



**NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.**

NEWS RELEASE

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N.C. LEGISLATURE HAS LARGEST NUMBER OF COMMITTEES IN U.S., CENTER REPORTS

North Carolina's General Assembly has more standing committees than any other state legislature, reports the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. This sometimes makes legislative life difficult for lawmakers and makes it confusing for the public to keep track of what's going on, the Center says.

During the past two legislative sessions, the N.C. House of Representatives had 58 committees, the largest number of any state in 1985-86 and 1987-88. The Senate in 1985 had 30 committees, second only to New York's 31. In 1987, the N.C. Senate took over first place as the number of its committees grew to 37. The N.C. Senate's 30 committees in 1985 was double the national Senate average of 15, and the N.C. House's 58 committees was nearly triple the national House average of 20.

"Such a large number of committees carries with it advantages and disadvantages," says Jack Betts, editor of the Center's magazine, North Carolina Insight. "On the up side, it spreads power around, and it gives a forum for nearly every bill that comes up. But on the down side, it makes it extremely difficult for legislators to attend all their committee meetings or for them to develop expertise in a few specific policy areas."

In the article, written by columnist Paul O'Connor in the most recent issue of Insight, the Center does not recommend decreasing the number of committees. But the Center suggests that the legislative leadership carefully consider the impact of having so many committees and decide whether a smaller number of committees might improve the legislature's efficiency.

Committees in both the House and the Senate traditionally have been appointed by the presiding officers -- House Committees by the Speaker of the House and Senate committees by the Lieutenant Governor, who is the president of the Senate. But with the election of a Republican Lieutenant Governor, the Senate Democratic Caucus has decided to change Senate rules and shift the power to appoint Senate committees from the Lieutenant Governor to the President Pro Tempore of the Senate.

Betts says the Center's research showed that in the 1980s, the number of committees in the House varied very little; the number of Senate committees underwent greater fluctuation, but there seems to be no consistent trend. The Senate Alcoholic Beverage Control Committee has been dropped and re-instituted

over the years, as have committees on Senior Citizen Affairs and Veterans and Military Affairs. Senate Committees on Public Utilities and Energy, Congressional and Senatorial Redistricting, Small Business, and the University Board of Governors Nominations have been dropped, and Committees on the Environment and Children and Youth have been added.

Because of the large number of committees, North Carolina legislators have held many committee appointments. In 1987, the average was 10.7 committees per Democratic representative, and 10.2 per Democratic senator -- the highest in years for each. Republicans in both chambers had fewer committee assignments -- 9.9 each in the House, 8.0 in the Senate. Newly-elected Sen. Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie), the House minority leader during the 1987-88 session, isn't surprised by the difference in workload. "Republicans usually get the committees they ask for," says Cochrane, "but I've checked in previous years and I've found that Republican representation is often higher on the less-important committees, and not as high on the important policymaking committees."

The average number of committee assignments for House Democrats and Republicans has shown a consistently upward trend in the 1980s, up about 17 percent for House Democrats and 13 percent for House Republicans. Senate Democrats were on more committees in 1987 than they were in 1981 (up 5 percent), but in 1983 and 1985 the numbers actually went down -- reaching their lowest point (about 8 committees per member) in 1985. Senate Republicans in 1987-88 were appointed to slightly fewer committees than in 1981, but more than they had in 1983 and 1985, when Republicans only had 6.6 committees each.

In both 1985 and 1987, certain Republicans were given vice chairmanships of one Senate or House committee; most Democrats serve as chairmen of one committee and also serve as committee vice chairmen. Senate committee chairmen usually are also given one committee vice-chairmanship, while House committee chairmen may also have two or more vice-chairmanships.

The assembly has long been criticized for its large number of committees, which some detractors believe weakens the legislative process because members may be spread too thin. The most recent effort to change the system came in 1983, when then-Sen. William G. "Gerry" Hancock (D-Durham) sponsored the Citizen Legislature Act, designed to preserve a citizen legislature by making it easier for the average citizen to serve. Among Hancock's recommendations for changes in the legislative process were shorter sessions and more standing committee work between legislative sessions. His bill, which passed the Senate but failed in the House, recommended a reduction in the number of standing committees in each house to somewhere between 10 and 20.

Supporters of that proposal argued that committee work was too important to the legislative process to continue saddling members with so many assignments. Cutting down the number of committees would allow members to develop more expertise and knowledge in a particular field -- although it also would mean that each committee would handle far more legislation, assuming that no restriction on bill introductions was adopted. But the proposal did not attract widespread support, and the number of committees remained at a high level.

Legislators generally express support for the current system, saying they are not willing to trade away the benefits that come with many committee assignments for the benefits that come from a system of fewer committees. They identify three basic tradeoffs involved when choosing between the two systems.

(1) The current system allows more legislators to serve as committee chairmen, and it therefore disperses legislative power among a greater number of legislators. "When you reduce the number of committees, you reduce the opportunities for a lot of members to play an important role" in the legislature, says Rep. Robert Hunter (D-McDowell).

Former Lt. Gov. Robert B. Jordan III, who reduced the number of Senate committees when he came into office (from 34 to 30) but who in 1987 named 37 committees, says he's opposed to further reductions. "You spread the power when you have more chairmen. If you had only four chairmen, we'd have an even greater degree of concentration of power."

Proponents of fewer committees say that by reducing the number of committees, the legislature would involve more members in the nuts-and-bolts of each piece of legislation. Thus, they also see their proposal as a way to disperse power. "If we had fewer committees, we'd have more members on each committee," says former Sen. Harold Hardison (D-Lenoir). Then, when a bill got to the floor, more members would have had the benefit of hearing the detailed debate, which usually occurs in committee and not on the floor, and more legislators would have had input into fashioning the bill as it is presented on the floor.

That would be a real dispersal of power, agrees Rep. Harold Brubaker (R-Randolph). The current system doesn't really disperse power because "on the important issues, the chairmen are going to check with the leadership anyhow," he says. A chairman of a committee of minor or moderate importance is not going to buck the preferences of the House Speaker or Lieutenant Governor, Brubaker adds.

(2) Supporters of the current system say that it allows legislators to develop a broader knowledge of the issues which are coming through the General Assembly. "It's best to have as broad a view as possible," says Rep. Joe Mavretic (D-Edgecombe). "It's a question of whether the General Assembly ought to be a population of specialists versus a population of generalists."

Reducing the number of committees would limit the number of people who have knowledge of an area. As Representative Hunter puts it, "I enjoy being on a number of different committees because I don't get confined to one area."

But former Sen. Charles Hipps (D-Haywood) argues that the large number of committees creates some absurd situations. "Look at the education committee," he said. "I don't understand why we have an education committee with one chairman [for education policy and statutory issues] and a different committee with a different chairman for education funding." Those two committees should be combined, he says, because it is often impossible to distinguish between a policy issue and a funding issue. If combined, the new committee might involve just as many people, Hipps adds.

(3) The current system allows the legislature to highlight special needs, while reducing the number of committees would de-emphasize important issues. Supporters of the current system point with pride to such committees as the House Committee on Schools for the Blind and Deaf. If the number of committees were reduced, this committee would almost certainly be a casualty, they say, because these schools use such a small piece of the state education budget. "The current system gives those people a committee which is well-versed and attentive" to the

needs of those schools, Mavretic says. If the committee were consolidated into a larger education committee that handled all schooling from pre-school to the universities, the concerns of the deaf and blind "would only be a small part of the agenda, and they wouldn't get any attention," he warns.

Former Sen. Tony Rand (D-Cumberland) says that concern over the loss of forums for specific interests is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to any sizable reduction in the number of committees. "If you try to eliminate a committee you encounter a certain amount of turf fighting. People with an interest in an area want a committee to handle their problems," says Rand, who was the Democratic nominee for lieutenant governor in the 1988 elections.

Those problems would not be overlooked, say proponents of fewer committees. Subcommittees likely would be created for individual areas of interest. The issues would get just as much individual attention in the subcommittees, and then get another review when considered by the full committee before going to the floor. That should give bills a thorough airing and allow more legislators to bone up on the issues.

Hardison, who chaired the Senate Commerce Committee for the past two sessions, says his experience proves that. The committee was formed out of the three old committees on Banking, Public Utilities, and Small Business. Rather than have their issues lost in the shuffle, Hardison said, these industries found a more efficient and coordinated Senate system under the merged committee.

Of course, the General Assembly uses subcommittees now to resolve tough issues, although they are not standing subcommittees, as is common in the U.S. Congress. And critics of a smaller committee system with regular subcommittees point out that the need for a large number of subcommittees will merely duplicate what the legislature now has -- a large number of committees, regardless of whether they are called committees or subcommittees.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to examine state government policies and practices. The Center is supported in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations, both in Winston-Salem. Other funding comes from 110 corporate contributors and more than 700 individual and organizational members. In addition to North Carolina Insight magazine, the Center also has conducted studies comparing the performance of for-profit and not-for-profit hospitals, problems with local landfills running out of space, and the possibility of publishing legislators' votes. Recently, the Center published rankings of the 32 most influential lobbyists in the state legislature.

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Copies of the issue of North Carolina Insight containing the research on legislative committees are available for \$6.30 (plus \$1.00 postage and handling) from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, or call (919) 832-2839.

For more information, call Jack Betts at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research at (919) 832-2839.

Table 1. Number of Legislative Committees in N.C., 1957-1987

	<u>Senate</u>	<u>House</u>
1957	29	47
1967	35	47
1977	35	45
1981	38	59
1983	34	57
1985	30	58
1987	37	58

Source: North Carolina Manuals, 1957-1988

Table 2. N.C. Legislators: Average Number of Committee Assignments, 1957-1987

	<u>Senate</u>	
	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
1957	8.3	8.7 (All Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
1967	11.6	10.4
1977	8.9	8.3 (All Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
1981	9.7	8.8
1983	8.6	7.8
1985	8.2	6.6 (Some Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
1987	10.2	8.0 (Some Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)

	<u>House</u>	
	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Republicans</u>
1957	9.1	8.7
1967	8.1	8.0
1977	6.9	6.7
1981	8.9	8.6
1983	10.1	9.2
1985	10.2	9.5 (Some Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
1987	10.7	9.9 (Some Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)

Tables prepared by Center Intern Kim Kebschull

Table 3. Number of Committees Per Chamber, by State, 1987

State	Senate	Rank Among All States	House	Rank Among All States
Alabama	17	18	24	16
Alaska	9	44	9	47
Arizona	11	37	16	28
Arkansas	10	42	10	44
California	22	6	26	11
Colorado	11	37	12	40
Connecticut	20*	7	20*	21
Delaware	20	7	20	21
Florida	16	20	28	7
Georgia	24	4	28	7
Hawaii	20	7	17	26
Idaho	11	37	14	35
Illinois	18	13	25	15
Indiana	19	11	26	11
Iowa	15	22	15	29
Kansas	18	13	21	18
Kentucky	15	22	17	26
Louisiana	15	22	15	29
Maine	19*	11	19*	24
Maryland	9	44	10	44
Massachusetts	7	49	6	48
Michigan	15	22	30	5
Minnesota	18	13	21	18
Mississippi	28	3	30	5
Missouri	23	5	49	2
Montana	16	21	14	35
Nebraska	13**	31		
Nevada	9	44	13	37
New Hampshire	15	22	23	17
New Jersey	17	18	27	10
New Mexico	8	48	15	29
New York	32	2	37	3
North Carolina	37	1	58	1
North Dakota	15	22	15	29
Ohio	11	37	26	11
Oklahoma	18	13	28	7
Oregon	14	29	15	29
Pennsylvania	20	7	21	18
Rhode Island	6	50	6	48
South Carolina	18	13	11	42
South Dakota	13	31	13	37
Tennessee	9	44	11	42
Texas	12	34	34	4
Utah	10	42	10	44
Vermont	12	34	15	29
Virginia	11	37	20	21
Washington	13	31	19	24
West Virginia	15	22	13	37
Wisconsin	14	29	26	11
Wyoming	12	34	12	40
Average:	15.6		20	

* All joint committees.

** Nebraska's legislature is unicameral, but is called the Senate.

Note: These figures do not generally include joint committees, except as noted for Connecticut and Maine, which use joint committees exclusively.

Source: The Book of the States, 1988-1989.