
CRASH COURSE: GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

EPISODE 7: CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES

1. Why are some committees called "standing committees?"
2. In this context, what is a "chair?"
3. What kinds of committees are created to deal with issues that are beyond the scope of the standing committees?
4. Some committees are "advisory," which means they lack the power to ----.
5. List two reason why Congress works through committees.
6. Who is allowed to propose a bill in Congress?
7. What is required for a bill to reach the full house or Senate?
8. What is oversight authority?
9. Under House Speaker Newt Gingrich, the method of selecting chairs of committees was changed. What new method was implemented?
10. Why is more and more legislative work being done by staff instead of by the elected officials themselves?
11. What is a Congressional caucus?
12. List at least two existing caucuses in Congress.
13. What political function do committees serve?

Extra Credit Questions

- If you were organizing Congress, what topics would be important enough to merit having a standing committee? A special committee?
- Decide how many staff people you believe each Representative should have. What about Senators? Assume each staffer is paid \$65,000. Calculate the cost of staff for one Representative, and multiply by 435 to find the cost for the entire staff of the House. Multiply the cost of a Senate staffer by 100 to find the cost for the entire staff of the Senate. Now do some research and compare your projected figures to the real numbers of staffers and the real salaries they earn. Was your imaginary Congressional staff more or less expensive than the real one?

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EPISODE 8: CONGRESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

1. The leader of the House is the Speaker. How is the Speaker chosen . . . and how often?
2. The Speaker has two assistants to help him run the House. What are their titles?
3. Who is the official spokesperson for the political party that is *out of power* in the House at any given time?
4. Which executive branch official is authorized by the Constitution to preside at sessions of the Senate?
5. The President Pro-Tempore of the Senate is always the most “senior” member of the majority party. What does senior mean in this context?
6. What is the primary way that the House Speaker and Senate Majority Leader exercise power in Congress?
7. How do the House and Senate differ when it comes to setting rules for how debates will proceed?
8. Agenda setting, a power held by House and Senate leaders, is often a negative power. What does this mean?
9. What publicity advantage do Congressional leaders enjoy over ordinary members?
10. What financial advantage do Congressional leaders enjoy over ordinary members? It is easier for them to raise money for their elections since they are proven winners with a lot of power.
11. What situation makes it much more likely that a party will be able to pass laws and “get things done?”
12. Where does most of the legislative work in Congress happen?
13. How do political parties make Congress more efficient?
14. What was the complaint that Tea Party Republicans had with Republican House Speaker John Boehner?

Extra Credit Questions / Discussion Prompts

- Agenda setting means that many urgent matters facing the nation may not be getting much, or any, attention in Congress. What current issues do you feel Congress is ignoring?
- If your member of Congress happens to be the Speaker or chairs an important committee, he or she will be in the news a lot. Most members, however, get very little press attention. Would you want to see your member of Congress in the media more? How does the rise of the Internet help members of Congress to level this playing field to some extent?

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EPISODE 9: HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

1. List three places where a Congressmen or Senator might get an idea for a bill.
2. What kinds of bills MUST start in the House, not the Senate?
3. What does it mean for a bill to be "marked up?"
4. What is an "open rule" for a bill in the Senate, and why does an open rule make it much less likely that a bill will pass the Senate?
5. Once a bill has passed the Senate, it goes to the House. What extra step does it have to go through in the House?
6. Before a bill can go to the president, it must pass both the House and Senate. But what must be true in this case?
7. What does a Conference Committee do?
8. Where does a bill go next if the Conference Committee succeeds?
9. What is a veto and who has the veto power?
10. How can a bill become a law WITHOUT the President's signature? How can Congress check the president's veto power?
11. Why is the lawmaking process designed to be so cumbersome?
12. What is the first chance a bill has to die?
13. In the Senate, a bill can die because of a filibuster. What is a filibuster?
14. Why would Congress sometimes prefer to not vote at all on a given bill?
15. Congress was deliberately designed with what in mind?

Extra Credit Questions / Discussion Prompts

- Why does the Constitution specify that "bills for raising revenue" must begin in the House, not the Senate?
- Is the government currently too dysfunctional? How would you solve that without going too far in the other direction and creating a powerfully efficient but tyrannical government?