



## Why U.S. Legislatures Need Social Policy Committees

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The United States House of Representatives has one of the most powerful legislative committee systems among all the world's democracies. These committees are the "workhorses" of the legislature, where bills are investigated, debated, shaped, and even dropped. They also signal U.S. policy priorities – through budgetary allocations and substantive efforts such as those to protect agriculture and natural resources or improve business conditions and employment. There is, nevertheless, a glaring hole in the U.S. House committee system, because there is no committee dedicated solely to social policy. This makes the U.S. unique among democracies for all the wrong reasons.

Across nations, two regularities stand out. National commitments to broad and generous social policies go hand in hand with assigning such issues to powerful legislative committees. And the policy clout of women is magnified in social policy committees. As scholars have long argued, full democratic citizenship is built upon access to civil, political, and social rights. This is why democracies install committees focused on social issues, thereby channeling relevant concerns, expertise, and discussions into one influential institutional locus. Lacking such an influential committee, the U.S. approach to social policymaking devolves into a patchwork of proposals that can be grafted onto measures considered in many jurisdictions. This undermines possibilities for Congress and state legislatures to take a comprehensive approach and consult relevant experts to devise optimal policies to support opportunity and security for all American families. To correct for this shortfall, all U.S. state legislatures, and both branches of Congress should establish a permanent standing committee on social policy.

### Legislative Priorities

Although nations differ a great deal in the number of legislative standing committees, consistent patterns prevail. Nearly every democracy has committees dealing with the Budget, Agriculture and National Resources, International Affairs, Science, Labor, and the Judiciary. Similarly, every democracy except the United States assigns social policy issues a central place in its legislative arrangements. Of course, the impulse to protect social rights undergirds America's Social Security benefits, Medicare, Medicaid, health insurance, and unemployment insurance. But the United States still has one of the least generous social safety nets among industrialized democracies. The absence of a powerful House committee helps explain this weakness, and my research on lower houses of the legislature also suggests that this lacuna goes hand in hand with women's severe underrepresentation in Congress.

There is no structural reason that U.S. committee lists could not be changed to include a social policy committee. In my study of the U.S., German, and Swedish legislatures across 40 years, I found regular changes to committee rosters, names, and purviews. Similarly, from 1970 to 2009, the U.S. House of Representatives made 18 changes, as committees were renamed, combined, dropped, and added. New social policy committees could easily be established. In fact, the U.S. Senate developed its current Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee from an earlier committee on Labor and Social Relations. This committee is 30 percent women compared to 22 percent in the body as a whole.

### Equality in Policymaking

As voters and politicians, women and members of racial and ethnic minorities are more strongly concerned with social policy issues than men. Committees focused on these matters provide minorities and women citizens a formal channel to bring forward concerns and could also provide extra opportunities for leadership and clout. The U.S. currently ranks 101st in the low percentage of female legislators in its lower legislative house, less than 20%. Among the wealthiest democracies only South Korea, Japan, and Turkey have lower levels of women's representation. Across all nations, women legislators tend to be over-represented on social

issue committees, where they have extra opportunities for visible influence.

## Establishing Social Policy Committee with Real Power

Establishing a committee with jurisdiction over social policy is a start, but there are more and less effective ways to do it.

- ***The scope of a social policy committee's jurisdiction matters.*** Sweden, a capitalist democracy with one of the most comprehensive social welfare systems in the world, keeps a gender-neutral focus on social issues in its Social Insurance and Health and Welfare committee. Germany also devotes a great deal of its budget to social investments. But conservative governments divide social issues between committees focused on women and family matters and others dealing with broader health and social issues, while all social matters are addressed in one jurisdiction under labor/left governments. Thus, we see that in Sweden, women serve more equally on all legislative committees, while Germany has more gender segregation.
- ***Social issue committees should have clout to gather data and improve policy-making through involvement with relevant experts.*** These bodies must not just be symbolic places where women, minority, and junior legislators are relegated to unimportant committee positions. Senior party members must make fair and inclusive committee assignments. Even though disproportionate interest may lead female and minority legislators to ask for assignments to social policy committees, such legislators should still appear on many committees and they should have opportunities to move into committee leadership and transfer to other committees. Women and minorities must also get chances for leadership on social policy committees and on the most prestigious and powerful general committees, such as the Budget and Ways and Means committees. As things stand now, women tend to be excluded from committee leadership even in committees where they have long been overrepresented.

Read more in Catherine Bolzendahl, "Beyond the Big Picture: Gender Influences on Disaggregated and Domain-Specific Measures of Social Spending, 1980-1999" *Politics & Gender* 7, no. 1 (2011): 35-70; "Opportunities and Expectations: The Gendered Organization of Legislative Committees in Germany, Sweden, and the United States" *Gender & Society* 28, no. 6 (2014): 847-76; "Legislatures as Gendered Organizations: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Empowerment as Political Elites," in *Measuring Women's Political Empowerment across the Globe* (Palgrave, 2018): 165-186.