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Committee Types and Roles

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Structure of the Committee System

Congress divides its legislative, oversight, and internal administrative tasks among more than 200 committees and subcommittees. Within assigned areas, these functional subunits gather information; compare and evaluate legislative alternatives; identify policy problems and propose solutions; select, determine, and report measures for full chamber consideration; monitor executive branch performance (oversight); and investigate allegations of wrongdoing.

The 1946 Legislative Reorganization Act (60 *Stat.* 812) sets the framework for the modern committee system. The act organized the Senate and House committees along roughly parallel lines, but divergences have emerged over time. Within the guidelines of chamber rules, each committee adopts its own rules addressing organizational, structural, and procedural issues. As a consequence, there is considerable variation among panels and across chambers.

In the 115th Congress (2017-2018), there are 20 standing committees in the House, with 97 subcommittees¹ and one select committee.² The Senate has 16 standing committees, with 68 subcommittees³ as well as four select or special committees. There are also four joint committees.

Types of Committees

There are three main types of committees: standing, select or special, and joint. (Party committees, task forces, and congressional Member organizations—informal groups—are not addressed here.)

Standing committees are permanent panels identified as such in chamber rules (House Rule X, Senate Rule XXV). Because they have legislative jurisdiction, standing committees consider bills and issues and recommend measures for consideration by their respective chambers. They also have oversight responsibility to monitor agencies, programs, and activities within their jurisdictions and, in some cases, in areas that cut across committee jurisdictions.

Most standing committees recommend funding levels—authorizations—for government operations and for new and existing programs. A few have other functions. For example, the Appropriations Committees recommend legislation to provide budget authority for federal agencies and programs. The Budget Committees establish aggregate levels for total spending and revenue, via the annual budget resolution, that serve as guidelines for the work of the authorizing and appropriating panels.

Select or special committees are generally established by a separate resolution of the chamber, sometimes to conduct investigations and studies and, on other occasions, also to consider measures. Often, select committees examine emerging issues that do not fit clearly within existing standing committee jurisdictions or cut across jurisdictional boundaries. A select committee may be permanent or temporary. Select committees may have certain restrictions on member tenure or may include certain specified representatives (e.g., party leaders or certain

¹ The number of total subcommittees is current as of April 25, 2017, and based on lists found at http://clerk.house.gov/committee_info/scsoal.pdf.

² The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence operates, in many ways, like a permanent standing committee; it has four subcommittees in the 115th Congress.

³ The number of total subcommittees is current as of April 25, 2017, and based on lists found at <http://www.senate.gov/committees/membership.htm>.

standing committee chairs) as ex officio members. Instead of the term *select*, the Senate sometimes uses *special* committee (e.g., the Special Committee on Aging).

Joint committees are made up of Members of both the House and Senate. Today's permanent joint committees conduct studies or perform housekeeping tasks rather than consider measures.⁴ For instance, the Joint Committee on Printing oversees the functions of the Government Printing Office and general printing procedures of the federal government. The chairmanship of joint committees usually alternates between the House and Senate. A *conference committee* is a temporary joint committee formed to resolve differences between competing House and Senate versions of a measure. Conference committees draft compromises between the positions of the two chambers, which are then submitted to the full House and Senate for approval.

Subcommittees

Most committees form subcommittees to share specific tasks within the jurisdiction of the full committee. Subcommittees are responsible to, and work within the guidelines established by, their parent committees. In particular, standing committees usually create subcommittees with legislative jurisdiction to consider and report bills. They may assign their subcommittees such specific tasks as the initial consideration of measures and oversight of laws and programs in the subcommittees' areas.

Subcommittees may play an important role in the legislative process. Because few chamber and party rules apply to subcommittees, the number, prerogatives, and autonomy of subcommittees vary among committees. Senate rules do not directly limit the number of subcommittees each committee may create. House rules impose a maximum of five subcommittees for most committees (Rule X, clause 5(d)), but a sixth oversight subcommittee is permitted; several committees, such as the Appropriations Committee, have been allowed—via House rules or a separate order in the opening-day rules resolution—a larger number of subcommittees.⁵

Some committees create independent subcommittees with sizeable staff and budgets; routinely refer measures to subcommittees for initial consideration; and allow subcommittees to take the lead in framing issues, drafting measures and reports, and holding hearings and markups. On other committees, most work is undertaken by the full committee. Some full committees repeat all actions taken by their subcommittees, while others review only major subcommittee work or even forward subcommittee-reported measures to the floor with little change.

⁴ Unlike the permanent existing joint committees, a joint committee established for a portion for the 112th Congress (the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction) was empowered to consider legislative proposals.

⁵ See House Rule X, clause 5(d)(2), 115th Congress, for higher allowances for subcommittees at the House committees on Appropriations (13), Armed Services (7), Foreign Affairs (7), Oversight and Government Reform (7), and Transportation and Infrastructure (6). For the 115th Congress, also see Section 3(p) ("Separate Orders") of H.Res. 5, 115th Congress, allowing the Agriculture Committee six subcommittees in the 115th Congress. For provisions in other recent congresses, see Section 3 (j) ("Separate Orders") of H.Res. 5 (114th Congress), and Section 3 (f) ("Separate Orders") of H.Res. 5 (113th Congress).

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