

The Legislative Committee Process

The committee process goes through several different phases, which include:

- [Standing Committees](#)
- [Select Committees](#)
- [Conference Committees](#)
- [Joint Committees](#)

Committees: A General Introduction

The committee is the heart of the legislative process. Committees can and should do the fact-finding groundwork.

The formation of committees breaks down the membership into numerous small groups. Opportunity is thus afforded the Senate for closer study of a bill than would be possible in debate on the floor. In this preliminary screening, the committee will hear from the legislator who introduced the bill. It will hear, too, from other legislators who either favor or oppose the bill.

The committee may go outside the Legislature to learn the opinion of interested persons who may be well informed on the subject of the bill. The committee can subpoena for witnesses and for records. It can also use the research facilities of the Legislature to analyze the situation here and in other states. Citizens who wish to be heard are also allowed to speak at committee meetings.

Technically, both the Senate and the House, sitting as a committee, could do all these things. But committees can and do perform the work more efficiently and thoroughly. The volume of business in today's Florida Legislature is considerable. It would be difficult to complete if the entire body attempted to study every bill upon its introduction.

Basically, there are *standing*, *select*, and *conference committees*. A joint select committee may be appointed at any time by the Senate President and the House Speaker. It functions like a select committee, except that it includes members of the House appointed by the House Speaker.

Standing Committees

Standing committees are established by the Senate for the management of its business. They are established by authority of rules adopted by the Senate. The appointment of committee members, and the designation of the committee chairs and vice-chairs, is made by the Senate President. Proposed legislation is referred to a standing committee. The committee then has the responsibility of passing judgment on that legislation. Each committee may originate legislation within its field of expertise.

The Senate President refers bills to one or more committees for review. Committees may vote to take the following actions on a bill: favorable, favorable with amendments, favorable with committee substitute, or unfavorable. If amendments are adopted in committee, they still must be heard and adopted by the full Senate. The Senate Policy and Calendar Committees determine the order in which bills are scheduled for consideration on the Senate floor.

It also should be kept in mind that nearly every bill must travel the same long road in each house. A bill passed by the Senate may be referred to one or more committees when it reaches the House of Representatives. And the same is true in the Senate of a House-passed measure.

Select Committees

Select committees are those that have been appointed, or selected to perform a specific task. The life of a select committee may last

for a few minutes for example, the time required for one house to notify another of its readiness to transact business on the opening day of the legislative session, or a select committee might last for years.

The powers of each select committee are set forth in the action creating it. Some are given the authority to subpoena witnesses and open records. Some are empowered to employ counsel and clerical assistance.

Conference Committees

For a bill to become an act it must be passed by both houses in precisely the same words and figures. The second house frequently amends and returns the bill to the house of origin.

In the case of bills with substantial differences, the shortcut of a conference committee likely will be taken almost immediately.

Conference committees are among the oldest of lawmaking procedures, dating back to early days of the British Parliament. In America, colonial legislatures used conference committees. In Congress, a conference committee was appointed on its second day, in 1789.

A conference committee in reality is composed of separate committees from the Senate and the House of Representatives. As separate committees, they vote separately, not only on the final product but on any subsidiary questions put to a vote. A majority of each committee prevails.

Conference committees are intended to reconcile differences. This suggests a give-and-take process because if a majority of the conferees from either house refuses to budge, the conference would be stalemated and the bill could fail. However, this rarely happens.

The Senate and House have the conference committee report presented on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. No amendments can be

offered. Occasionally, a report will be rejected and the bill sent back to conference. Usually, however, conference reports are submitted in the waning hours of a session when the shortness of time might mean the bill would be lost or the Legislature called into an extended or special session. Thus, the committee has the pressure of time on its side.

The Senate President and House Speaker agree upon the number of conferees. (The General Appropriations Bill, by its magnitude, requires a larger conference committee.) The conferees are known as managers. They generally are appointed from the committee that handled the bill but sometimes the President or Speaker will go outside the committee to select one or more conferees. Usually this occurs when the House/Senate has so amended the bill during floor consideration that the bill may no longer resemble the bill reported from the committee. Then, those who shaped the bill during floor consideration may more easily speak for the House/Senate in the conference committee.

Joint Committees

Joint committees are composed of both House and Senate members.