Name: AP U.S. Government and Politics

**Comparison: U.S. House and U.S. Senate**

**Leadership Structure of the U.S. Congress (adapted from Lowi, et al., *American***

***Government* and Barbour, et al., *Keeping the Republic*)**

The majority and minority in each house elect their own leaders, who are, in turn, the leaders

of Congress.

The Constitution provides for the election of some specific

congressional officers, but Congress itself determines how much

power the leaders of each chamber will have. The main

leadership offices in the House of Representatives are the

Speaker of the House (the only post established by the

Constitution), the majority leaders, the minority leader, and the

whips. The real political choice about who the party leader

should be occurs within the party groupings or caucuses in each

chamber. The Speakers of the House is elected by the majority party and, as the person who presides over debates on the floor of the House, is the most powerful House member. The House

majority leader, second in command, is given wide-ranging

responsibilities to assist the Speaker. The House minority leader is the official head of the minority party in the House.

**Speaker of the House John**

In the House of Representatives, the Speaker of the House and the majority leader work together to organize the chamber and

**Boehner (R-OH)**

set the legislative agenda. The Speaker and the majority leader have great influence in the

process of determining which members are seated in the different committees and

subcommittees. They also have some sway over determining the powerful position of chair of each committee, although the traditional seniority system gives strong preference to members of the majority party who have been sitting in the committee the longest.

The Speaker and the majority leader also help determine the course of legislation in the

chamber. For example, when a bill is initially dropped in the hopper as a legislative proposal, the Speaker of the House determines which committee has jurisdiction over it. Since the mid- 1970s, the Speaker has had multiple-referral power, permitting him or her to assign different

parts of a bill to different committees or the same parts sequentially or simultaneously to

several different committees. The Speaker can also influence the scheduling of legislation, a

factor that can be crucial to a bill's success, even pulling a bill from consideration when defeat would embarrass the chamber's leadership.

The Speaker is also second in the line of succession to the presidency after the Vice President under the Presidential Succession Act of 1947.

The leadership organization in the Senate is similar but not as elaborate. According to the

Constitution, the presiding officer of the Senate is the vice president of the United States, who

can cast a tie-breaking vote when necessary but otherwise does not vote or take part in

debates and does not sit in any committee. When the vice president is not present, which is almost always the case, the president pro tempore of the Senate officially presides, although the role is typically performed by a junior senator. Because of the Senate's much freer rules

for deliberation on the floor, the presiding officer has less power than in the House, where

debate is generally tightly controlled by the Speaker. The locus of real leadership in the Senate is the Senate majority leader and the Senate minority leader. Although the smaller and highly

individualistic Senate would not accept the kind of formal authority afforded the Speaker of the House, like the Speaker, the Senate majority leader can influence the scheduling of bills and can withdraw a bill from consideration.

In both chambers, Democratic and Republican leaders are assisted by party whips. (The term

*whip* comes from an old English hunting expression; the "whipper in" was charged with

keeping dogs together in pursuit of the fox.) Elected by party members, whips find out how

people intend to vote so that on important party bills, the leaders can adjust legislation,

negotiate acceptable changes, or employ favors (or, occasionally, threats) to line up support. Whips work to persuade party members to support the party on key bills, and they are active in making sure favorable members are available to vote when needed.

**The Committee System (adapted from Lowi, et al., *American Government* and**

**Barbour, et al., *Keeping the Republic*)**

Meeting as full bodies, it would be impossible for the House and the Senate to consider and

deliberate on all of the 100,000 bills and 100,000 nominations they receive every two years.

Hence, the work is broken up and handled by smaller groups called committees. The

Constitution says *nothing* about congressional committees; they are completely creatures of

the chambers of Congress they serve. But they are, indeed, the only way that the legislative

process can function in an efficient manner in the House and, to a lesser extent, in the Senate, where chaos would ensue were all matters to be addressed by the general membership.

It is at the committee and, even more, the subcommittee stage that the nitty-gritty details of

legislation are worked out - and where members of Congress - who in committees act as

specialists in an area of legislation - have the most opportunity to influence the outcome of

the process. Committees act as the eyes, ears, and workhorses of Congress in considering, drafting, and redrafting proposed legislation.

Congress has four types of committees: standing, select, joint and conference. The vast

majority of work is done by the standing committees. These are permanent committees,

created by law, that carry over from one session of Congress to the next. Standing committees

are said to have gate-keeping authority. They review most pieces of legislation that are

introduced to Congress. After a bill is sent to a committee, the committee may take no further

action on it, amend the legislation in any way, or even write its own legislation before

bringing the bill before the whole chamber for a vote. Committees, then, are lords of their

jurisdictional domains, setting the table, so to speak, for their parent chamber. So powerful

are the standing committees, in sum, that they scrutinize, hold hearings on, amend, and,

frequently, kill legislation before the full Congress ever gets the chance to discuss it.

The size of the standing committees and the ratio of majority to minority party members on

each are determined at the start of each Congress by the majority leadership in the House and by negotiations between the majority and minority leaders in the Senate.

Standing committee membership is relatively stable as seniority on the committee is a major factor in gaining subcommittee or committee chair; the chairs wield considerable power and are coveted positions.

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When a problem before Congress does not fall into the jurisdiction of a standing committee, a

select committee may be appointed. These committees are usually temporary and do not recommend legislation but are, rather, used to gather information on specific issues. An

example of a select committee was the Select Committee on Homeland Security that conducted investigations following the September 11 terror attacks.

Joint committees are made up of members of both houses of Congress. There are currently

only four joint committees. They are the joint committees on the library, on printing, on

taxation, and the joint economic committee. None of the joint committees have legislative

powers, limiting themselves to conducting researching issues and monitoring the activities of the parts of the executive branch.

Before a bill can become a law, it must be passed by both houses of Congress in exactly the

same form. But because the legislative process in each house often subjects bills to different

pressures, they may be very different by the time they are debated and passed. Conference

committees are temporary committees made up of members of both houses of Congress

commissioned to resolve these differences, after which the bills go back to each house for a final vote.

**U.S. House Standing Committees**  **U.S. Senate Standing Committees**

**(Source: U.S. House Website)**  **(Source: U.S. Senate Website)**

Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Committee on Agriculture Appropriations Committee on Appropriations Armed Services

Committee on Armed Services Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

Committee on the Budget Budget

Committee on Education and Labor Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Committee on Energy and Commerce Energy and Natural Resources

Committee on Financial Services Environment and Public Works

Committee on Foreign Affairs Finance

Committee on Homeland Security Foreign Relations

Committee on House Administration Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Committee on the Judiciary Homeland Security and Governmental

Committee on Natural Resources Affairs

Committee on Oversight and Judiciary

Government Reform Rules and Administration

Committee on Rules Small Business and Entrepreneurship

Committee on Science and Technology Veterans' Affairs

Committee on Small Business

Committee on Standards of Official

Conduct

Committee on Transportation and

Infrastructure

Committee on Veterans' Affairs Committee on Ways and Means

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