How Committees Work

Perhaps the most important phase of the legislative process is the action by committees. The committees consider every possible aspect of a proposed measure and provide a forum for the public to be heard. A tremendous volume of work, often overlooked by the public, is done by the Members in this phase. There are, at present, 20 standing committees in the House and 16 in the Senate as well as several select committees in both Houses. In addition, there are four standing joint committees of the two Houses—Joint Economic Committee, Joint Committee on the Library, Joint Committee on Printing and Joint Committee on Taxation—that have oversight responsibilities but no legislative jurisdiction.

Each committee's jurisdiction is divided into categories under the rules of the House and the Senate. All measures affecting a particular area of the law are referred to the committee with jurisdiction over the particular subject matter. The Speaker of the House or the Senate Majority Leader may refer an introduced bill to multiple committees for consideration of those provisions of the bill within the jurisdiction of each committee concerned. The Speaker or Majority Leader must designate a primary committee of jurisdiction on bills referred to multiple committees.

A member usually seeks selection to the committee that has jurisdiction over a field in which the Member is most qualified and interested. Many Members are nationally recognized experts in the specialty of their particular committee or subcommittee. For example, the Committee on the Judiciary is traditionally composed almost entirely of lawyers. Membership on the various committees is divided between the two major political parties. The proportion of Republicans and Democrats on a particular committee depends upon who holds the majority in that particular House of Congress. In the current session of Congress, the Democrats hold a majority in the Senate, where they hold a majority of committee seats, and the Republicans hold a majority in the House, where they hold more committee seats. The one exception to this rule is the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, whose membership is always divided equally among the two major political parties.

Members of the House of Representatives may serve only on two committees and four subcommittees, with limited exceptions.

Except as otherwise noted, Senators may serve on no more than three committees, and five subcommittees (with the exception of the Committee on Appropriations). For more specific information, go to http://www.senate.gov/legislative/common/briefing/Standing_Rules_Senate.htm#24.
Members rank in seniority according to the date of their appointment to the full committee. Most often, it is the most senior member of the majority with the most continuous service to the committee that is elected chairman.

Committee reports are written by the committee staff to describe the purpose and scope of a particular bill and the reasons for its recommended approval. Committee reports generally contain a section-by-section analysis explaining precisely what each section is intended to accomplish.