Congressional Committees: Crash Course Government and Politics #7

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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=====Intro=====

Hi, I'm Craig and this is Crash Course Government and Politics and today we're going to get down and dirty wallowing in the mud that is Congress. Okay, maybe that's a little unfair, but the workings of Congress are kind of arcane or byzantine or maybe let's just say extremely complex and confusing, like me, or *Game of Thrones* without the nudity. Some of the nudity, maybe.

However, congress is the most important branch, so it would probably behoove most Americans to know how it works. I'm going to try to explain. Be prepared to be behooved.

=====Committees=====

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate are divided up into committees in order to make them more efficient. The committees you hear about most are the standing committees, which are relatively permanent and handle the day-to-day business of Congress. The House has nineteen standing committees and the Senate sixteen. Congressmen and senators serve on multiple committees.

Each committee has a chairperson, or chair, who is the one who usually gets mentioned in the press, which is why you would know the name of the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee. Tell us in the comments if you do know, or tell us if you are on the committee, or just say hi.

Congress creates special or select committees to deal with particular issues that are beyond the jurisdiction of standing committees. Some of them are temporary and some, like the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, are permanent. Some of them have only an advisory function which means they can't write laws. The Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming has only advisory authority which tells you pretty much all you need to know about congress and climate change.

There are joint committees made up of members of both houses. Most of them are standing committees and they don't do a lot although the joint Committee on the Library oversees the Library of Congress, without which we would not be able to use a lot of these pictures. Like that one, and that one, and ooh that one's my favorite.

Other committees are conference committees, which are created to reconcile a bill when the House and Senate write different versions of it, but I'll talk about those later when we try to figure out how a bill becomes a law.

So why does Congress have so many committees? The main reason is that it's more efficient to write legislation in a smaller group rather than a larger one. Congressional committees also allow congressmen to develop expertise on certain topics. So a congressperson from Iowa can get on an agriculture committee because that is an issue he presumably knows something about if he pays attention to his constituents. Or a congressperson from Oklahoma could be on the Regulation of Wind Rolling Down the Plane Committee.

Committees allow members of Congress to follows their own interests, so someone passionate about national defense can try to get on the armed services committee. Probably more important, serving on a committee is something that a congressperson can claim credit for and use to build up his or her brand when it comes time for reelection.

Congress also has committees for historical reasons. Congress is pretty tradish, which is what you say when you don't have time to say traditional. Anyway, it doesn't seem much need to change a system that has worked, for the most part, since 1825.

That doesn't mean that Congress hasn't tried to tweak the system. Let's talk about how committees actually work in the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble=====

Any member of Congress can propose a bill, this is called proposal power, but it has to go to a committee first. Then to get to the rest of the House or Senate it has to be reported out of committee.

The chair determines the agenda by choosing which issues get considered. In the House the Speaker refers bills to particular committees, but the committee chair has some discretion over whether or not to act on the bills. This power to control what do or do not become bills is what political scientists call "Gatekeeping Authority", and it's a remarkably important power that we rarely ever think about, largely because when a bill doesn't make it on to the agenda, there's not much to write or talk about.

The committee chairs also manage the actual process of writing a bill, which is called mark-up, and the vote on the bill in the committee itself. If a bill doesn't receive a majority of votes in the committee, it won't be reported out to the full House or Senate. In this case we say the bill "died in committee" and we have a small funeral on the National Mall. Nah we just put it in the shredder.

Anyway, committee voting is kind of an efficient practice. If a bill can't command a majority in a small committee it doesn't have much chance in the floor of either house. Committees can kill bills by just not voting on them, but it is possible in the House to force them to vote by filing a discharge petition - this almost never happens.

Gatekeeping authority is Congress's most important power, but it also has oversight power, which is an after-the-fact authority to check up on how law is being implemented.

Committees exercise oversight by assigning staff to scrutinize a particular law or policy and by holding hearings. Holding hearings is an excellent way to take a position on a particular issue.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

=====Congressional History=====

So those are the basics of how committees work, but I promised you we'd go beyond the basics, so here we go into the Realm of Congressional History.

Since Congress started using committees they have made a number of changes, but the ones that have bent the Congress into its current shape occurred under the speakership of Newt Gingrich in 1994.

Overall Gingrich increased the power of the Speaker, who was already pretty powerful. The number of subcommittees was reduced, and seniority rules in appointing chairs were changed.

Before Gingrich or "BG" the chair of a committee was usually the longest serving member of the majority party, which for most of the 20th century was the Democrats. AG Congress or Anno Gingrichy

Congress holds votes to choose the chairs. The Speaker has a lot of influence over who gets chosen on these votes, which happen more regularly because the Republicans also impose term limits on the committee chairs.

Being able to offer chairmanships to loyal party members gives the Speaker a lot more influence over the committees themselves.

The Speaker also increased his, or her - this is the first time we can say that, thanks Nancy Pelosi - power to refer bills to committee and act as gatekeeper.

=====Congressional Staff=====

Gingrich also made changes to congressional staffing. But before we discuss the changes, let's spend a minute or two looking at congressional staff in general.

There are two types of congressional staff, the staff assistants that each congressperson or senator has to help her or him with the actual job of being a legislator, and the staff agencies that work for congress as a whole.

The staff of a congressperson is incredibly important. Some staffers' job is to research and write legislation while others do case work, like responding to constituents' requests. Some staffers perform personal functions, like keeping track of a congressperson's calendar, or most importantly making coffee - can we get a staffer in here?

As congresspeople spend more and more time raising money, more and more of the actual legislative work is done by staff. In addition to the individual staffers, Congress as a whole has specialized staff agencies that are supposed to be more independent. You may have heard of these agencies, or at least some of them.

The Congressional Research Service is supposed to perform unbiased factual research for congresspeople and their staff to help them in the process of writing the actual bills. The Government Accountability Office is a branch of Congress that can investigate the finances and administration of any government administrative office. The Congressional Budget Office assesses the likely cost and impact of legislation. When the CBO looks at the cost of a particular bill it's called "scoring the bill".

The congressional reforms after 1994 generally increased the number of individual staff and reduced the staff of the staff agencies. This means that more legislation comes out of the offices of individual congresspeople.

=====Caucuses=====

The last feature of Congress that I'm going to mention, briefly because their actual function and importance is nebulous, is the caucus system. These are caucuses in Congress, so don't confuse them with the caucuses that some states use to choose candidates for office, like the ones in Iowa.

Caucuses are semi-formal groups of congresspeople organized around particular identities or interests. Semi-formal in this case doesn't mean that they wear suits and ties, it means that they don't have official function in the legislative process.

But you know what? Class it up a little - just try to look nice.

The Congressional Black Caucus is made up of the African American members of the legislature. The Republican Study Group is the conservative caucus that meets to discuss conservative issues and develop legislative strategies.

Since 2010 there is also a Tea Party caucus in Congress. There are also caucuses for very specific interests like the Bike Caucus that focuses on cycling.

There should also be a Beard Caucus, shouldn't there? Is there a Beard Caucus Stan? No? What about an eagle punching caucus?

The purpose of these caucuses is for like minded people to gather and discuss ideas. The caucuses can help members of Congress coordinate their efforts and also provide leadership opportunities for individual congresspeople outside of the more formal structures of committees.

=====Conclusion=====

There are a lot of terms and details to remember, but here's the big thing to take away: caucuses, congressional staff, and especially committees, all exist to make the process of lawmaking more efficient.

In particular, committees and staff allow individual legislators to develop expertise; this is the theory anyway. Yes it's a theory.

Committees also serve a political function of allowing congresspeople to build an identity for voters that should help them get elected. In some ways this is just as important in the role in the process of making actual legislation.

When Congress doesn't pass many laws, committee membership, or better yet, being a committee chair is one of the only ways that a congressperson can distinguish him or herself. At least it gives you something more to learn about incumbents when you're making your voting choices.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.