U.S. Government Name:

Mrs. Barnes

Committees and Caucuses

**The Congressional Committee System**

Individual legislators do not have the time or expertise to thoroughly understand all the bills that come before Congress. Instead, they rely on a division of labor, entrusting most of the work of lawmaking to various committees. Congress has five kinds of committees, some permanent and others temporary.

1. Standing committees: these are permanent committees in the House and Senate that handle most legislative business. Each standing committee has its own broad area of responsibility, such as homeland security or foreign affairs. In addition to studying legislation, standing committees have another key duty: they gather information through hearings and investigations. Committee hearings are one way for Congress to monitor the policies of government agencies. Committee members can ask officials, face to face, to explain their agency’s actions.
2. Subcommittees: smaller committees within standing committees. The subcommittees do most of the work of reviewing proposed legislation. The vast majority of bills introduced in Congress each year “die” in committee.
3. Select or special committees: Designed to investigate specific problems. These committees are usually temporary. Although they do not review legislation, special and select committees may make recommendations to Congress based on their investigations.
4. Joint committees: Joint committees deal with issues of interest to both the House and Senate. The Joint Committee on the Library, for example, oversees the operations of the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress is the research arm of Congress and is home to the world’s largest library. Its collections include millions of books, photographs, documents, recordings, maps, and manuscripts.
5. Conference committees: A temporary kind of joint committee. It is formed to iron out differences between two versions of a bill passed by the House and Senate. Both chambers must pass identical versions of a bill for it to become law.

**Staff and Support Agencies**

Members of Congress cannot do their job alone; they must have staff members who help them along the way. These people are employed as congressional staffers, or staff members. Some work for the committee at large. Others belong to a member’s personal staff.

The House and Senate each employ around 1,000 committee staffers to support the work of their various committees. This staff includes clerical workers as well as experts in the subject area of a particular committee. The number of personal staff a Congress member has varies. Representatives average about 16 staffers apiece, while senators average about 40 staff members each. Personal staff members perform a variety of tasks, from answering constituents’ questions to writing speeches and drafting bills.

**Caucuses and Coalitions**

Members of Congress have also formed a number of unofficial groups to pursue particular goals and interests. These are known as “caucuses” or coalitions and there are more than 300 informal caucuses today. Caucuses group members of Congress by factors they have in common like gender, race, or personal morals and values.