



Primer: Understanding Committees of Jurisdiction

General Overview of Committees

What are “Committees of Jurisdiction?”

Committees of jurisdiction are committees in the House or Senate that oversee specific policy areas, review legislation, and conduct oversight of agencies that implement programs and rules. Each committee (or sub-committee) has authority over certain topics, and plays an important role in shaping legislation before it is considered by the full House or Senate. Committees write and pass legislation (out of the committee), that then moves to a vote in the House or Senate in order to get passed.

Sub-committees

Because larger committees have broad agendas and cover many topics, they are often organized further into sub-committees. Each sub-committee is responsible for overseeing a portion of the issues covered under the jurisdiction of that committee, with a more clear, direct focus. For example the Senate Finance Committee has sub-committees on Banking Regulations, Housing Finance, and more. All members of the full committee weigh in, but certain members (i.e., members on the sub-committee) are charged with leading the policy efforts that fall within the subcommittee’s jurisdiction.

Types of Committees

There are 3 major types of committees:

- **Standing**– These committees don’t change year to year, although sometimes their names change. For example, the Education and Workforce Committee is named so when under Republican control, but switches to the Education and Labor Committee when under Democratic control.
- **Select Committees**– These committees are temporary, and reflect topics of interest in a given moment. They often center around specific investigations (e.g. January 6th Committee investigating the attack on the Capitol).
- **Joint Committees**– These committees are shared between the House and Senate and work in a bi-cameral way on the priorities set forth by the leaders of the committee.

As of 2025, the Senate has 16 standing, 4 joint, and 4 select committees. The House has 20 standing, 4 joint, and 2 select committees (the House tends to develop new select committees more regularly, and sunset others). Water/climate policy prioritized by the Water Equity & Climate Resilience Caucus is held across multiple committees and subcommittees in both the House and Senate. Water/climate policy prioritized by the Water Equity & Climate Resilience Caucus is held across multiple committees and subcommittees in both the House and Senate. Please see CBO Engagement with Committees for further detail.

Is there a difference between a Caucus and a Committee?

Yes! A Caucus is a group of members in Congress (House and Senate) that come together to influence an agenda, legislation, or ideologies of a large group, but have no formal legislative authority. Members of Congress typically join a Caucus as a way to come together around issues they care about. They may conduct research together, hold briefings, or work to strategically elevate themselves in this space. Some caucuses are created in a response to a political moment, while others are long-standing. This differs greatly from a House or Senate Committee, which formerly oversees developing and moving legislation related to the jurisdiction of the committee. Caucuses might be partisan (like the Blue Democratic Caucus) or bi/non-partisan, and sometimes have specific issues they focus on (like the Bi-Partisan Climate Caucus).

How Do Committees Work?

Committee / Sub-Committee Organization

Committees include leadership, member, and staff positions. Committee posts and leadership positions are influenced by a number of factors:

- Who leadership within each party decides should sit on each committee and what role they play
- Who has “earned” the position through good relationships
- Who is “senior” in the party (e.g., The Appropriations and the Ways and Means (tax) Committees are highly coveted, so usually don’t include newer / “freshman” members.)
- Which party is in control. The majority party gets more seats, depending on the size of the majority
- A potential members’ given expertise (e.g., lawyers on specific judicial committees)
- A potential members’ political context. If a member is in a tough race coming up, they may be given a more coveted role to support their chances of winning

Specific positions include:

- **Chair**– Person from party in political power. Sometimes has a Vice chair that supports, if has a broad area of jurisdiction. Manage agenda, relationships with members, etc. The Chair works together with the Ranking Member of the committee.
- **Vice Chair**– Sometimes there is a Vice Chair appointed to support the Ranking Member or Chair - usually on larger committees, or committees with big policy agendas.
- **Ranking Member**– Lead Member of Congress on the committee, in the minority party. This is a powerful position, even though their party is in the minority because given the small margins in party control, there are times that the majority needs support from minority MOCs to pass legislation.
- **Committee Members**– The number of members from each party depends on how much % difference there is in the House and Senate. If the % difference between two parties is slim, the minority has even more power.

Committee Staff– These differ from regular Senate and House Office Staff, which support Members of Congress and their offices and help manage the entire agenda of that office. Committee staff work for either the Chair, Ranking Member, or another Committee Member and are usually experts in a related policy area (and sometimes have more policy expertise on specific topics than the member). They use this expertise and their positionality with the committee to help shape the committee's specific legislation.

Committee Rules and Culture

There are some rules that apply across all committees but might be slightly different depending on the committee. For example, all committees must post an announcement of a public hearing before the actual event, but some may require a week while others require 48 hours. There are often different “rules of engagement” for specific committees. For example, some committees are very collaborative when developing and debating policy. In these cases, the development of a bill for mark-up will mostly be done beforehand, which results in a much less contentious markup process. Other committees are more contentious and have to spend more time debating during mark-up, or fail to pass a bill that is supported by both parties.

Term Limits

Committees have term limits, which are determined by the leadership of that committee. These also can be sometimes overridden. There is no consistent set of rules across committees on term limits. Committee/sub-committee leadership positions usually run for 4 or 6 years, and involve competitive races for the Chair or Ranking Member positions.

Do changes in administration impact committees?

When party control changes in the House or Senate, the Committee Chair and Ranking Member change based on party control, too. Sometimes this simply means that the existing Chair and Ranking Member switch roles. Other times, there is a complete change in leadership for the committee. When a new member joins the committee, they might keep the existing committee staff or bring in a new committee staff.

Bills, Legislative Process, & Committees

Do committees write or pass legislation, or both?

Committees both write and pass legislation, but passing legislation, does not ultimately mean it becomes law. The legislative process starts with a member of Congress (sometimes on a committee of jurisdiction, but not always) proposing a bill. Policy gets developed with a group of stakeholders, legislative council, etc. When it gets taken up by committee, it is considered, evaluated, and amended. Sometimes there will be hearings on the proposed policy to offer all committee members an opportunity to learn more. This can influence the base bill, garner additional support, or potentially increase opposition.

When a bill is proposed in committee, committee members vote on it first before being considered by the full House or Senate. During this process, the bill can only be amended by members of the committee of jurisdiction. If passed, the bill is then sent to the larger House or Senate for consideration. This creates an additional opportunity for the bill to be amended. Bills can move through this process in a few ways:

- A bill is drafted and passed out of either the House or Senate and then sent to the other chamber for vote. If a bill passes both the Senate and House, the bill goes to a conference process where any changes that were done in the Senate and House are considered for the final bill.
- Two bills focused on the same policy issue, known as companion bills, are moved through the process described above in the House and the Senate. If they both pass out of their respective chambers, the House and Senate then conference to reconcile the two versions of the bill into one.

Once there is agreement in conference, the bill goes back to the House and Senate for another vote by the entire Congress. It is only after it has passed the House and Senate, the second time, that it is sent to the President to be signed into law.

What does it mean for a bill to be referred to committee?

When a bill is referred to a committee, it means that the bill has been sent to a committee for review and analysis. The committee or subcommittee considering the bill may hold hearings on the bill, review committee prints (which can provide more information on the bill's topic), and produce committee reports.

What is a committee report? What is the significance of committee reports?

A committee report is a formal document that details the findings, discussions, and recommendations of a specific committee on a particular issue, providing an overview of their work and outlining proposed actions based on their research and analysis. Committee reports are often used to explain the rationale behind a proposed bill when it is reported to the full chamber for consideration.

CBO Engagement With Committees

How can advocates effectively engage with committees?

If a member you're working with is on a committee that is working on legislation, it's a good idea to find out how engaged they are on the legislation. You may even want to meet with them to discuss why you want a policy passed or not. You can engage either as legislation is being developed, or after development (while it's being considered). Sometimes legislation is missing important elements or elements that would help it be successful. This may depend on where that policy will be enacted, or through what agency. Other types of engagement include: providing questions or testimony at hearings, highlighting specific things within the committee, etc.). It's easier to provide value to a committee than you think! The initial hurdle is building a relationship. Engagement can help your organization be seen as a "resource."

If you are not already engaged with a member on a specific committee, you can also look up any committee your organization is interested in, see what they're working on, and reach out to the committee staff to set up a meeting and learn more.

How can I find committees, member lists, and scheduled hearings/meetings?

See table below:

House	Senate
Committee on Energy and Commerce (E&C) <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>	Environment & Public Works Committee (EPW) <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>
Environment <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>	Subcommittee on Fisheries, Water and Wildlife <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I) <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>	
Water Resources and Environment <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>	
House Appropriations Committee <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>	Senate Appropriations Committee <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearings</u>	Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development and Related Agencies <u>Members</u> and <u>Hearing</u>

Should CBOs with limited bandwidth build relationships with committee staff or focus on local House/Senate representatives?

Absolutely, it is always important to build relationships with your **delegations**, which are the Members of Congress that represent your congressional district and state. They should know what their constituents (i.e. you) want, they work for you!. They can lead the charge and you can support them with real experience and understanding of the implications of your proposed policy. In addition, working with committee staff on specific policy helps expand your opportunity to advocate for your agenda and with staff that have a specific expertise.

Coming in coalition or partnership with other CBOs (e.g. with the WECR Caucus) is always going to help push things in a committee, as many constituents and an issue affecting many communities leads to a powerful voice. This also helps with limited staff time at CBOs and it helps a committee.