Congress at Work: The Structure and Significance of Congressional Committees

Online Advocacy Training
AALL Government Relations Office
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“...[S]o that it is not far from the truth to say that Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in its committee rooms is Congress at work.”

– Woodrow Wilson

*Congressional Government, 1885*
Outline

I. Congressional Committees 101
II. Key Committees for AALL’s Policy Priorities
III. Opportunities for Influence
History of Committees

• Not Constitutionally mandated
• 1789-1816: Select Committee System
  • Temporary, as needed
  • Committee of the Whole
• Since 1816: Standing Committee System
  • Formal system
  • Long term studies and investigations
History of Committees

• Legislative Reorganization Acts of 1946 and 1970
  • Reduced House committees from 48 to 19 and Senate committees from 33 to 15
  • Jurisdictions codified
  • Expanded subcommittees and number of professional staff

• Today: 21 permanent committees in House, 20 in Senate, 4 joint committees
Types of Committees

• **Standing Committees**: permanent bodies with specific responsibilities established by rules of chamber

• **Special and Select Committees**: created for clearly specified purposes; usually temporary; coordinate overlap

• **Joint Committees**: perform housekeeping functions or studies
Committee Membership

- Assignments
- Seniority: Chairmen and Ranking Members
- Provides lawmakers with specialized expertise and gives lawmakers influence over policies critical to their reelection
  - District interests
  - Advancement in party/chamber
  - Personal Interest
  - Visibility
Committee Operations

• Legislative roles
  • Consideration of measures or policy issues that may become public law

• Investigative and Oversight roles
  • Review or study a law or issue with focus on the quality of federal programs

• Division of legislative labor
  • 100 Senators and 435 House members consider approx. 5,000 bills and 50,000 nominations/year
Committee Functions

• Hearings
  • Early stage of collecting, analyzing information
  • Witnesses provide oral testimony, answer questions

• Markups
  • Committee debates, amends, and rewrites proposed legislation

• Reports
  • Explanation of bill, committee’s actions in considering it, and arguments why chamber should approve the committee’s position as reported
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

- Congress' chief investigative and oversight committee with government-wide jurisdiction
  - One of the most influential, powerful committees in House
- Hot topics:
  - Open government and transparency
  - Records Management
  - FOIA
  - Whistleblower protections
House Energy & Commerce Committee

- Legislative oversight relating to telecommunications, consumer protection, food and drug safety, environmental health, energy, etc

- Hot topics:
  - Net neutrality *
  - Relevant subcommittee: Communications and Technology
House and Senate Judiciary Committees

• Federal criminal law, human rights, immigration law, intellectual property rights, antitrust law, and Internet privacy

• Confirmation of federal judicial nominations, Constitutional Amendments, impeachments

• Hot topics:
  • Copyright (House) *
  • FOIA (Senate) *
  • Surveillance, digital communications, and privacy *
Rules Committees

• House Rules determine under what rule bills will come to the floor
  • “An arm of the leadership" or "traffic cop of Congress" – very powerful
  • Bills reported by committees considered by Rules Committee first to determine debate

• Senate Rules does not set terms of debate for bills, since the Senate has tradition of open debate
  • Presidential Nominations
• Annually allocates all discretionary funds to government agencies, departments, and programs
  • “Power of the purse”

• Hot topics:
  • Library of Congress
  • Government Printing Office
  • Institute of Museum and Library Services
  • National Archives and Records Administration
Joint Committee on Printing

- Oversees operations of GPO
- Membership: Chair + 4 members of Senate Committee on Rules, Chair + 4 members of House Committee on House Administration
  - Chairmanship and vice-chairmanship rotate between House and Senate every 2 years
Joint Committee on the Library

• Oversees operations of the Library of Congress
• Membership: Chair + 4 members of Senate Rules, Chair + 3 members of House Administration, Chair of House Approps Subcommittee on Legislative Branch
  • Chairmanship and vice-chairmanship rotate between House and Senate each Congress
Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

- Oversees and makes continuing studies of federal government’s intelligence activities and programs
- Membership: 15 members, temporary, rotated among members of the chamber
- Hot topics:
  - NSA surveillance programs *
  - Section 215, Patriot Act *
  - Classification
Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

• Chief oversight committee in Senate; has jurisdiction over matters related to security concerns, National Archives, the Census, federal civil service, USPS, etc.

• Hot topics:
  • NARA
  • Access to government information
  • PACER
Opportunities for Influence

• Do your members of Congress serve on one of our key committees?
  • AALL Legislative Action Center: http://www.congressweb.com/AALL
  • Use home address
  • Let us know- take our Advocacy Team Survey: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/advocacyteam
Opportunities for Influence

Legislative Action Center

United States House

Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY-10)
Congressman since 1992

Committees
- Judiciary
  - the Constitution and Civil Justice
  - Courts, Intellectual Property and the Internet
- Transportation and Infrastructure
- Highways and Transit
- Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials
Opportunities for Influence

• Markups provide best opportunity for action
  • Testimony, letters, calls
• Staff connections, personal relationships
• Constituents > Lobbyists
• Own your expertise
Questions and Answers

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