

The House of Representatives

The Committees

General

The committees are the organs of the Parliament which carry out the preparatory legislative work and a substantial proportion of oversight of government.

Each committee is competent for a well defined field (for example justice, national defence, etc) and its members are specialised in the area in question. Consisting of a limited group of parliamentarians, the committees allow work to be done in a more effective manner.

Committees in the House of Representatives

» The standing committees

The names and powers of the standing committees are established at the start of the legislative term.

There are currently 11 standing committees:

- Social affairs, Work and Pensions
- Constitution and Institutional Reform
- Defence
- Economy, Consumer Protection and Digitalization
- Energy, Environment and Climate
- Finance and Budget
- Interior, Security, Migration and Administrative Affairs
- Justice
- Mobility, Public Enterprises and Federal Institutions
- Foreign Affairs
- Health and Equal Opportunities

» The special or temporary committees

These committees are created for the purpose of examining a specific Bill or Private Member's Bill. Once that scrutiny has been completed, they cease to exist.

The special committees are charged with specific missions other than the scrutiny of government or private members' bills (e.g.: the Prosecutions Committee, the Rules Committee; the Accounts Committee; the Committee in Charge of Parliamentary Oversight of the Standing Committee for Monitoring the Police Services).

» Committees of enquiry

The House has a right of enquiry (article 56 of the Constitution) and may create enquiry committees, authorized to take any investigative actions provided for in the Code of Criminal Procedure. These committees enquire about problems that arise in our society (for example the bankruptcy of Sabena, tax fraud, terrorist attacks, ...).

» Advisory committees

There are three advisory committees:

- The advisory committee on European affairs
- The advisory committee on social emancipation
- The advisory committee on scientific and technological questions

» Joint Committees

There are also joint committees composed by deputies as well as senators, such as the parliamentary conciliation committee (see information sheet 11.07).

Focus on the standing committees

» Composition

After each renewal of the House of Representatives (i.e. after the federal legislative elections) it appoints the standing committees from among its deputies.

The standing committees consist of 17 members. The appointments are made by proportional representation of the political groups within the plenary assembly.

Deputies who do not form part of a group or who form part of a small group may also participate in the work of one or more committees, but without being entitled to vote.

In addition to the permanent members, the committees also have substitute members.

» Role

Preparatory legislative work

The committees examine and, where appropriate, amend the Bills and Private Member's Bills referred to them by the President of the House. The Bills and Private Member's Bills are put to the vote. The rapporteur (or rapporteurs) draws up a report of the proceedings. The rapporteurs are appointed by their colleagues on the committee. The report and the text adopted by the committee are submitted to the plenary assembly which either adopts the text as proposed after having amended it if appropriate, or rejects it, or sends it back, if appropriate, to the committee.

» Government control

The committee members may ask questions of the members of the federal government. Since 1987 most of the oral questions and interpellations have been raised at the committee stage.

Only the most important interpellations and oral questions are still raised in the plenary session.

The committees may organise hearings or meetings in order to inform the members. Just like the plenary assembly, the committee may also request the presence of a minister.

» Workings of a committee

In principle the committee meetings are public. A certain number of committees meet in camera, such as the Committee on prosecution and the naturalisation Committee.

The meetings are managed by a chairman. The vice-presidents of the House and the members of the Bureau of the House chair by right one of the standing committees of which they are members. If one of these renounces the chair, the political group to which he/she belongs may propose to the Conference of Presidents that the Chair of that committee should be another of its members on the committee. The Chair of each of the other committees is designated from the members of the committee by the President of the House of Representatives, on a proposal by the Conference of Presidents.

The committee chairmen have the same competences at the committee level as the President of the House of Representatives at the plenary session level: order, observance of the Rules of procedure, admissibility of texts.

The committee's agenda is set by the committee, or failing that, by its chairman or by the President of the House. With regard to the legislative work, priority is given to Bills and budgets.

In each committee, a majority of the members must be present at any time for the committee to be able to examine Bills and Private Member's Bills. For adopting a report and, a fortiori, for voting Bills or Private Member's Bills, the presence of a majority of the members is required.