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CRS Report for Congress

House Committees: Assignment Process

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Introduction

Committee assignments often determine the character of a Member's career. They are also important to the party leaders who organize the chamber and shape the composition of the committees. House rules identify some procedures for making committee assignments; Republican Conference and Democratic Caucus rules supplement these House rules and provide more specific criteria for committee assignments.

Information on the number of, and limitations on, assignments is provided in CRS Report 98-151, *House Committees: Categories and Rules for Committee Assignments*. In general, pursuant to House rules, Representatives cannot serve on more than two standing committees. In addition, both parties identify exclusive committees and generally limit service on them; other panels are identified as nonexclusive or exempt committees. House and party rules restrict Members' service on the Budget, Intelligence, and Standards of Official Conduct Committees to a limited number of terms.

Committee Sizes and Ratios

Traditionally, the respective party leaders, occasionally with input from committee leaders, negotiate individual committee sizes and ratios prior to the post-general-election early organization meetings, when the assignment process officially begins. Sizes are determined prior to the start of the Congress, although they generally remain fairly constant year after year. When the size of a committee is increased, it is usually done to accommodate individual Member requests for service on a particular panel. In the 110th Congress, the largest House committee has 75 members; the smallest has 10.

Ratios on committees generally reflect party strength in the chamber. However, it is generally agreed that ratios are done in the aggregate, rather than on a committee-by-committee basis, in part to retain a "working majority" on the more sought-after committees, usually the exclusive panels. In contrast to the general practice, one committee, Standards of Official Conduct, has an equal number of majority and minority members, while the Rules Committee has a ratio of 2:1, plus one, in favor of the majority.

Factors in Making Assignments

Both parties consider a variety of factors in making assignments, including seniority, experience, background, ideology, election margin, state delegation support, leadership support, as well as the special concerns of the Member's district. Further, the leadership often considers geographic balance in making assignments, with Members of the other party not usually counted for such purposes. None of these factors, however, is usually seen as having equal weight for each Member in each instance.

In addition, the rules of the party organizations and the House attempt to ensure an equitable number of assignments for each Member and an equitable distribution of assignments to important committees. However, the so-called "property norm" generally allows returning Members to retain their seats on committees prior to allowing new Members to seek their assignments. In addition, if sizes and ratios are dramatically changed, each party might make exceptions to the property norm.

Party Organizations

Both Democrats and Republicans give the assignment function to a "steering committee." For both parties, the steering committee comprises the elected party leadership, numerous Members elected by region from the party membership, and Members appointed by the leadership. Representatives from specific classes — groups of Members elected in a specific year — are also represented.

Each party Member has a representative on his or her party's steering committee, and one role of this representative is to advance the individual Member's choices for assignments. The steering committee for each party votes by secret ballot to arrive at individual recommendations for assignments to standing committees and forwards those recommendations to the full party conference or caucus. (Even recommendations for the House Rules and House Administration Committees' members, which are made by the Speaker and minority leader, are confirmed by the full party conference.) Once ratified by the Republican Conference or Democratic Caucus, the recommendations are forwarded to the House, which votes on simple resolutions officially making the assignments.

Individual Member Rights

Democratic Caucus rules guarantee each Democratic Member assignment to either an exclusive or nonexclusive committee. Further, if a Member's regional representative on the Democratic Steering Committee refuses to nominate the Member to the committee of his or her choice, the Member may ensure consideration by sending a letter, signed by half of his state delegation, to the chair of the Steering Committee. In addition, caucus rules provide for a separate vote by the entire caucus on particular Steering Committee recommendations if a vote is requested by 10 or more Members. Republican Conference rules do not contain similar provisions.