Explainer: Congressional Conference Committees

Conference committees are a [mechanism] used by Congress to reconcile differences between legislation that has been passed in each respective chamber. Identical legislation must be agreed upon by the Senate and the House in order to become a law, according to the U.S. Constitution.

Where the two houses need to reconcile two versions of a bill, a temporary committee is tasked with negotiating a proposal to be passed by both chambers without amendments. Typically, differences arise when a bill originates in the House—and includes tax or appropriations measures —and is then significantly amended by the Senate and sent back to the House.

When the House and Senate agree to form a conference committee to resolve differences in legislation, the process is as follows:

Conference committee is formed. Members of the House and Senate are appointed by the Senate Majority Leader and House Speaker, and primarily pulled from the committees that have jurisdiction over and originally considered the bill. Typically, the lead sponsors of each bill will chair the committee.

Negotiations begin. Both informal and formal meetings (private and public) are held where conferees attempt to reach a compromise. Sometimes constituents of senators and representatives on the committee play a role in deliberations.

A conference report is written. If the majority of conferees reach a compromise, the negotiated proposal is drafted into a conference report, which contains a compromise bill and explanation of the compromise per each section.

One chamber considers and votes on the conference report. If it is passed by one chamber, it is sent to the other for passage. Both chambers must agree upon the report without any amendments. The conference report is subject to filibuster in the Senate, except for reports on budget resolutions or budget reconciliation bills.

The measure is sent to the President for approval or veto.