

## *The Committee System: How Much Is Too Much?*

by Paul T. O'Connor and Kim Keschull

*This regular feature of Insight focuses on the process of policymaking in the N.C. General Assembly. In this installment, Insight takes a look at the legislature's committee system and examines whether there are too many committees—and whether members have too many committee assignments.*

**H**arold Brubaker is a lucky man. According to the Senate Rule Book, the Randolph County Republican, a veteran legislator with six terms under his belt, serves on 13 standing committees in the N.C. General Assembly. Nine of those meet each week (some of them every day during the legislative session), another (the UNC Board of Governors Nominating Committee) meets whenever there are vacancies that need nominations, and three more meet at the call of the chairman. It all makes for a rugged schedule for the Asheboro businessman, but he's not complaining. Many of his committee assignments are actually subcommittees of the Appropriations Committee, and most days, he can make all of his committee meetings. Not everyone can say that.

For instance, during the 1987 legislative session, some of the fiercest debates occurred in the House Committee on Manufacturing and Labor, where Brubaker is a member. House Speaker Liston Ramsey had divided the committee equally between advocates of the usually conflicting interests of business on one side and consumers and workers on the other. Members of the committee from both sides say that some cases—issues like workmen's compensation benefits, child care leave, and con-

sumer protection on new car purchases—were decided not by the force of argument or the merits of debate, but by each side's ability to get its votes to the committee meeting.

"Every time that a vote was called," Brubaker recalls, "things were so tight pro and con that you literally had to go around and count to see if it would pass. The vote would constantly change depending on who was in the room at the time."

The proceedings of the Manufacturing and Labor Committee are not recalled here to accuse legislators of dodging their responsibility to work. Rather, the committee's often boisterous hearings of 1987 highlight a problem with the way the legislature operates. Members serve on so many committees that they are often scheduled to be in two places at the same time. When the crunch comes at the end of a session, they must often choose which important meeting they will attend, and which they will miss. For instance, Rep. Joe Hackney (D-Orange) serves on Manufacturing and Labor and on the Natural and Economic Resources committees, both major panels in the General Assembly. They meet at the same hour, and Hackney often must rush from one to the other.

Sen. Laurence Cobb (R-Mecklenburg) has had similar conflicts in the past, though the Senate tries to avoid scheduling conflicts except where a legisla-

---

*Paul O'Connor is a columnist for the N.C. Association of Afternoon Newspapers. Kim Keschull, who has served three internships at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, is a graduate student in government and foreign affairs at the University of Virginia.*

tor specifically requests assignment to committees that meet at the same time. "You have to develop a buddy system [with another legislator] to help you keep up with what's going on in committee, and when something important is going to come up, you can make sure you're both there," says Cobb. And if a member is sponsoring a bill in yet another committee at the same hour, that legislator must be there to help guide it through.

According to *The Book of the States*, North Carolina ranks right at the top of the 50 state legislatures in the number of standing committees.<sup>1</sup> In 1985, the N.C. House of Representatives had 58 committees, the largest number of any of the states. The Senate, that same year, 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—more than double the national Senate average of 15.6. The N.C. House's 58 committees were more than twice the national House average of 20. See Table 2, p. 70, for more.

Committees in both the House and the Senate are appointed by the presiding officers—House Committees by the Speaker of the House, according to House Rule 26, and by the Lieutenant Governor, who is the president of the Senate, according to Senate Rule 31. By custom, the Speaker and the Lieutenant Governor can increase or decrease the number of committees, subject to the approval of the Rules committees and the membership. Committees meet during the morning, beginning at 8:30 a.m. for both Appropriations committees (which meet until 10 a.m. Other committees meet for an hour, with sessions beginning on the hour, until 1 p.m. Legislative sessions usually begin around 1:30 p.m.).

### Too Many Assignments?

In the 1980s, the *number of committees* in the House has altered very little; the number of Senate committees has undergone 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. 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 hold 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. See Table 3 on page 73 for more. Rep. Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie), the House minority leader, 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 policy-making 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, 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 today have slightly fewer committees, measured both by average and mode (most frequently occurring number), than they did in 1981, but more than they had in 1983 and 1985, when Republicans had only 6.6 committees each. That low number could be attributed to the fact that there were more Republicans in the Senate in 1985 (12) than in any other year surveyed, at a time when the number of

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

	Senate	House
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. 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

— continued

committees had been reduced to 30. The number of Democratic committee assignments dropped in 1985 as well.

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.

Republicans, who haven't controlled the legislature since the turn of the century, don't fare very well in assignments. Not only do Republicans serve on slightly fewer committees per member (2.2 committees fewer in the Senate, 0.8 committees fewer in the House), they also do not get committee chairmanships—though some Republicans have been named to vice-chairmanships. Both Cochrane and Cobb say that while Republicans generally

**Table 2. Number of Committees Per Chamber, by State, 1987, *continued***

State	Senate	Rank Among All States	House	Rank Among All States
New Hampshire	15	22	23	17
New Jersey	17	18	27	10
New Mexico	8	48	15	29
New York	32	2	37	3
<b>North Carolina</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>1</b>
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
<b>Average:</b>	<b>15.6</b>		<b>20</b>	

\* 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.

get the committee assignments they ask for, representation on the major committees is not always what it should be. "If Republicans make up one-third of the House, then you might expect they'd make up one-third of *each* committee. But the last time I looked, our [Republican] representation on the major committees ran a little less than that, and it ran a little higher on the lesser committees," says Cochrane. Adds Cobb, "There are some cases of under-representation on the major committees, but I

don't feel that we've [Republicans] all been dumped into committees like Building and Grounds or anything like that."

### Efforts For Reform

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 Sen. 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. "The objective is to get a committee system under way that will allow any member to meet his or her committee obligations without conflicts and overlaps," Hancock wrote at the time.<sup>2</sup>

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 remains high. 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 trade-offs involved when choosing between the two systems.

■ *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).

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 see the issue in exactly the opposite terms. They 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 see their

proposal as a way to disperse power. "If we had fewer committees, we'd have more members on each committee," says 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 Brubaker. 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.

■ *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 Sen. Charles Hips (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 issues] and a different committee with a different chairman for education funding." Those two committees should be combined, he says, because it often is impossible to distinguish between a policy issue and a funding issue. If combined, the new committee might involve just as many people, Hips adds.

Brubaker says that legislators are stretched thin. They spend only one hour in most committee meetings and never really develop an in-depth understanding of the issues. With fewer committees, meetings could run longer and legislators could learn more about the proposals before them. Even Hunter, an opponent of fewer committees, concedes that "it's harder to do in-depth analysis" on most issues when legislators have so many committees to attend and so many bills to monitor. Yet others

**Table 3. N.C. Legislators: Number of Committee Assignments, 1957-1987**

<b>Senate</b>				
	<b>Democrats</b>		<b>Republicans</b>	
1957	Avg.	8.3	Avg.	8.7 (All Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
1967	Avg.	11.6	Avg.	10.4
1977	Avg.	8.9	Avg.	8.3 (All Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
1981	Avg.	9.7	Avg.	8.8
1983	Avg.	8.6	Avg.	7.8
1985	Avg.	8.2	Avg.	6.6 (Some Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
1987	Avg.	10.2	Avg.	8.0 (Some Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
<b>House</b>				
	<b>Democrats</b>		<b>Republicans</b>	
1957	Avg.	9.1	Avg.	8.7
1967	Avg.	8.1	Avg.	8.0
1977	Avg.	6.9	Avg.	6.7
1981	Avg.	8.9	Avg.	8.6
1983	Avg.	10.1	Avg.	9.2
1985	Avg.	10.2	Avg.	9.5 (Some Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)
1987	Avg.	10.7	Avg.	9.9 (Some Republicans given Vice-Chairmanships)

*Chart prepared by Kim Keschull*

point out that with fewer committees, each committee would have to handle more bills—and the time that could be allotted to each measure would be reduced.

A spin-off to this debate is the question of staff. Brubaker says that the shallow knowledge legislators obtain on any individual proposal increases the power of legislative staff. They do most of the research, they draft bills, and they fashion amendments, he says. With this system, Brubaker charges, the staff gains too much power. But Mavretic says the current system should be applauded for encouraging the development of a “good-sized and compe-

tent staff” which can advise legislators.<sup>3</sup>

Another staff consideration is the increasing likelihood that one day, the General Assembly may create separate staffs for the House and the Senate. Currently, one staff serves both the House and the Senate for fiscal research, bill drafting, and general research. But as relations between the two chambers become more strained, as they have in recent sessions, the pressure for separate staffs will grow, legislative observers say.

■ *The current system allows the legislature to highlight special needs, but 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 Commissions and 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.

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, the Democratic nominee for lieutenant governor in the 1988 elections.

Those problems would not be overlooked, say proponents of fewer committees. Brubaker and Hipps note that 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

—continued on page 81

**Table 4. Standing Committees in the 1987-88 General Assembly**

<b>Senate</b>	<b>House of Representatives</b>
Alcoholic Beverage Control	Aging
Agriculture	Alcoholic Beverage Control
Appropriations	Agriculture
Appropriations – Education	Appropriations-Expansion Budget
	Appropriations Base Budget – Education
	Appropriations Expansion Budget – Education
Appropriations – General Government	Appropriations Base Budget – General Government
	Appropriations Expansion Budget – General Government
Appropriations – Human Resources	Appropriations Base Budget – Human Resources
	Appropriations Expansion Budget – Human Resources
Appropriations – Justice and Public Safety	Appropriations Base Budget – Justice and Public Safety
	Appropriations Expansion Budget – Justice and Public Safety
Appropriations – Natural and Economic Resources	Appropriations Base Budget – Natural and Economic Resources
	Appropriations Expansion Budget – Natural and Economic Resources
Base Budget	Appropriations Base Budget
Children and Youth	Banks and Thrift Institutions
Commerce	Children and Youth
	Commissions and Schools for the Blind and Deaf
Constitution	Constitutional Amendments
	Corporations
	Corrections
	Courts and Administration of Justice
	Cultural Resources
Economic Growth	Economic Growth
Education	Education
Election Laws	Election Laws
	Employment Security

— continued

**Table 4. Standing Committees in the 1987-88 General Assembly, *continued***

<b>Senate</b>	<b>House of Representatives</b>
Environment	Water and Air Resources
Finance	Finance
	Governmental Ethics
	Health
Higher Education	Higher Education
	Highway Safety
	Housing
Human Resources	Human Resources
Insurance	Insurance
Judiciary I	Judiciary I
Judiciary II	Judiciary II
Judiciary III	Judiciary III
Judiciary IV	Judiciary IV
	Law Enforcement
Local Government and Regional Affairs I	Local Government I
Local Government and Regional Affairs II	Local Government II
Manufacturing and Labor	Manufacturers and Labor
	Marine Fisheries
	Mental Health
	Military and Veterans' Affairs
Natural and Economic Resources and Wildlife	Natural and Economic Resources
Pensions and Retirement	Pensions and Retirement
	Public Utilities
Rules and Operations of the Senate	Rules and Operations of the House
	Small Business
State Government	State Government
State Personnel	State Personnel
	State Properties
Transportation	Transportation
Veterans Affairs and Senior Citizens	
Ways and Means	
	Wildlife Resources
University Board of Governors	University Board of Governors Nominating Committee
Board of Community Colleges	



During the 1987 session, there were 412 lobbyists registered with the Secretary of State's office. They represented 395 different companies or organizations. There were also 258 legislative liaisons representing 63 different agencies in the executive branch of state government. By the end of the 1988 short session, there were 688 registered lobbyists. Unlike figures compiled by the Secretary of State's office, these calculations count each lobbyist only once. They do not reflect multiple listings when a lobbyist represents more than one client. These rankings were based on lobbyists' performance during the 1987 long session.

The lobbyist rankings are available for \$4.15 from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602. They are a companion piece to *Article II: A Guide to the 1987-88 N.C. Legislature* and the 1988 rankings of legislators' effectiveness, which are available for \$16.80 plus \$1.50 postage from the Center. Both prices include postage and handling. The *Guide* is a directory of legislators serving in the 1987-88 sessions that includes each legislator's education, occupation, list of bills introduced, voting record, and effectiveness rankings before 1988.



---

## IN THE LEGISLATURE — continued from page 73

---

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.

Other arguments also enter the debate. Supporters of the current system, for example, note that the large number of committees provides a good training ground for new legislators. Freshman Democratic senators, and House members in only their third term, often can get minor committee chairmanships. There they learn how to handle a committee and prepare themselves for the days when they might be Appropriations, Finance, or Judiciary Committee chairmen.

Also, Mavretic argues that committee chairmen must learn the rules well. With so many members holding a chairmanship of one kind or another, a greater number of members develop a good understanding of the chamber rules.

One final argument is mentioned by both sides. With a great many committees, almost every Democratic legislator gets to be a chairman, and that is good for legislative egos. It also may look good to the homefolks. "Everyone wants to be a hero, and the way to make them a hero is to make them a committee chairman," says Hipps.

That's not the point, Mavretic replies. "If you think the public out there in Tarboro gives one whit that I'm the chairman of a committee, you're nuts," notes Mavretic.

Still, most legislators would much prefer to be a committee chairman than just another member—and it takes a lot of committee chairmanships to feed the needs of 170 legislators. 

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Book of the States 1986-87*, Council of State Governments, Lexington, Ky., p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Gerry Hancock, unpublished paper in support of the Citizen Legislature Act (SB 5406), 1983 General Assembly. The bill was approved by the Senate 35-12, but failed in the House when the Rule Committee declined to act on the bill.

<sup>3</sup>For a closer look at the development of the legislative staff and its expertise, see Ran Coble, "Three Key Trends Shaping the General Assembly Since 1971," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 9, No. 4, June 1987, p. 35.