

# All about Congressional Committees (Jul 3, 2024)

By Amy West

When we surveyed y'all recently, we got a lot of questions about Congressional committees and how are they formed and what do they actually *do* . So today, we're talking committees!

## Kinds of committees

First, it's important to know [what kind of committee](#) we're talking about. Standing committees are the ones that keep going over time. Except for the Ethics Committee, the majority party will always have enough members on a committee to pass what they prioritize. For example, [Judiciary](#) currently has 24 Republicans and 19 Democrats. [Ethics](#), for obvious reasons, is evenly split between the majority and minority. However, even in the Ethics Committee, as with standing ones, the chair belongs to the majority and gets to wield considerable power. The chair is supposed to work with the Ranking Member (a member of the minority party), but they don't have to.

Shorter term committees with a specific purpose (aka "special" or "select"), like the January 6th Committee, are still set up in a broadly similar manner although the House Speaker can reject minority party members put forth by the Minority Leader. This happened with the January 6th Committee when then Speaker Pelosi rejected some, but not all of the members proposed by Minority Leader McCarthy. Even though she kept two Republicans, Pelosi's rejection of others is part of the reason many Republicans considered the whole thing illegitimate.

Most standing committees have several subcommittees that are structured similarly and work in the same way as the main committee, but then when they finish their part, they bring their work and recommendations to the full committee for final action in this stage.

## How are committee memberships assigned?

The [Senate](#) and [House](#) each have their own rules. Generally though, each party in each chamber establishes a steering committee to oversee the process and elections are held to see who the party overall wants on a given committee. Intra-party relationships play a big role here. If a member is not well liked or considered not a team player, it can hurt their prospects.

All of this holds true for chairships, but not covered in the CRS reports linked here is the role of contributions to leadership PACs. For example, [Jake Sherman reported on June 26 on X](#) that @GReschenthaler announced he is transferring \$1M to the NRCC. Reschenthaler is the chief deputy whip and has one eye on the Rules Committee chairmanship.

In other words, one way to demonstrate that one is a team player is to transfer some of one's own campaign funds to the party leadership's fund to be used to help ensure wins for the party overall in the next election. In return, that member may be better positioned to become a committee chair.

If this sounds like "pay to play" it's because it is. Is it bad? Hard to say. It certainly seems reasonable that party leadership would prioritize members who're willing to help keep seats

even when those seats aren't their own. On the other hand, does fundraising prowess really demonstrate the necessary skills to lead a committee successfully? While the example above is for the Republicans, this role of contributions is equally strong among Democrats.

## How are bills assigned to committees?

According to the [House website](#)

The bill is assigned its legislative number by the Clerk and referred to the appropriate committee by the Speaker, with the assistance of the Parliamentarian.

In the [Senate](#)

... bills are typically referred to committee in a similar process, though in almost all cases, the bill is referred to only the committee with jurisdiction over the issue that predominates in the bill. In a limited number of cases, a bill might not be referred to committee, but instead be placed directly on the Senate Calendar of Business through a series of procedural steps on the floor.

## What happens in committees?

According to the [House website](#) the big picture is:

- hearing(s)
- markup which is a review of the legislation and possible addition of amendments
- a committee report for the House as a whole or a vote to table (kill) the bill
- if the bill is reported, it can have amendments -- sometimes so many amendments that the bill is rewritten and given a new number
- then it's ready for the floor

Per [Congress dot gov](#), there are no real differences in Senate.

## What is a Conference Committee?

A [Conference Committee](#) is what is required when the House and Senate each pass different versions of the "same" bill. This happens with appropriations a lot. Each chamber will add or subtract provisions they don't like and so each ends up passing something different. But only one bill can be sent to the President for signature and both chambers have to agree to that one bill.

So, a Conference Committee is assigned. It's a joint committee in that there are members from both chamber on it. Leadership of each chamber select the members. Ideally, you'd anticipate members who are both knowledgeable about the bill and good negotiators. However, like everything in Congress, popularity and leadership commitment to getting a final bill that can pass both chambers also play a role.

Once the final bill is sorted out, the committee is dissolved.

## Next Week on Congress!

Congress is back in session next week, so we'll be back to our usual schedule of previews and recaps. They're out again the week of the 15th so expect another mid-week mailbag then. Have a [safe Fourth of July](#) everyone.