congressional committees

The backbone of the U.S. Congress since the late 18th century, committees perform a wide range of functions to facilitate the legislative aspects of the national government.

Congress uses a system of committees and subcommittees as a way to conserve limited resources and study several different matters of national importance simultaneously. Members of committees solicit the opinions of leading experts who testify before committee hearings, which are also the venue for the public to influence the development of legislation.

Four types of congressional committees operate in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate: standing, select or special, conference, and joint. Since the federal government runs on a two-party system, both Democrats and Republicans are given seats on committees in direct proportion to the number of party members elected to sit in either hall of Congress during each term; when one party dominates the House or Senate, that party controls the majority of committee seats as well. The decision of which legislators to sit on which committee is up to the party leadership, which places members according to their policy strengths.

Standing committees are are permanent committees divided almost equally between the House and the Senate. These committees determine which batches of legislation will be sent to either house for a full vote. All bills that Congress debates have been screened by at least one committee and possibly more if the legislation is controversial or expensive.

To conduct special investigations during national crises or study particular issues of national importance, Congress uses select or special committees. Less powerful than standing committees, special committees need congressional approval each year to exist and cannot introduce or pass legislation. These committees are particularly affected by the actions of those who pressure Congress to affect change in specific issues, like drug use or poverty. Often, a special committee develops into a standing committee if the problem that led to its rise remains important to the American people and Congress.

Another form of temporary committee is a conference committee. Conference committees are set up when there is a discrepancy between versions of a bill passed in the House and Senate. Each house of Congress can pass its own piece of legislation on a single issue, requiring the convening of a conference committee to resolve differences between the two pieces of legislation and draft a single bill, which is then sent to the White House for the president's signature. Usually, conference committees meet for only a few days. Although most of these committees are small, some have included as many as 250 senators and representatives.

Joint committees, like special committees, meet for a limited time to examine issues of importance to Congress as a whole. Most joint committees govern such mundane congressional operations and administration as the printing and delivery of federal government documents to federal, state, and public agencies.
Subcommittees perform the bulk of the legislative work in Congress by specializing in particular issues. Each of the standing committees in both houses possesses subcommittees. Subcommittees analyze and create legislation and hold hearings to gather testimony from experts and the public. Their smaller size enables them to focus on specific problems that would be impractical in a larger standing committee.

The functions and powers of committees have changed dramatically over the past 50 years. Prior to 1970, most committees met in relative secrecy with little oversight by the press, public, or even the party's own rank-and-file. Committee chairs held an immense amount of power to control the direction and outcome of committee operations. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, conservative Southern Democrats dominated the chairs due to a majority representation in the House and the Senate and were often unrepresentative of the political thinking of the party's rank-and-file because they were chosen based on seniority. They effectively stonewalled liberal civil rights legislation by stalling it in the committees.

Following the Watergate scandal, major changes were made to reduce the power of the chairs. A revolt by younger antiwar Democrats and Republicans began to limit their policy-making powers. House Democrats, for example, established a loophole through which they could replace committee chairs by a secret ballot of the whole caucus. Most chairs, however, began to listen to the concerns of the party's liberal constituency. Although chairs lost power to determine the make-up of subcommittees and the ability to block legislation by actions taken during the post-Watergate shake-up, they still retained enough muscle to prevent the speaker of the House from carrying out his desires.

Other major changes during this reform era included the decentralization of power in the House and the increase in the power of subcommittees. The House adopted the "Subcommittee Bill of Rights," which added several new subcommittees and seats on current subcommittees. Each subcommittee now retained its own chair based more on experience and seniority rather than political cronyism. Chairs could only serve on one subcommittee in order to prevent a concentration of power. All subcommittees could hire permanent staff that in effect could not be tampered with at the whim of the chair. Every bill now had to be given to a subcommittee within two weeks of reaching the chair, a reform that prevented chairs from killing bills by ignoring them.

During the 1980s, subcommittees grew in number rapidly. More than 100 subcommittees met regularly in the House, and 80 in the Senate. This growing number of subcommittees created more bureaucracy, slowing the process of creating legislation and reducing the effectiveness of democracy. Legislators complained that they devoted nearly all of their time to sitting on committees. As a result, they have relied increasingly on the support of staff and lobbyists to read bills and provide them with important information.

By the mid-1990s, Congress chose to cut back on the number of committees. Republicans, flush with party dominance in the congressional elections in 1994, moved to reclaim the speaker's power to dominate the actions of committees, voting to cut the number of committees and give back power to the chairs and the speaker in order to push the passage of the their ambitious legislative agenda, the Contract with America. After a Republican set back at the polls in elections of 1998, more power was accorded the chairs to dictate the passage of legislation. In 1997, congressional reformers passed legislation reducing the number of subcommittees by more than 100, while limiting the number of subcommittees on which one member could serve.

Overall, congressional committees perform the most important functions of Congress, prompting President Woodrow Wilson to once remark, "Congress on the floor is Congress on public exhibition; Congress in committee
is Congress at work." Through small hearings and membership, congressional committees also allow the American people a voice in shaping the development of legislation at the federal level. Committees and subcommittees provide a key venue for congressmen to pass legislation to help their constituents enjoy a higher standard of living, a process that helps reelect both senators and representatives.

Further Reading


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