

CRS Report for Congress

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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 approximately 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, although over time divergences have emerged. 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.

At the beginning of the second session of the 107th Congress, there were 19 standing committees in the House with 88 subcommittees, and one select committee with four subcommittees. The Senate has 16 standing committees with 68 subcommittees, as well as four select committees with no subcommittees. In addition, there are four joint committees. The total number of approximately 200 committees and subcommittees reflects a decline of nearly 100 panels since the 102nd Congress level. This reduction can be attributed to reforms that abolished panels, restricted the creation of subcommittees, reduced committee budgets, and limited Members' assignments.

Types of Committees

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

Standing committees are permanent panels identified 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 that serve as guidelines for the work of the authorizing and appropriating panels.

Select committees are established generally by a separate resolution of the chamber, sometimes to conduct investigations and studies, and, on other occasions, also to consider measures. Often a select committee is established because the existing standing committee system does not provide for an issue to be addressed comprehensively by a single committee, or because a particular event sparks interest in an investigation. A select committee may be permanent or temporary. Instead of select, the Senate sometimes uses the term *special committee* (as in the Special Committee on Aging), or does not designate a committee's type in its title (as in the Committee on Indian Affairs).

Joint committees are made up of Members of both the House and Senate. Today's joint committees are permanent panels that conduct studies or perform housekeeping tasks rather than consider measures. 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, while House rules impose a maximum of five subcommittees for most committees (Rule X, clause 5(d)). The number of subcommittees per committee currently ranges from none to 13.

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.