How the House and Senate Settle Legislative Differences

Each chamber must approve the same bill before it can be sent to the president. In a majority of cases, the second chamber simply approves the one approved by the first, and it is presented to the president for signature. If there are differences, there are two options for compromise. Historically, most major bills are resolved in conference committee, though the two chambers may also exchange amendments, or both.

For example, they might agree to immediately go to conference and then resolve any remaining differences with an amendment exchange. Or they may first attempt to exchange amendments and then decide to go to conference.

To expedite the amendment exchange process, a senator and a representative will initially introduce identical or similar versions of the bill in each chamber. If one passes, the other chamber will act on that bill, but usually considers its own bill and then acts on the other, substituting its preferred language into the other chamber’s version and sending it back.

The chambers keep sending it back and forth—called “amendments between the houses,” or “amendment exchange,” or “pingpong”—until one chamber ultimately approves the other’s version. Each chamber may only amend the other’s amendments once.

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If the chambers don’t approve the other’s amendments, a conference committee is assembled. Conferees are appointed from committees in each chamber with jurisdiction over the bill, usually seven to 11 conferees each, or more in the case of appropriations or budget reconciliation measures. Conferees begin informal negotiations and formal meetings to come to a compromise between the differing proposals.

The conference report is then taken up for a vote in one chamber. It may be considered under each chamber’s regular legislative procedure, but may not be amended. It is sent to the other chamber for approval.

If neither chamber makes changes to the report, it is sent to the president.