**CFE Higher Politics**

**POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

**Committees comparison UK parliamentary committees v. US congressional committees**

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| **UK Parliamentary Committees** | **US Congressional Committees** |
| Membership of Parliamentary committees hasn’t always been valued as it could be, but in recent years their profile has risen following investigations and public hearings into the conduct of British banks and phone hacking allegations against a number of newspapers. | Membership of US committees, especially Senate committees, has always had a high status.  Congressional committees are often referred to as ‘little legislatures’ because of the influence they have. |
| **SELECT COMMITTEES**  These are small groups of a minimum of 11 MP’s which each examine and scrutinise a specific aspect of the work of the government.  There are select committees dealing with: defence, health, foreign affairs and other important departments  MP’s are elected to committees and places are allocated on size of party (so govt will always have most MP’s on a committee)  Select committees have the power to call experts and ministers to explain actions or give advice   * For example – the culture media and sport committee has had a high profile in the wake of the phone hacking scandal as owner Rupert Murdoch was questioned by this committee over the actions of the news of the world newspaper. * The comedian Russell Brand has given evidence to a select committee on drug rehabilitation | **Congressional Select Committees**  Congress can scrutinise the Executive & government through its Committees.  Committees have a wide range of powers to call witnesses and see papers. They have significant powers to compel witnesses to attend hearings.  Committees tend to focus on a particular area i.e. Defence spending committee.   * For example – US chat show comedian Stephen Colbert, of the Colbert Report gave advice to a congressional committee on immigration after highlighting the issue on his TV show |
| **Lords and joint committees**  Select Committees in the House of Lords do not mirror government departments but instead focus on specialist subject areas.  *The four major Lords select committees hold investigations on science and technology, economic affairs, the UK constitution, and the work of the European Union.*  Lords select committees are able to draw on the expertise of some members of the upper House.  **For example house of lords committees cover policy areas such as the EU**  Joint Select committees consisting of both Lords and MP’s have similar powers, although some are permanent like the Joint Committee on Human Rights. | **Senate committees**  Senate committees have the ability to effectively scrutinise the executive as all appointees i.e. to supreme court or to cabinet have to be approved by a senate committee.  This enables the committee to pass judgement of the suitability/experience of the nominee.   * For example almost 20% of supreme court nominations have been rejected in the past.   Senate committee meetings can often be lively and combative. UK MP George Galloway famously made a flamboyant appearance at the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs committee in 2005. |
| **Standing Committees**  In the UK standing committees are set up to consider bills.  After the 2nd read stage bills are sent to committees. These go through the bill in detail. This enables considerable scrutiny of government policy as the committees can suggest considerable changes to any bill   * For Example standing committees consider around 250 bills a year | **Congressional Standing committee**  After a bill is introduced, it is sent to a committee to be considered. This give the committee effective powers of scrutiny as most bills are changed significantly in the US before they are sent back to the house  It could be argued that **standing committees** in the US have more power at the legislative process as they can ‘kill a bill’   * For example, congressional committees examine the details of over 6000 bills in a two year period. |
| **Overview and Comparison**   * UK parliamentary committees have been criticised as being limited by a lack of staff and resources to carry out detailed effective scrutiny of the executive branch * Despite, in theory, being independent of the government, the balance of the House of Commons committees reflects party support in the house. As a result of committees usually have a majority controlled by the governing party. Which, means for a long time, party whips had too much power and committees were accused of editing reports critical of the government as a result on influence of the government whips. * While the vast majority of those called to attend committees do so, Parliament does not have any real effective power to fine or imprison people who refuse to attend or mislead it. For example ex-PM Tony Blair has so far given excuses not to attend a committee explaining his government’s position on letters sent to ex-IRA members | **Overview and Comparison**   * In contrast, Congressional committees have significant budgets to carry out detailed investigations and can rely on a large staff of investigators * Although partisanship has impacted on members willingness to scrutinise the government, Congressional committees are often controlled by opponents to the President. For example, during the 1990’s congressional committees controlled by the Republicans carried out a number of investigations into Democratic President, Bill Clinton, over alleged scandals in office. * Congressional committees do have significant powers such as the ability to compel witnesses to attend hearings and to acquire information under oath. Lying under oath and failure to disclose information has resulted in imprisonment in the past. |