

CRS Report for Congress

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Assignments to Senate Subcommittees

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One of the first orders of business for Senate committees is deciding whether to establish subcommittees, and if so, determining their number, sizes, party ratios, chairs, ranking minority members, and other members. There are no direct limits on the number of subcommittees that may be created.

Sizes and Ratios

Senate and party rules are silent on subcommittee size. A committee often determines its subcommittee sizes through interparty negotiations, especially between the committee's chair and ranking minority member.

Process for Selecting Subcommittee Leaders and Members

Neither Senate nor party rules discuss how subcommittee chairs, ranking members, and other members are selected. However, there are two prevalent approaches. Under one approach, the full committee chair exercises discretion to choose subcommittee leaders and members. Consultation with the ranking minority member and other committee members is common; some committees' rules explicitly require prior consultation, particularly with the ranking minority member or majority-party members of the full committee.

Under the other common practice, Senators choose subcommittee leadership slots and other assignments in order of seniority on the full committee. Typically, there are separate, parallel processes for Republicans and Democrats, allowing each Senator to choose one subcommittee assignment before anyone in the same party chooses a second assignment. Each Senator then selects a second assignment before anyone in the same party selects a third assignment.

Although they do not address the *assignment process*, both Senate and Republican Conference rules limit the number of subcommittee assignments or chairs per Senator. Senate rules do not limit subcommittee ranking memberships, and Democrats do not have written Conference Rules addressing subcommittee assignment and leadership issues.

Limits on Subcommittee Assignments

Senate Rule XXV establishes three categories of committees, popularly called the “A” “B” and “C” committees. Senators generally are limited to two “A” and one “B” committee assignments, although waivers can be granted. In addition, Senators are restricted from serving on more than three subcommittees of each “A” committee (except Appropriations) and two subcommittees of a “B” committee (Senate Rule XXV, paragraph 4(b)(1) and (2)). The full committee limitations sometimes are waived, and assignment to an additional committee usually also allows service on additional subcommittees. No service restrictions exist on subcommittees of “C” committees, although “C” subcommittees have been rare in recent years.

Special provision is made for the chair and ranking member of each full committee to serve *ex officio*, without vote, as a member of any of a committee’s subcommittees (Senate Rule XXV, paragraph 4(b)(3)). Some committees also allow their members to sit with any subcommittee during its sessions, although their role may be restricted. For instance, some committees prohibit Senators from participating in subcommittee votes if they are not regular members of a subcommittee.

Limits on Service as Subcommittee Chair

Senate rules essentially prohibit each Senator from chairing more than one subcommittee per committee, and limit each Senator to three chairs of “A” and “B” committees and subcommittees (Rule XXV, paragraph 4(e)(2) and (3)). A Senator who does not chair a full committee may chair a subcommittee of each of the Senator’s two “A” committees and a subcommittee of the Senator’s “B” committee. However, a Senator who chairs a full “A” or “B” committee may chair only two subcommittees: the chair of a full “A” committee may chair one “A” and one “B” subcommittee, while the chair of a full “B” committee may chair two “A” subcommittees.

Republican Conference rules further restrict the chairs held by Republican Senators (Conference Rule V(C)). The chair of a full “A” committee may not chair any subcommittees, except of Appropriations. The chair of a full “non-A” committee, except Ethics, may chair one subcommittee. The chair of the Rules and Administration Committee may chair the Joint Committee on the Library or the Joint Committee on Printing. Other Senators who are not full-committee chairs may chair two subcommittees, although waivers can be granted. These conference rules also apply to ranking memberships, should the Republicans be the minority party.

(For additional information, see CRS Report 98-183, *Senate Committees: Categories and Rules for Committee Assignments* and CRS Report RL30743, *Committee assignment process in the U.S. Senate: Democratic and Republican Party Procedures*, both by Judy Schneider.)