

## Module 3: Congress

### Topic 1 Content: Congressional Leadership and Committees

#### Introduction




**Demi Tracy:** Congress is a very large organization consisting of 535 representatives. In order for the legislative branch to operate efficiently, both the House of Representatives and the Senate have their own leadership. Congress is also broken down into congressional committees to better handle its numerous responsibilities. Bill O'Law and Pilar de la Casa are joining us, live via satellite, to discuss congressional leadership and committees.

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#### The Speaker of the House

## The Speaker of the House



- The leader of the House of Representatives
- Power based on rules and customs of the House, not the Constitution
- Member of the political party holding the majority of House seats
- Decides what is debated and the procedures of the debate
- Appoints members to serve on committees and assign bills to committees for review

**Pilar de la Casa:** Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution explains that the members of the House of Representatives may choose their own leader. The Speaker of the House is the leader of the House of Representatives. The Constitution does not directly state what the power of the Speaker of the House is, but rules and customs of the House have led to the position being one of significant power and influence.

The Speaker is a member of the political party that holds the majority of the seats in the House. The Speaker decides if a proposed political issue may be debated in the House and the procedures of the debate. The Speaker also appoints members to serve on specific committees and assign bills to committees for review, along with other political duties.

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#### Other House Leaders

## Other House Leaders



- House Majority Leader**
  - Floor leader of the party that holds the majority of the House seats
  - Acts as the assistant to the Speaker of the House
- House Minority Leader**
  - Floor leader of the opposition party

**Pilar de la Casa:** Each party in the House elects a floor leader to oversee its party's plans. The House Majority Leader is the floor leader of the party that holds the majority of the House seats, and acts as the assistant to the Speaker of the House. The House Minority Leader is the floor leader of the opposition party. The House Majority Leader and the House Minority Leader work to keep their parties unified, so that they may have a greater influence in establishing policy.

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**The President of the Senate**


## The President of the Senate

**Vice President**

- Acts as the President of the Senate
- Oversees debates
- Only votes if there is a tie

**President Pro Tempore**

- Selected by members of the Senate
- Officiates in the absence of the Vice President
- Traditionally the longest serving senator of the majority party



**Bill O'Law:** Article I, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution states that the Vice President of the United States acts as the President of the Senate. The President of the Senate may oversee debates, but may not actively participate in them. The Vice President does not have a right to vote in the Senate, unless there is a tie.

The Constitution requires the members of the Senate to choose a president pro tempore. The president pro tempore officiates in the absence of the Vice President or if the Vice President assumes the role of the President. Traditionally, the senator who belongs to the majority party and has served the longest term in the Senate assumes the role of president pro tempore.

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#### Other Senate Leaders

## Other Senate Leaders

**Senate Majority Leader**

- Floor leader chosen by the majority party in the Senate

**Senate Minority Leader**

- Floor leader chosen by the minority party in the Senate



**Bill O'Law:** To help organize their efforts to influence policy, the majority party and the minority party of the Senate elect a floor leader. The Senate Majority Leader is chosen by the majority party in the Senate and the Senate Minority Leader is chosen by the minority party in the Senate.

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#### Congressional Committees

## Congressional Committees

- Gather and analyze information necessary to make informed decisions on issues of policy
- Led by a chair chosen by the majority party
- **Types of committees:** Senate committees, House committees, and Joint committees
- **Joint committees:** consist of members of both the House and the Senate
- **Joint Economic Committee:** joint committee that informs Congress about the state of the economy



**Bill O’Law:** Now that we have talked about Congressional leadership, we can discuss congressional committees. Congressional committees gather and analyze information necessary to make informed decisions on issues of policy. This is how Congress delegates its responsibilities among its members. These committees are led by a chair chosen by the majority party. These chairs have a significant amount of power in the legislative process. They decide if and when bills will be discussed and determine the schedule of the committee.



There are Senate committees, House committees, and Joint committees. Joint committees consist of members of both the House and the Senate. Obviously, they tackle issues that affect both chambers of Congress. The Joint Economic Committee, for example, is responsible for keeping Congress informed about the state of the economy and providing suggestions for its improvement.

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#### Standing Committees

# Standing Committees



- Addresses issues related to taxes and other fundraising efforts

**Pilar de la Casa:** Bill, you forgot to mention that these committees can be classified even further. Standing committees are permanent congressional committees that deal with ongoing issues. These committees focus on areas where the legislative branch is consistently involved.

The Senate Committee on Appropriations is a standing committee and is responsible for writing laws that distribute federal funds to government agencies and organizations.

The House Committee on Ways and Means is also a standing committee, which addresses issues related to taxes and other fundraising efforts.

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#### Subcommittees



**Subcommittees**



**HOMELAND SECURITY  
COMMITTEE**

- Has several subcommittees focusing on cyber security, border security, and emergency response

**Bill O'Law:** Excuse me, Pilar, but you did not mention the fact that standing committees will typically be divided up into subcommittees. Since you brought up the Senate Committee on Appropriations, let's use that as an example. It is responsible for distributing federal funds, and in order to operate more efficiently, it is divided into several subcommittees that focus on things like defense, commerce, transportation, and agriculture.

The House Committee on Homeland Security is another example. It has several subcommittees focusing specifically on different aspects of Homeland Security, including cyber security, border security, and emergency response.



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#### Select and Special Committees

## Select and Special Committees



- Created to serve for a limited period of time
- May address issues and carry out tasks that are not already delegated to standing committees
- Created to advise the House or Senate or to investigate fraud
- Not usually involved in creating new policy

**Pilar de la Casa:** That is correct, Bill. We do not want to overlook select committees either. Select committees, also known as special committees, are created to serve for a limited period of time. These committees may address issues and carry out tasks that are not already delegated to standing committees. Generally, they are created to advise the House or Senate or to investigate fraud. They are not usually involved in creating new policy.

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#### Ending of Episode



**Demi Tracy:** I hope you enjoyed this episode as much as we did. Pilar and Bill had some interesting discussion on how congressional leadership is organized and how legislative responsibilities are delegated into congressional committees.