Overview of Congressional Committees

1. Congressional committees consider issues that correlate closely to the departments

represented in the president’s cabinet.

2. The House has 19 standing committees with an average of 31 members.

3. The Committee on Rules in the House gives each bill a “rule,” which contains the

date the bill will come up for debate on the floor and the time that will be allotted for

discussion, and often specifies what kinds of amendments can be offered.

􀂃 Bills considered under a “closed rule” cannot be amended.

4. Standing committees have considerable power. They can kill bills, amend them

radically, or hurry them through the process.

5. Committees report out to the full House or Senate only a small fraction of the bills

assigned to them.

􀂃 Bills can be forced out of a House committee by a **discharge petition** signed

by a majority (218) of the House membership.

6. In both the House and Senate, committee membership generally reflects the party

distribution within that chamber. For example, in the 112th Congress, since

Republicans occupied about 56% of the 435 total seats, they held about a 56% share

of the seats on many committees.

7. Committee chairpersons are extremely powerful.

􀂃 They select all subcommittee chairs and call all meetings.

􀂃 Committee chairs can kill a bill by refusing to schedule a hearing on it.

􀂃 They also have a large committee staff at their disposal.

8. In the House, committee chairs are no longer selected by seniority, or time of

continuous service on the committee. Instead, they are chosen by party leaders, who

expect chairmen to demonstrate party loyalty. Committee chairs in the House are also

limited to a term of six years, after which they are required to step down.

9. In the Senate, seniority, or time of continuous service on a committee, is still used to

determine who holds committee chairs.

10. In contrast to the House, whose members hold few committee assignments, senators

each serve on an average of three to four committees and seven subcommittees.

11. Whereas the committee system allows House members to become policy or issue

specialists, Senate members often are generalists.

12. The Senate is more open to individual input than the House, giving less deference to

the work done in committees.

13. In the Senate, legislation is more likely to be rewritten on the floor, where all senators

can add amendments at any time.

14. Representatives often seek committee assignments that have access to what is known

as **pork**, legislation that allows representatives to bring money and jobs to their

districts in the form of public works programs, military bases, or other programs. The

inclusion of this type of add-on legislation to bills is known as “pork barrel politics.”

15. Many of these pork barrel programs are called **earmarks** because they are monies

that an appropriations bill designates—“earmarks”— for specific projects within a

member’s district or state.