**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works. In a single week, Congress can debate or vote on issues from tax policy to wildlife conservation to international trade. So how do individual members of Congress gain expertise on every piece of legislation being considered? Well, they don't. Congress divides the work load up into committees. Listener Helena Lynch asked, I would like to know more about how congressional committees work.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:28] Garrison Nelson is picking up that question for us. He's a professor at the University of Vermont who studies and has written extensively about the history and inner workings that the committee system. Garrison Nelson thanks for being here.

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:00:39] Glad to be here.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:40] Generally speaking, what is a congressional committee?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:00:44] Well the Congress of course is rather sizable. There are 100 members of the U.S. Senate are 435 members of the House of Representatives. And so consequently you cannot do all your work on the floor with a full membership. So in order to basically expedite legislation they divided up into committees. That's where the work gets done.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:03] So to answer the question, is it important that we distinguish Senate Committees from House committees?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:01:09] In a way, yes, because the house really is run by its committees. Because it's 435 members, you can gain access to the floor but it's very very limited. So the House is really a committee run institution. The Senate is more run off the floors and of course the House committees that's where the legislation is written. Subcommittees basically will call witnesses and experts who come and testify. So that's where the expertise gets established in the subcommittees.

A lot of bills are killed in Committee, never come out of committee or consolidated into other bills. And then they refer it up the ladder from the subcommittee to the full committee and from the full committee then it will head for the floor.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:52] So when a committee is considering a bill does each member or their staff conduct their own research?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:01:57] Yes. And not only the staff but the lobbying groups will conduct research and feed the committee members with research they've done. And so this has been part of the process that seems somewhat, I wouldn't say corrupt, but nevertheless has been the object of some attention, the fact that a lobbyist in some cases will even try to sit in on the committee meetings and submit their own proposals.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:23] So somebody from outside of the House can actually they sit in on a committee?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:02:28] They actually try and try to submit submit research. But nonetheless you have to go first for the staff but there have been efforts to sort of actually try to participate in the process that has been a sort of somewhat embarrassing that this has happened there. They've been trying to enforce these rules and send them on their way. But nevertheless these guys will bring research and you know bucket loads of research to support their position and their particular take on a bill.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:54] How does a member of Congress actually get on a committee? Is this an appointment?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:02:58] So what basically happens is that the Congress will open on January 3rd, odd numbered years, and they will look at the committees and see how many vacancies there are. In the old days the size of committees was determined by statute. That no longer is the case it's now negotiated between the two party leaders as to how many seats will be assigned and what the proportion of seats what the ratio is going to be between majority minority members and now members will knowing you know which vacancies are available, well now you know make the pitch. These are the committees I'd like to serve on and then they make their case.

And the case is based on a number of factors. First of all, loyalty. How loyal have you been to the party's agenda. And so the more loyal you are the more consideration you receive. Secondly how does this committee assignment help you get elected, help you hold your office. You know, you want to be on the Agriculture Committee because you come a farming state, there's a good argument there.

So then the third question is particularly in the house do you really want to be in the house? Because so many members of the house really will try to use their position in the House to run for you know run for the U.S. Senate or run for governor. The House faces a lot of attrition due to ambition on the part of members and if you are seen as a member who really is using the house as a way station on just some other office, you're not going to get that committee assignment.

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:04:28] Classic case involves John F. Kennedy who has served in the house for six years, 1947 to 52, in which he basically was put on the Education Labor Committee which is a semi good committee and in the District of Columbia Committee which is a dreadful committee because it was suspected that Kennedy really wanted to be a U.S. senator.

And I have a letter from the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee considering Kennedy for the Rules or Ways and Means. Two of the big ones and they choose not to put Kennedy on those committees because they suspected that he really wanted to be a senator.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:58] I love hearing about this hierarchy. What are some of the most important committees?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:05:03] The two most important committees in each chamber are the money committees. Ways and Means and Finance, the spending committees. That means that in the House Finance and in the Senate, that's where all the battle right now the tax cut has taken place, the Senate Finance Committee. So any appropriations, spending committees because there the ones that allocate the money. And this is where those the committees that really have those kind of powers.

Two other committees and we call them members of the big three. In the case of the house it's the rules committee which controls the agenda the flow of bills to the floor and the Senate it has historically been the Foreign Relations Committee because the Senate has the power to ratify treaties. And of course to confirm ambassadors. So as a result the Senate plays a role in foreign policy as opposed to the house which is a relatively minor role in foreign policy the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate are very powerful.

If you want to run for president you would try to angle yourself to get onto the Foreign Relations Committee as Jack Kennedy did in 1957. And as Barack Obama did and it was on the Foreign Relations Committee that Barack Obama got to become a protege of Joe Biden who was then chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and made a huge difference in Barack's life obviously and so much so that he'd chosen to be vice president.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:20] Does the Constitution provide any guidelines about the powers of committees or how they are regulated?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:06:25] No, no, there's nothing in the Constitution about committees and so it basically all grew out of precedent. You know once again the size of the Congress is so huge. Well because it wasn't always the old but but as it grew more and more committees we named at one point there were 71 standing committees in the U.S. Senate. My favorite is transportation routes to the seaboard which lasted for 39 years and never met.

The unimportant committees, nobody cares about and nobody shows up for the meetings. And it's a wonderful interview with John McCormick of the house and his first committee was elections number three and I said, what was that committee like? He said I don't know. We never met.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:17] Well Garrison Nelson you've written a lot about congressional history, seven volumes. How is the system different today than it has been in the past?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:07:27] Well obviously it's much more partisan today and years ago you would get some real cooperation between the Chair and the ranking member. I remember when I was working for Senator Leahy's staff and we brought a bill before the Government Operations Committee and the chair and the ranking members asked questions they alternated asking questions and the questions were similar. One was not trying to get us, embarrass us, it was very bipartisan. Back in the day before this wave of really toxic partisanship overtook both chambers.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:01] How about term limits. How long can someone serve on a committee?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:08:05] As long as they wish, as long as they keep being elected and as long as they keep wanting to be on the committee. But the Republicans have imposed a three year rule on committee chairs and now the Democrats don't do that.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:19] What are some of the real disadvantages or drawbacks to the committee system?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:08:27] Well not everything is very transparent and that's part of the problem. And you know in terms of you know where the money comes to see corporations and lobbies with a major interest in bills were just you know funnel lots of money into the campaigns of the senior members of those committees obviously in order to sort of keep them in office and to basically continue to have them be sensitive sympathetic to their issues. The crack is that the two things you never want to see made, One is sausage and the other is legislation.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:06] What does the public miss out on by not seeing how the sausage is made?

**Garrison Nelson:** [00:09:11] They miss out on the banter that takes place over bills and that's kind of fun. And you know in particular the subcommittees the subcommittees that C-SPAN is not covering the subcommittees. You know so go to the full committees we'll all be covering the subcommittees and the second is a lot of banter goes back and forth and because it's in the subcommittees that most bills die. They get killed in the subcommittee and they get some sort of a lively discussion in the subcommittees. So that's what they do miss the banter that takes place.