually rotates between houses

#### Conference Committees

(Example: House and Senate Conference Committee on 1994 Anti-Crime Bill)

Temporary

Dissolved as soon as a final joint version of a bill is agreed on

Type of joint committee

Appointed to resolve differences between House and Senate versions of legislation

With limitations, have power to consider, alter, and report legislation

Members or conferees usually drawn from the original committees where legislation was examined

Chairmanship rotates between houses

#### Committee on Committees

(Example: One committee each for Democrats and Republicans in both Senate and House)

Permanent

Established in 1910 as a response to the growing control in the House of the leadership, especially the speaker

Appoints members to committees

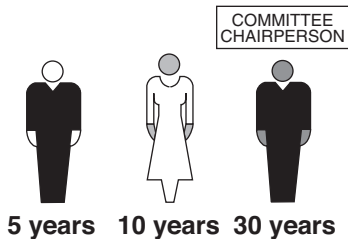
Appointments are then submitted to party caucuses for approval

Membership rules vary between House and Senate Democrats and Republicans

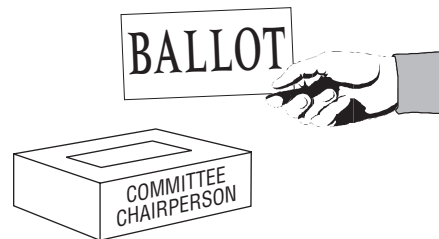
## Committee Leadership

### How a Chairperson Is Selected: Seniority vs. Election

Initially, committees were given the option of electing their own chair. Once the committee system gained a stronghold in Congress, the chairs rose to their positions through longevity. Custom conferred the position of chairperson on the member of the majority party who had served the longest on the committee.



Because of criticism of the seniority rule in selecting committee chairs, however, House Republicans now select some chairpersons of standing committees by secret ballot. House Democrats now select chairpersons by secret ballot if 20% of their party caucus requests such a vote. Lawmakers may be restricted as to the number and type of chairmanships he or she may hold.



### Washington Chronicle

#### HELP WANTED

## Committee Chairperson Sought

U.S. Congress seeks strong committee chairperson.  
As the most powerful member of your committee, you will:

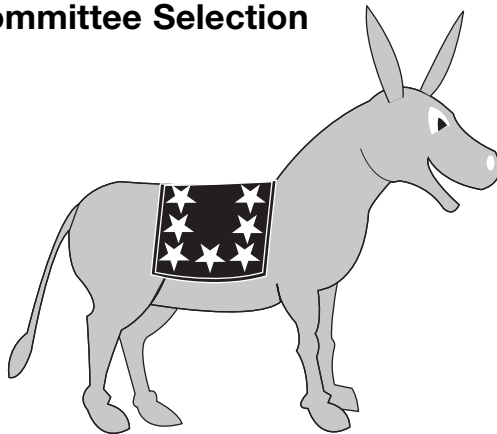
#### RESPONSIBILITIES

- ☆ Control your committee's agenda
- ☆ Schedule meetings and hearings of the full committee
- ☆ Help schedule subcommittee hearings and meetings
- ☆ Handle committee's budget and hiring of its staff
- ☆ Be expected to sit in regularly on House-Senate conference committees
- ☆ Serve as the committee and party spokesperson on issues that fall within your committee area
- ☆ Handle related bills on the floor of your chamber
- ☆ If selected as a Senate committee chair, you will steer your committee's legislative agenda.
- ☆ If selected as a House committee chair, you will have less control over legislation, because of new House rules.
- ☆ Salary: \$165,391 per year, non-negotiable. Only members of Congress may apply.

## Assigning Members to Committees

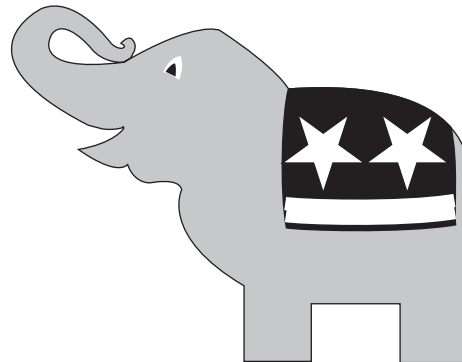
Historically, the speaker of the House assigned committee members. These assignment decisions were often part of the bargaining process to determine who would receive the speakership. In the 1850s, however, political parties gained control over committee assignments. At the beginning of each new Congress, in both the House and the Senate, the parties give the job of appointing committee members to the “Committee on Committees.” The parties select these powerful committees differently.

### House Committee on Committee Selection

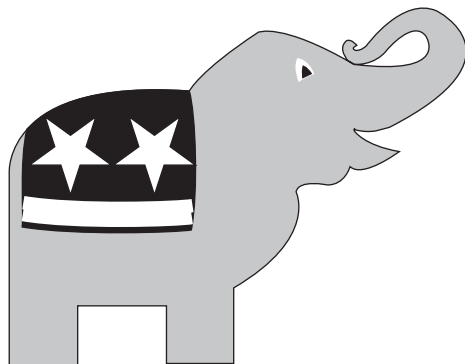


The Democratic party’s “committee on committees” is composed of the Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee, the speaker, and the floor leader.

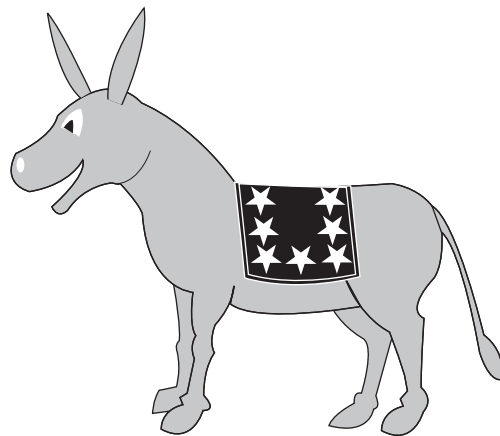
### Senate Committee on Committee Selection



Senate Republicans allow the chair of the Republican Conference to appoint members to the “committee on committees,” which then makes committee assignments.



The Republican party’s “committee on committees” is made up of one member from each state that has a Republican representative.



Senate Democrats require the floor leader to appoint a “steering committee” that makes committee selections.

## Criteria in Assignment to a Committee



### Party Loyalty

Because party caucuses have more control over committee selection, loyalty to the party (voting record) is important. How well a person gets along with the party leaders also is a factor.



### Seniority

Based on uninterrupted service, seniority still plays a key role in assignment. Seniority on a committee is established by number of years of service on that committee. Seniority cannot be transferred from committee to committee.



### Geographic Location

When a vacancy occurs on a committee, often the replacement is from the same state. Certain states have special interest in particular committees. For instance, the Midwest states are especially interested in the Agriculture Committee.

#### Note:

To be appointed to an “exclusive” committee, the member must be from a “safe” district—one that allows great independence in decision making.

U. S. Senate CONGRESSIONAL REPORT CARD		
Name <input type="text" value="Senator Richard Lugar"/>		
State <input type="text" value="Indiana"/> Party <input type="text" value="Republican"/>		
SUBJECT	GRADE	CONGRESSIONAL LEADER'S COMMENTS
Defense Policy	A+	Senator Lugar's expertise in international affairs makes him suitable to lead the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

### Special Competence

Members who develop expertise in a particular area stand a better chance of appointment.

U. S. Senate CONGRESSIONAL REPORT CARD		
Name <input type="text" value="Senator Richard Lugar"/>		
State <input type="text" value="Indiana"/> Party <input type="text" value="Republican"/>		
WORK ATTITUDES AND RELATIONSHIPS	SATISFACTORY	UNSATISFACTORY
Respected by others	X	
Civil toward colleagues	X	
Willing to compromise	X	

### Responsibility & Attitude

Attitude is a key factor in assignment. Those whose abilities are respected, whose relationships with colleagues are civil, and who are willing to compromise are likely candidates for assignment.



### Personal Preference

This plays a role in assignment to a committee, albeit a minor one. In fact, since the 83rd Congress (1954-55), the Democrats have stipulated that each new Democratic member of the Senate must be given a committee assignment.