

APGoPo Unit 5

THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM

INTRODUCTION

- Real work of Congress is done in committees and subcommittees, not on the floor of the House or Senate.
- Before a bill even reaches the floor, it must first pass through a committee, unless the committee has resisted "reporting out" the bill and the House votes to "discharge" it (through a discharge petition) onto the floor for consideration by the full body.
- Committee functions:
 - Analyze legislation, conduct investigations of executive branch agencies, conduct oversight of executive branch agencies

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Committee membership is controlled by the parties, primarily by the majority party. The chairman and a majority of each standing committee come from the majority party. The remaining committee members are from the minority party, but they are always a minority on the committee. Assignments are based on the personal and political qualities of the member, his or her region, and whether the assignment will help reelect the member. Getting on the right committee is very important to most members of Congress. A member from a "safe" district whose reelection is secure may want to serve on an important committee that promotes a power base in Washington. On the other hand, a member who has few ambitions beyond his or her current position and whose reelection is less secure may want to serve on a committee that suits the needs of constituents. For example, a less secure representative from rural Kansas may prefer to serve on the Agriculture Committee.

- Whichever party has majority in the House or Senate will have a majority on each committee in that house.
- Committee chairman is of majority party; ranking member is most senior member of minority party on a committee.

COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN

Committee chairmen are the most important shapers of the committee agenda. From 1910 until the early 1970s, chairmen were strictly chosen by the seniority system, in which the member with the longest continuous service on the committee was placed automatically in the chairmanship. In the early 1970s, the House decided to elect committee chairmen by secret ballots from all the majority members. As a result, several committee chairmen were removed, and although most chairmen still get their positions through seniority, it is possible to be removed or overlooked.

- Power of chairmen is substantial over:
 - Setting committee agenda
 - Hiring staff
 - Membership on subcommittees
 - Jurisdiction of subcommittees
- Advantages of seniority system:
 - Experience
 - Stability
 - Expertise
 - Reduces infighting among those who would be rivals for chairmen

IMPORTANT STANDING COMMITTEES

Standing committees are the permanent committees of Congress.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• House<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Rules<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Most powerful of all▪ Sets legislative calendar▪ Establish "rules" for debate and amendments◦ Ways and Means<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Deals with tax (revenue) bills | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Senate<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Foreign Relations<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Highly prestigious▪ Senate has larger role in foreign affairs than House because of treaty ratification, ambassador confirmation provisions in Constitution◦ Judiciary<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Screens judicial nominees▪ Careful scrutiny given because of the power of the modern judiciary and the fact that judges have life terms |
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OTHER COMMITTEES

- **Conference Committees**
 - Temporary committees comprised of members from both houses
 - Formed to resolve differences between bills passed through the House and Senate (only if the language of the bill is different)
 - Members are appointed by the party leadership and are selected from the House and Senate committees that originally considered the bill
 - After conference committee sends bill back to each house, no amendments are allowed, and the bill generally passes
 - The power of these committees is such that they are often called the "third house of Congress"
- **Select**
 - Appointed by a house for a limited, temporary purpose, e.g., to study and issue or to conduct an investigation
- **Joint**
 - Composed of members from both houses for similar temporary purposes