

The Congressional Committee System - Who's Doing What?

Where do things get done in Congress? Usually in committee.

Each chamber of Congress has committees set up to perform specific functions, enabling the legislative bodies to accomplish their often complex work more quickly with smaller groups.

There are approximately 250 congressional committees and subcommittees, each charged with different functions and all made up of members of Congress. Each chamber has its own committees, although there are joint committees comprising members of both chambers. Each committee, going by chamber guidelines, adopts its own set of rules, giving each panel its own special character.

In the Senate, there are standing committees for:

- *agriculture, nutrition and forestry*
- *appropriations (which holds the federal purse strings and is therefore one of the most powerful Senate committees)*
- *armed services*
- *banking, housing and urban affairs*
- *budget*
- *commerce, science and transportation*
- *energy and natural resources*
- *environment and public works*
- *finance*
- *foreign relations*
- *health, education, labor and pensions*
- *homeland security and governmental affairs*
- *judiciary*
- *rules and administration*
- *small business and entrepreneurship*
- *veterans affairs*

These standing committees are permanent legislative panels, and their various subcommittees handle the nuts-and-bolts work of the full committee. The Senate also has four select committees charged with more specific tasks: Indian affairs, ethics, intelligence, and aging. These handle housekeeping-type functions, such as keeping Congress honest or ensuring the fair treatment of American Indians. Committees are chaired by a member of the majority party, often a senior member of Congress. Parties assign their members to specific committees. In the Senate, there is a limit to the number of committees on which one member may serve. While each committee may hire its own staff and appropriate resources as it sees fit, the majority party often controls those decisions.

The House of Representatives has several of the same committees as the Senate:

- *agriculture*
- *appropriations*
- *armed services*
- *budget*
- *education and labor*
- *foreign affairs*
- *homeland security*
- *energy and commerce*
- *judiciary*
- *natural resources*
- *science and technology*
- *small business*
- *veterans affairs*

Committees unique to the House include House administration, oversight and government reform, rules, standards of official conduct, transportation and infrastructure, and ways and means. This last committee is considered the most influential and sought-after House committee, so powerful that members of this panel cannot serve on any other committees without a special waiver. The panel has jurisdiction over taxation, among other things. There are four joint House/Senate committees. Their areas of interest are: printing, taxation, the Library of Congress, and the U.S. economy.

Most congressional committees deal with passing laws. During each two-year session of Congress, literally thousands of bills are proposed, but only a small percentage is considered for passage. A bill that is favored often goes through four steps in committee. First, executive agencies give written comments on the measure; second, the committee holds hearings in which witnesses testify and answer questions; third, the committee tweaks the measure, sometimes with input from non-committee members of Congress; finally, when the language is agreed upon the measure is sent to the full chamber for debate. Conference committees, usually composed of standing committee members from the House and Senate who originally considered the legislation, also help reconcile one chamber's version of a bill with the other's.

Not all committees are legislative. Others confirm government appointees such as federal judges; investigate government officials or pressing national issues; or ensure that specific government functions are carried out, like printing government documents or administering the Library of Congress.