

HOUSE COMMITTEES



Members of the
House Committee on Agriculture, ca. 1915
Image courtesy of Library of Congress

“I know not how better to describe our form of government in a single phrase than by calling it a government by the chairmen of the Standing Committees of Congress.”

— Woodrow Wilson, 1885

The committee system of the U.S. House of Representatives was originally intended as a temporary measure to discuss legislation on behalf of the Committee of the Whole, a device in which all Members are considered part of one large committee. Throughout the 19th century, the committee system expanded and developed along with the size of the federal government, and many select committees, which had previously formed to consider a particular item before disbanding, became standing committees. After this period of growth, the committee system was streamlined and restructured with the Legislative Reorganization Acts of 1946 and 1970, which also increased the number of subcommittees and professional staff.

FAST FACTS

- **Types of Committees**

There are three types of committees: standing, select, and joint.

1. **Standing committees** are permanent committees whose jurisdiction is identified in the House Rules.
2. **Select committees** are created by a resolution to conduct investigations or consider measures, usually on a specific topic, and are not renewed on a permanent basis.
3. **Joint committees**, such as the Joint Committee on Taxation, have both House and Senate members and typically conduct studies rather than consider measures.

- **Number of Standing Committees**

There are currently 20 standing committees and one permanent select committee in the House. For current committee information, please refer to the website of the Clerk of the House.

- **Largest Number of Standing Committees**

During the 57th and 58th Congresses (1901–1905), there were 59 standing committees in the House.

- **Oldest Standing Committee**

The Committee on Ways and Means is the oldest standing committee in the House of Representatives. First created as a select committee in the 1st Congress on July 24, 1789, it became a standing committee in the 4th Congress (1795–1797).

- **Newest Standing Committee**

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Committee on Homeland Security was created as a nine-member select committee on June 19, 2002. With a jurisdiction to provide congressional oversight of the newly created Department of Homeland Security, it became a permanent standing committee on January 4, 2005.

- **Chairs**

Traditionally, though not exclusively, committee chairs have been selected by seniority, so that the longest-serving Members of the committee from the majority and minority parties become the chair and ranking member, respectively, of the committee.

- **Size**

The size of each committee is determined at the beginning of each Congress by House leaders who set the number of committees and subcommittees, their size, and the ratio of majority to minority members on each panel.

- **Committee Assignments**

Members are typically limited to service on two committees and four subcommittees, with exceptions for particular committees. The steering committee for each party makes assignment which in turn must be voted on by the Democratic Caucus or Republican Conference.

- **Investigations**

The first congressional investigation was authorized on March 27, 1792, when the House resolved to create a committee to investigate the “Battle of Wabash,” led by Major General Arthur St. Clair, in which more than 600 American soldiers were killed by Native Americans.

- **Committee Chair Firsts**

- **First Hispanic American** to chair a standing House Committee: Romulado Pacheco of California chaired the Private Land Claims Committee, 47th Congress (1881–1883).

- **First Woman** to chair a standing House Committee: Mae Ella Nolan of California chaired Expenditures in the Post Office Department, 68th Congress (1923–1925).
- **First African American** to chair a standing House Committee: William L. Dawson of Illinois chaired Expenditures in the Executive Departments, 81st Congress (1949–1951).
- **First Asian American** to chair a standing House Committee: Norman Mineta of California chaired the Committee on Public Works and Transportation, 103rd Congress (1993–1995).
- **First Woman to Address a Committee**
In 1871, Victoria Woodhull became the first woman to address a congressional committee. Flanked by suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Isabella Beecher Hooker, Woodhull declared before the Judiciary Committee that the 14th and 15th Amendments implicitly granted women the right to vote.

TEACHING TIP

In 1885, Woodrow Wilson noted that *“Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition, whilst Congress in its committee rooms is Congress at work.”* Ask your students’ opinion about what they think this statement means. Is this statement still true today? Have your student provide examples to support their opinion.