

Committees

Committees improve the organization of the Senate and House of Representatives. Members of Congress can't be experts on all issues. For this reason, the Senate and House of Representatives developed committees that focus on particular subjects. Committees look at the way that government functions; identify issues that require review; gather and evaluate information; and make legislative recommendations to the full House or Senate.

The committee system has expanded and developed along with the size of the federal government. The committees have evolved over time, reflecting changes in Congress as well as in American society.

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate maintain three types of committees: standing; select (in the Senate these are called special and select); and joint. Standing committees are permanent committees with specific responsibilities outlined in the rules of each chamber. Special and select committees are created for specific purposes, such as an investigation. Joint committees are formed with members of both the House and Senate.

Currently, the House has 20 standing committees and the Senate has 16 standing committees. In the early 20th century, the House had 59 standing committees! The Legislative Reorganization Acts of 1946 and 1970 decreased the number of committees but added subcommittees and professional staff to assist members.

Generally, members are assigned to committees by their party based on their particular interests and the committee requirements. Traditionally, the most senior member of the committee from the majority party became the chair of a committee, and the most senior member of the minority party was called the "ranking member" of the committee. More recently, there have been some changes to the method of choosing committee chairs.

Why are committees so important? Thousands of bills are introduced in Congress each year; however, only a few hundred are considered by the full House or Senate. After bills are introduced, they are sent to the appropriate committee (and possibly, subcommittee) where the hard work of writing legislation is done. Most bills are never passed out of their committees and must be re-introduced in the next Congress for consideration. For instance, in the 112th Congress, Second Session, 5,395 measures were introduced, and 148 public bills were enacted into law.

Bills "die" in committee for various reasons. Some bills are duplicative; some bills are written to bring attention to issues without expectation of becoming law; some are not practical ideas. Committees use professional staff, and experts representing business, labor, the public and the executive branch to obtain information needed by members in writing legislation.

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- 1** Begin by reading Article I of the Constitution. Is there any mention of legislative committees in the Constitution?
- 2** The first committees in both the Senate and House were select committees. The Committee on Ways and Means became the first standing committee in the House during the Fourth Congress, whereas the first standing committees in the Senate were established during the Fourteenth Congress in 1816. What is an advantage of standing committees over select committees?
- 3** The Ways and Means Committee is the tax-writing committee in the House of Representatives. The term “ways and means” refers to the ways and means that are adopted to raise funds for the use of government. What does the Constitution state about bills for raising revenue (income)? Why did the founders make this decision?
- 4** What is meant by the majority and minority parties?
- 5** The Senate website states, “...committees became policy-making bodies instead of merely technical aids to the chamber. Whereas the Senate formerly set the agenda, the committees came to be, in effect the Senate’s agenda-maker.” What does this mean?

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- 1** Section 8 of the Constitution lists the powers of Congress but does not suggest how the Senate or House should be organized. Committees are not mentioned in the Constitution.
- 2** Standing committees allow for more equal distribution of work among members as well as for specialization among members. In addition, the establishment of standing committees allowed for long-term studies and investigations.
- 3** Article I, Section VII of the U.S. Constitution declares, "All Bills for raising Revenue shall originate in the House of Representatives." When the Constitution was written, only the House of Representatives was directly elected by the people (the state legislatures elected members to the Senate). The founders decided that this important responsibility should be left to the members closest to the people.
- 4** The majority party is the party with the most members in the House or Senate. The minority party has fewer members. In the U.S. we have a two-party system, and most members of Congress are members of either the Republican or Democratic Party.
- 5** An agenda is the list of things to be discussed by a legislative body. Committees have become very powerful because committees generally determine which legislation is considered by the Senate or House of Representatives. Bills that receive consideration and a majority vote in committee can then be scheduled for floor consideration.

SOURCES:

U.S. Senate Website:

<http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Committees.htm>

http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/reference/two_column_table/Resumes.htm

http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/history/one_item_and_teasers/partydiv.htm

U.S. House of Representatives Website:

<http://history.house.gov/Education/Fact-Sheets/Education-Fact-Sheets/>

RESOURCES:

U.S. Capitol Website:

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/about-congress/making-laws>

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibition-hall/timeline>