



Congressional Freshmen: Getting on Committees

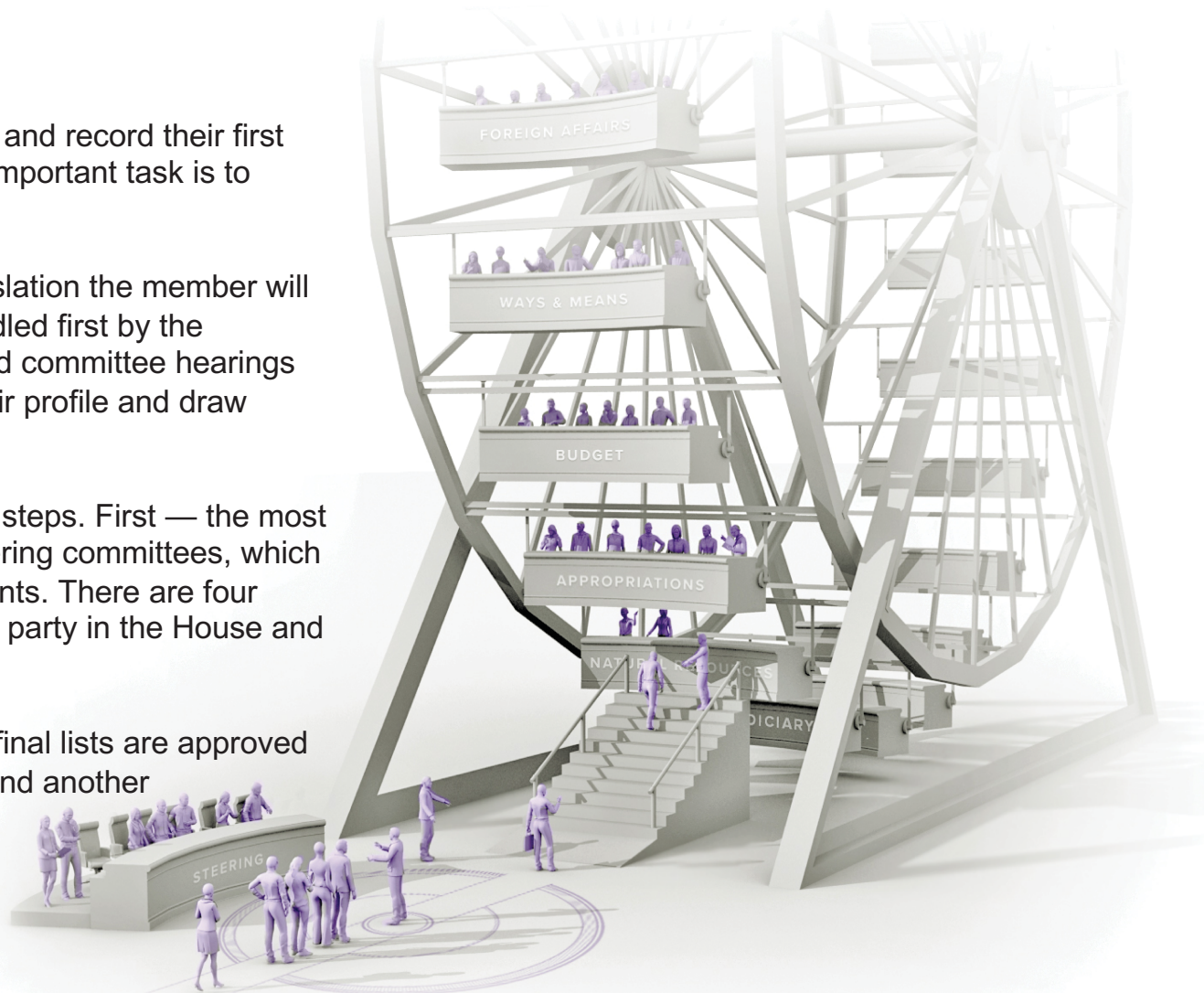
December 21, 2020

Before new members officially take office and record their first votes or introduce legislation, their most important task is to secure committee assignments.

Committees determine what kinds of legislation the member will work on — typically, any major bill is handled first by the committee with relevant jurisdiction — and committee hearings are a key venue for members to raise their profile and draw attention to the issues they care about.

The assignment process has three major steps. First — the most important — is the formation of party steering committees, which generate lists of recommended assignments. There are four steering committees in total, one for each party in the House and Senate.

Once the steering committees finish, the final lists are approved in two votes — one by the party caucus and another on the floor by the entire chamber. These votes are largely a formality, however, since the steering committee's recommendations are essentially always approved.



Sources: Congressional Management Foundation, "Setting course: A congressional management guide"



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Steering process for deciding committee assignments

While each steering committee has a different structure, all four are heavily influenced by the top congressional leaders of each party because many of the steering members are hand-picked by them. Furthermore, the other party and committee leaders who also sit on the steering committees are usually closely allied with their floor leader.

Floor leaders often use their influence over the steering committee strategically. Members who have been loyal to the party leadership are sometimes rewarded with prime committee assignments, while disloyal members might be left in less important committees.

For example, as part of her bid to remain the Democratic floor leader, Nancy Pelosi promised positions on key committees to members of the House Progressive Caucus in exchange for their support in the House leadership vote.

Electoral considerations also play an important role. Members from rural farm districts are often assigned to the Agriculture Committee, which controls key farm subsidies. Assignments that help members raise campaign funds, such as the Financial Services Committee, are typically given to members in swing districts who expect difficult re-election campaigns.

KEY FACTORS FOR STEERING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Number of vacancies and members competing for spots
- ▶ Chamber and party rules for appointments
- ▶ Member seniority
- ▶ Member background, ideology and electoral margin
- ▶ Support for member among party leadership
- ▶ Geographic balance for the committee as a whole

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THE SELECTION PROCESS



1 Election Day

The election results determine who controls the majority in each chamber, how many new vacancies there will be on each committee and how many new freshmen members will be seeking committee assignments.



2 Steering committees formed

Four steering committees are created, one for each party in each chamber. Each has its own unique structure that is determined by party rules, and the parties frequently make small changes.

Some steering members are directly chosen by floor leadership. Some are automatically elevated because of their position as a party or committee leader, such as the deputy whips.

Other steering members are elected by rank-and-file members to serve as regional representatives.



3 Deliberation

For several weeks, the steering committee members debate how they will assign spots on the legislative committees.

During this time, colleagues will lobby them for desirable assignments.

Steering committee members eventually reach consensus on the assignment list and vote to finalize them.



4 Final votes

Once the steering committee has made its recommendations, the party caucus as a whole will vote to approve. Then, the entire chamber will vote to approve both parties' lists.

These votes are largely a formality, since the steering committee recommendations are always accepted.



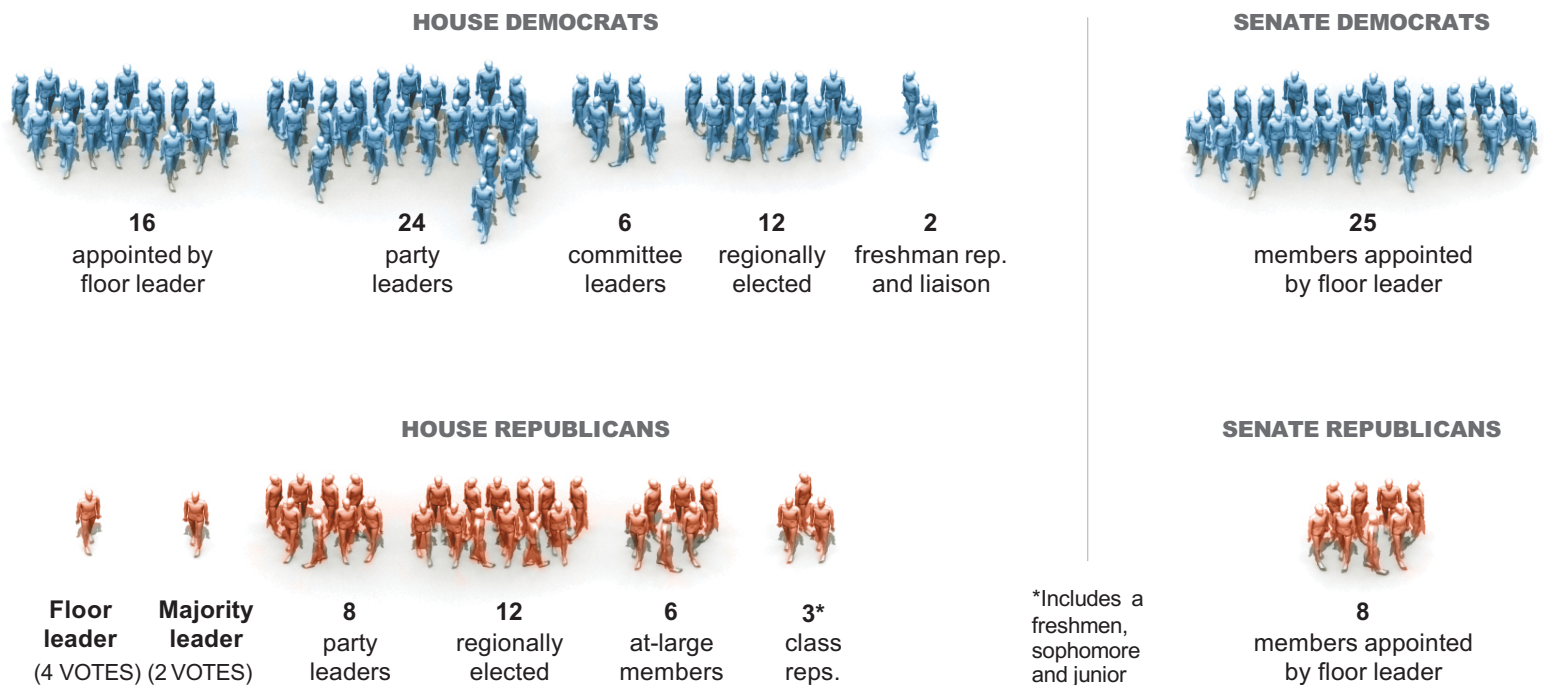
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Composition of party steering committees



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Rules determine on which committee a member will land

Chamber and party rules determine which committees members can serve on, although waivers are frequently granted to members seeking to bend the rules for a particular assignment.

The most powerful committees — called “exclusive” committees in the House and “Super A” committees in the Senate — have more limits on membership and are rarely assigned to freshmen members.

Some committees also have special restrictions. House rules prevent members from serving on the Budget and Intelligence Committees for more than four of the last six Congresses. Service on the Ethics Committee is likewise limited to three of the past four Congresses.

Committee assignments are not permanent, and members often seek new assignments even at the expense of their seniority on previous committees. By the time Election Day arrives, some returning members have already spent weeks lobbying for new assignments.

The wheels on the following pages provide a basic overview of the major rules for committee assignment:



Sources: Congressional Management Foundation, “Setting course: A congressional management guide”



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A basic overview of the major rules for committee assignment:

25 House committees

EXCLUSIVE COMMITTEES

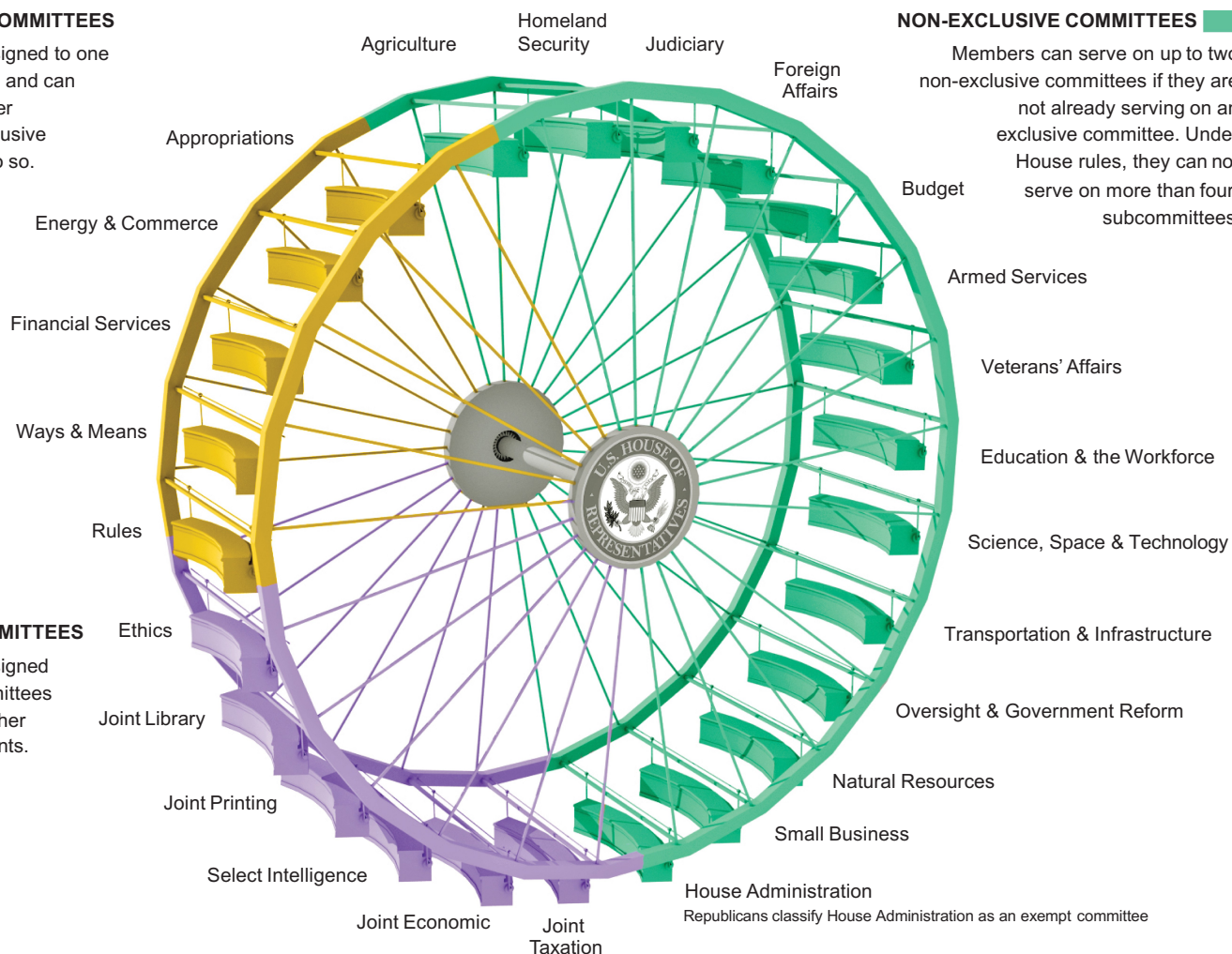
Members can be assigned to one exclusive committee, and can not serve on any other exclusive or non-exclusive committees if they do so.

EXEMPT COMMITTEES

Members can be assigned to any of these committees regardless of their other committee assignments.

NON-EXCLUSIVE COMMITTEES

Members can serve on up to two non-exclusive committees if they are not already serving on an exclusive committee. Under House rules, they can not serve on more than four subcommittees.



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A basic overview of the major rules for committee assignment:

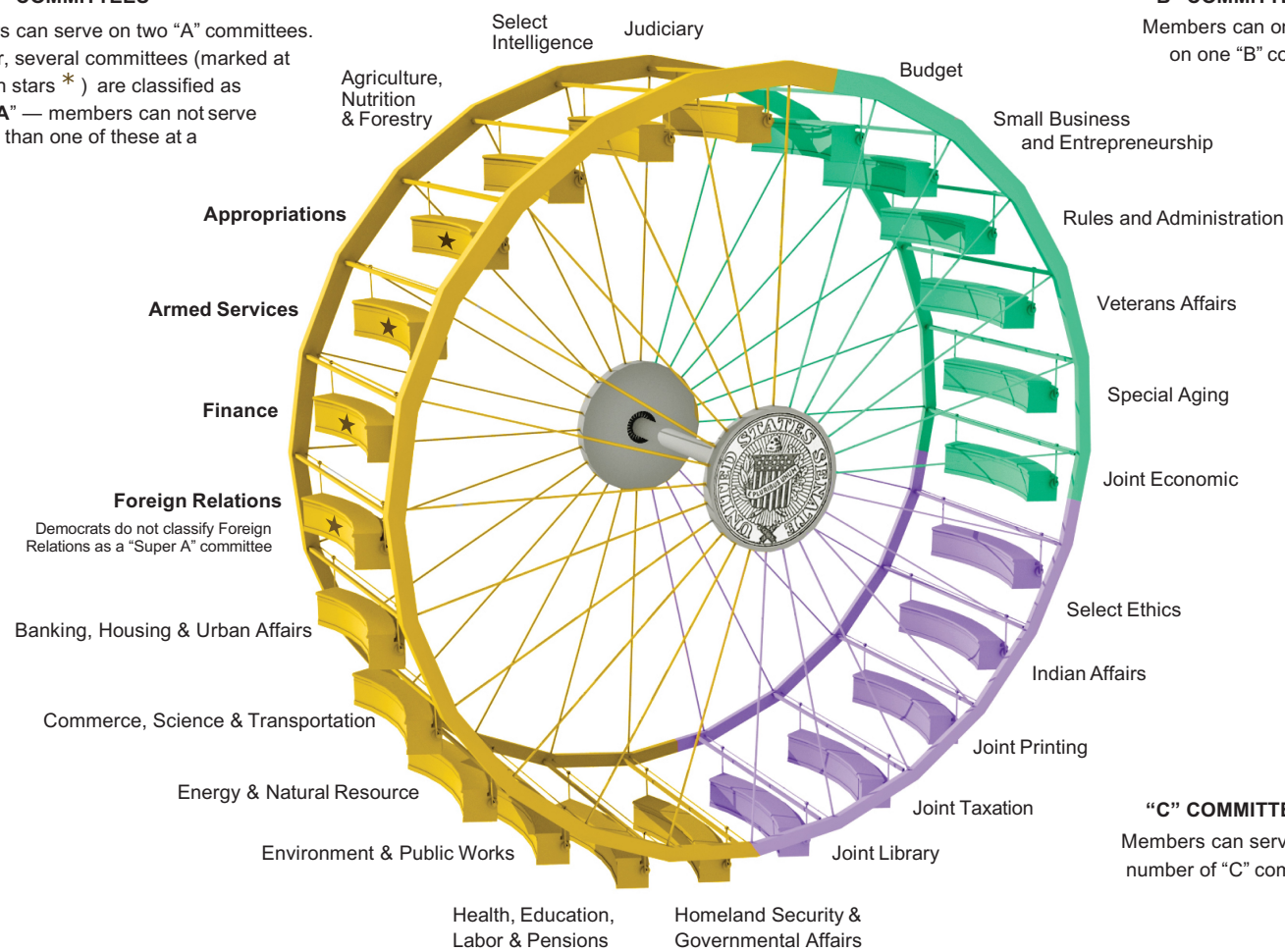
24 Senate committees

“A” COMMITTEES

Members can serve on two “A” committees. However, several committees (marked at right with stars *) are classified as **“Super A”** — members can not serve on more than one of these at a time.

“B” COMMITTEES

Members can only serve on one “B” committee



Sources: Congressional Management Foundation, “Setting course: A congressional management guide”