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February 2, 2009

Congressional Research Service

Report RL32015

Senate Policy Committees

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April 25, 2007

Abstract. This report covers the history of the two Senate policy committees and explains their structure, operation, and functions.

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Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RL32015

CRS Report for Congress

Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

Summary

This report covers the history of the two Senate policy committees and explains their structure, operation, and functions.

Created in 1947, the Senate Republican and Democratic Policy Committees are party leadership structures. Each is an analytical arm of its respective party leadership. Their fundamental missions are to achieve policy integration and to promote party unity through the dissemination of information about policy and other Senate matters.

The two policy committees are different in structure and operation, a contrast that appears to be rooted in different leadership styles within the two party organizations. Republican leadership has traditionally been shared among Senators other than the party floor leader; customarily, the Democratic leadership positions of party floor leader, chair of the Democratic Policy Committee (DPC), and chair of the Democratic Conference have been posts held by the same person. Additionally, where both policy committees once functioned largely as service agencies, peripheral to party leadership, today, the two party entities have assumed roles more important to the overall leadership structure in the Senate. The style and activities of the Republican Policy Committee (RPC) and DPC have, over the years, been shaped largely by the party leaders, particularly when the party is in the opposition.

This report will be updated if there is a change in the leadership of either party's policy committee.

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History

The Senate created Republican and Democratic Policy Committees when it inserted a provision within a supplemental appropriations bill, which Congress passed in 1947. This act provided for the maintenance of a staff for majority and minority policy committees in that chamber. As such, the policy committees have a statutory basis, with staff financed by the legislative branch, different from other party organizations, such as the campaign committees. The proposal for creating the policy committees came about during the reform hearings conducted by the LaFollete-Monroney Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress (1946). In its final report (1946), the Joint Committee recommended that the House and Senate establish policy committees for each party, consisting of seven members, separate from either of the party's respective Conferences, and with staffs paid through legislative branch funds.¹ These entities were modeled after the 19th century party Steering Committees, which leaders employed to achieve an orderly method of scheduling floor actions.²

The policy committees initially operated "unobtrusively" in the Senate. Early meetings were rarely publicized within the chamber, "often conducted in secret," with only policy committee members and the staff directors present. The Republican Policy Committee (RPC) did provide all Republican Senators with a resume of meeting discussions and the committee chair would customarily hold press conferences after meetings. By contrast, communication on what was discussed in the Democratic Policy Committee (DPC) was done informally, through "word of mouth" between individual Democratic Senators.³ Both policy committees of the Senate relied on such early meetings to discuss and generate ideas about policy matters. Formal votes were infrequently taken, and minutes were short and private.⁴

Structure and Operation

The Republican and Democratic Policy Committees are not alike in either structure or operation. The contrast appears to be rooted in the hierarchy of leadership within the two party organizations, which continues to influence the composition of the policy committees. Republican leadership has traditionally been shared among Senators other than the party leader.⁵ Different from their Democratic counterpart, for example, the chair of the RPC campaigns for the position, and is elected by the Republican Conference. Additionally, since July 1995, the Republican Conference limits committee chairs, including the policy committee chair, to three two-year terms.

¹ U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, *The Organization of Congress: Suggestions for Strengthening Congress*, joint committee print, 79th Cong., 2nd sess., June 1946 (Washington: GPO, 1946), p. 41.

² U.S. Congress, Senate, *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*, prepared by Donald A. Ritchie (Washington: GPO, 1997); and Congressional Quarterly, *Guide to Congress*, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Washington: CQ Press, 2000), p. 466.

³ Hugh A. Bone, "An Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 50, no. 2 (June 1956), p. 339.

⁴ Malcolm E. Jewell, *Senatorial Politics & Foreign Policy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), p. 85.

⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, *The Senate 1789-1989: Addresses on the History of the United States*, by Robert C. Byrd, 2 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1988), p. 188.

Republican Policy Committee

Senators converted the Republican Steering Committee (which then went out of existence) to the Republican Policy Committee, with very few changes in 1947. Senator Robert A. Taft (R-OH), chair of the Steering Committee, became chair of the new policy committee, a position he retained before becoming majority floor leader in 1953. Senator Taft's decision not to hold both positions simultaneously prompted the Republican Conference to elect a new policy chair, Senator William Knowland (R-CA) who, succeeding Taft as floor leader, followed precedent and relinquished his chairmanship of the policy committee.⁶ **Table 1** lists the chairs of the RPC.

The RPC has undergone considerable change both in size and complexion since its inception; changing functions at various times have led to expansion as well as contraction of membership.⁷ There were nine Republican Senators on the policy committee when it first met in the 80th Congress (1947-1948), with membership consisting of appointments by virtue of office or official position within the party. These included the chair and secretary of the Republican Conference, the Republican floor leader, whip, policy committee chair, and four additional Senators nominated by the chair of the Republican Conference and ratified by the Conference. This membership structure remained consistent for the next six years. At the start of 83rd Congress (1953-1954), the membership of the committee was expanded to include two-thirds of the standing committee chairmen. In the following Congress (84th, 1955-1956), the policy committee was expanded even more to obtain better sectional representation on the party panel, a balance between large and small states, and all Republicans facing reelection who were made members to give them added prestige.⁸ By 1957, the policy committee was reduced to 14 members: eight ex-officio and six elected by the Republican Conference.⁹

Today, the RPC is composed of the Republican Senate floor leader, whip, President Pro Tempore of the Senate (if a Republican), chair of the policy committee (who is elected in the Republican Conference), and chairs of the Senate's standing committees (if in the majority). In addition, the RPC has its own staff structure separate from the Republican Conference, which includes a staff director, secretary, and professional staff.

Democratic Policy Committee

Customarily, the Democratic leadership positions of party floor leader, chair of the Democratic Policy Committee, and chair of the Democratic Conference have been posts held by the same person. Until Senator George Mitchell (D-ME) became Majority Leader (1989-1995), Democrats permitted their party floor leader to also chair the Democratic Conference and the policy committee. Mitchell, however, appointed Senator Tom Daschle (D-SD) to serve as co-chair of the policy panel. When Daschle became floor leader in 1995, he chose to maintain the co-chair arrangement. In what appears to be a voluntary diffusion of leadership, in 1999, the co-chair was abandoned and a single chair of the policy committee was designated by the Democratic leader. **Table 2** lists the chairs and co-chairs of the DPC.

⁶ Bone, "An Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," p. 342.

⁷ Jewell, *Senatorial Politics & Foreign Policy*, p. 91.

⁸ Bone, "An Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," p. 342.

⁹ *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*, p. 60.

When the DPC was established, the Democratic Conference adopted a resolution authorizing the chair of the conference to appoint the membership of the party's policy committee, and the Conference chair to appoint the chair of the policy committee.¹⁰ The conference also declared that the committee would consist of seven members with the whip and the secretary of the conference attending meetings in an advisory capacity.¹¹ The first committee chair, Senator Alben W. Barkley (D-KY), selected six relatively junior members on the basis of geography, purposefully omitting other leadership positions, such as the President Pro Tempore and committee chairs. These junior Senators were also chosen because they would be "easier for him to work with."¹²

Senator Barkley's method of selection set a precedent. At the beginning of each succeeding Congress, the Democratic leader named members to the policy committee, in addition to himself as chairman. Membership of the policy committee remained virtually the same, with the Democratic leader filling vacancies occasioned by the death, retirement, or defeat of committee members.¹³ Members therefore generally served on the committee throughout their service in the Senate.

In 1959, at Senator Lyndon B. Johnson's (D-TX) suggestion, the DPC started the practice of having the members of the Legislative Review or Calendar Committee meet with the policy committee and take part in its deliberations. The Legislative Review Committee was an arm of the DPC composed of three freshmen Democratic Senators who handled calls of the Senate Calendar for the Democratic majority.¹⁴ Johnson sought to retain the chair of the DPC upon his election to the vice presidency in 1960, an attempt thwarted when Democratic Senators unanimously decided to give the conference itself the right to confirm or challenge nominations by the new Democratic Leader, Mike Mansfield (D-MT), to the policy committee.¹⁵

Currently, the DPC consists of the chair, three regional chairs, and 16 additional members. It appears that the party leader continues to have the discretion of appointing such members.

Because the floor leadership and policy committee chairmanship were held by the same person for so long, the staff of the Democratic leader served also as the staff for the DPC. As a result, little staff work was assigned to individual Democratic Senators, but rather was done for the chair, preparing legislative status reports, compiling quorum records, and noting the presence and absence from roll calls and votes.¹⁶ Under Senator Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) the DPC staff, who reported directly to him, negotiated for the Democratic leader with committee chairs and other Senators on substantive and procedural matters. Staff produced some publications, but oriented

¹⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, edited by Donald A. Ritchie (Washington: GPO, 1999), p. 389.

¹¹ *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, see *Conference* notes from the 82nd Congress (1951-1952), p. 474.

¹² Ralph K. Huitt, "Democratic Party Leadership in the Senate," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 55, no. 2 (June 1961), p. 342; and *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, p. 341. See also Legislative Reference Service, *The Senate Democratic Steering Committee and the Senate*, by George Galloway.

¹³ *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, p. 541.

¹⁴ *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, p. 542.

¹⁵ Tom Wicker, "Senate Democrats End Johnson Policy On Committee Posts," *New York Times*, January 5, 1961. See also Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), chap. 43.

¹⁶ Bone, "Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," p. 348.

most of their efforts toward “personalized service to the leader rather than provision of service to all Democratic members.”¹⁷

Today, the DPC staff remains, in effect, the staff of the Democratic Conference, but they are generally more specialized compared to the past, with most policy analysts holding advanced degrees in policy, law, and business, and are chosen largely on the basis of their expertise. Several staffers specifically track legislation by broad jurisdictional areas—such as trade, governmental affairs, welfare and education, economy and small business, and foreign relations—and disseminate information about matters to all Democratic member offices.¹⁸

Functions

The style and activities of the RPC and DPC have, over the years, been shaped largely by the “preferences and expectations of party leaders.”¹⁹ In his 1957 study of the Senate, *Citadel*, Washington journalist William S. White illustrated how differently the two party policy committees functioned:

The Republican Senate Policy Committee will meet once a week, but it will do so only upon carefully printed notices circulated to the committee’s members officially to inform them that there *is* to be a meeting. The Democratic Policy Committee will meet—perhaps—once a week, and when it does the thing seems simply to happen and members will stroll in, usually late, with the air of a man dropping into another’s office to have a drink and, having nothing better to do at the moment, to pass the time of day.²⁰

In their formative years, the two policy committees functioned as service agencies that prepared material on issues and legislation for party members. Both party policy committees were peripheral to party leadership. How active they were depended on the needs of party leadership as well as on whether their party was in the minority or in the majority.²¹

The two policy committees generally have become more active in developing and promoting party unity along with assisting the floor leaders and committee chairmen (or ranking minority member) in designing, developing and executing policy ideas within the Senate. These roles have become more important to the overall leadership structure in the Senate.²²

¹⁷ Donald C. Baumer, “Senate Democratic Leadership in the 101st Congress,” in Allen D. Hertzke and Ronald M. Peters, Jr., eds., *The Atomistic Congress: An Interpretation of Congressional Change* (Armonk: ME Sharpe, Inc., 1992), pp. 327-328.

¹⁸ Sean Q. Kelly, “Democratic Leadership in the Modern Senate: The Emerging Roles of the Democratic Policy Committee,” *Congress & the Presidency*, vol. 22, no. 2 (autumn 1995), pp. 120, 125.

¹⁹ Samuel C. Patterson, “Party Committees,” in Donald C. Bacon, Roger H. Davidson, and Morton Keller, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the United States Congress* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 1525.

²⁰ William S. White, *Citadel: The Story of the U.S. Senate* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1957), p. 210.

²¹ Ritchie, *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*, p. 21.

²² Kelly, “Democratic Leadership in the Modern Senate: The Emerging Roles of the Democratic Policy Committee,” p. 134.

Republican Policy Committee

When the Republican party is in the opposition, its policy committee has greater independence and more opportunity to set the Senate Republican legislative agenda, develop party policy in opposition to the majority, provide summaries of Republican positions on specific issues, research procedural and substantive issues and strategies, and draft policy alternatives. In the majority, or when a Republican is President, the RPC tends to function as a party “think tank” as well as in a liaison capacity to bridge differences with the Administration. In this capacity, the RPC maintains a research service that provides analytic reports for Republican Senators.

The principal function of the RPC in recent years has been to provide an educational forum for Republican Senators. It also participates in the orientation programs for new Republican Senators and their aides. Weekly luncheon meetings are held, usually every Tuesday when the Senate is in session. Here all Republican Senators are invited to review the Senate’s schedule, to discuss policy options, and survey partisan strategies. Committee staff directors and legislative directors for individual Senators meet once a week in the policy committee office with RPC staff to review pending legislative issues and discuss strategy.

Policy committee staff perform a multitude of functions. They analyze the legislative record of Senators, review legislative histories, draft bills, and produce a host of publications. Important examples—that are distributed—include

- *Policy papers* provide in-depth analysis of current policy issues and layout legislative options.
- *Record Vote Analysis* indicates how members of each party voted on different legislative issues, provides a description of each vote and highlights of the debate, and summarizes pertinent bills in their final amended form.
- *RPC Monday Floorcast* is a one-page summary of anticipated floor business during the coming week, intended to give members a sense of the flow of Senate action in order to plan their schedules.
- *Legislative Notice* summarizes the major provisions of legislation under consideration, and provides information about possible amendments that might be offered. Often contains pros and cons relating to pending measures, and is meant to educate members and staffers about policy issues.

The RPC is especially prominent in the use of new technology to communicate the party’s message and agenda. Its in-house, closed-circuit television station (RPC-TV) broadcasts to all Senate offices scheduling information and other messages from the leadership whenever the Senate is in session. The RPC also provides a telephone hotline available to Republican Senators calling on and off the Hill. It also maintains a public website <http://www.senate.gov/~rpc>, which provides a current floor schedule and a summary of pending legislation.

Democratic Policy Committee

William White's 1957 account of the DPC demonstrated a nascent aspect of the committee: "it lacked the formality and institutionalization" that characterized the Republican Policy Committee.²³

Like its Republican counterpart, the functions of the DPC have changed over time depending on whether the party is in the majority, and who is chairing the committee. The first Democratic chairman, Senator Barkley, very rarely convened the committee.²⁴ His successors, such as Senators Scott Lucas (D-IL), Ernest McFarland (D-AZ), and Lyndon Johnson (D-TX) used the policy committee somewhat more frequently, but not nearly as consistently as their Republican counterparts. Johnson was the first Democratic leader to use the DPC for getting Democratic Senators to support the party position and to develop alternatives intended to embarrass the opposition.²⁵ Conversely, Senator Byrd chose not to convene the policy committee.²⁶ Following a 12-year hiatus, Co-chairs George Mitchell and Tom Daschle established a central role for the DPC in promoting the Democratic message inside the Senate and in public.²⁷

Today, the DPC works with all Senate Democrats. It plays an important role in facilitating consensus within the Democratic party, distributing information to Democratic Senate offices, and building public support for the party's legislative agenda. DPC briefings, lunches, and strategy meetings for all Democratic Senators and some staff, and have been used for an assortment of activities. These include, but are not necessarily limited to providing guidance on drafting speeches, press releases, newsletters to constituents, and radio and television advertisements relevant to specific legislation, preparing reports for all Senate Democrats on the party record and performance, and sponsoring annual policy conferences intended to educate members on specific policy issues. These forums are used by Senate Democrats to reach a common understanding regarding the party's legislative initiatives.²⁸

When the Senate is in session the DPC distributes a variety of materials and publications for Senate Democrats.²⁹ Most are for internal distribution, although some are available to both the public and all Senate offices electronically at the committee's website <http://democrats.senate.gov/>. Among the more commonly used examples are as follows:

- *Legislative Bulletins* summarize major provisions of legislation under consideration, supply pertinent information about amendments that might be offered, and frequently present pro and con arguments relating to the pending legislation. These bulletins are designed to educate members and staffers about a policy issue.

²³ Jewell, *Senatorial Politics & Foreign Policy*, p. 97.

²⁴ Bone, "Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," p. 342.

²⁵ Bone, "Introduction to the Senate Policy Committees," p. 352. See also Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), pp. 507-514.

²⁶ Baumer, "Senate Democratic Leadership in the 101st Congress," p. 299.

²⁷ Kelly, "Democratic Leadership in the Modern Senate: The Emerging Roles of the Democratic Policy Committee," p. 120.

²⁸ Kelly, "Democratic Leadership in the Modern Senate..." pp. 113, 122- 124.

²⁹ Based on Sean Kelly's participant-observation in the DPC, together with extensive interviews with Senate leaders and staffers.

- *DPC Daily Report* summarizes the previous day's action as well as anticipate future action, including pending legislation, timing of votes to be held, along with the nature and content of any unanimous consent agreements. These reports help Democratic Senators plan their schedules.
- *Issue Alerts* briefly describe policy changes that Democratic Senators may be asked about by the media.

Within the DPC are sub-units that engage in specialized services. These include

- *Vote Information Office* provides a broad range services on vote-related matters, such as daily voting record sheets for each floor vote, summaries of individual Senator's voting activity, and a series of annual documents reporting the previous year's voting activities.
- *DPC Graphics/Publications Office* supports individual Democratic Members with a range of printed material, such as the design and production of graphs and charts for use on the floor and at press conferences.

Policy Committee Chairs

Tables 1 and 2 below list all those Senators who have chaired (and co-chaired) their respective party Senate Policy Committee.

Table 1. Republican Policy Committee Chairs

Chair	Year
Robert A. Taft (OH)	1947-1952
William F. Knowland (CA)	1953
Homer Ferguson (MI)	1954
H. Styles Bridges (NH)	1955-1961
Bourke B. Hickenlooper (IA)	1961-1968
Gordon Allott (CO)	1969-1973
John Tower (TX)	1973-1985
William Armstrong (CO)	1985-1991
Don Nickles (OK)	1991-1996
Larry Craig (ID)	1996-2003
Jon Kyl (AZ)	2003-2006
Kay Bailey Hutchison (TX)	2006-present

Sources: U.S. Congress, Senate, *A History of the United States Senate Republican Policy Committee, 1947-1997*, prepared by Donald A. Ritchie (Washington: GPO, 1997; U.S. Senate Historical Office http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Policy_Committee_Chair.htm; U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee <http://www.senate.gov/~rpc/>).

Table 2. Democratic Policy Committee Chairs

Chair	Year
Alben W. Barkley (KY)	1947-1949
Scott W. Lucas (IL)	1949-1951
Ernest W. McFarland (AZ)	1951-1953
Lyndon B. Johnson (TX)	1953-1961
Michael J. Mansfield (MT)	1961-1977
Robert C. Byrd (WV)	1977-1989
George J. Mitchell (ME)	1989-1995
co-chair: Thomas Daschle (SD)	1989-1995
Thomas Daschle (SD)	1995-1999
co-chair: Harry Reid (NV)	1995-1999
Byron Dorgan (ND)	1999-present

Sources: U.S. Congress, Senate, *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, edited by Donald A. Ritchie (Washington: GPO, 1999); U.S. Senate Historical Office http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Policy_Committee_Chair.htm#3; U.S. Senate Democratic Policy Committee <http://democrats.senate.gov/leadership/>.

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