

Student Handout Number 2

“Conference Committees: where bills often go to die”

Kim Abrams

Associated Press

Published 7/06/2002

“WASHINGTON - Picture this: A union and a company cannot agree on a new contract and a strike looms. But bargaining typically continues.

In most cases, deals are struck. Business goes on. But imagine that scenario in the U.S. Capitol, where negotiations far more often lead nowhere. Prospective laws, passed in different form by the House and Senate, simply die.

That's what can happen in congressional conference committees - which consist of representatives of the House and Senate, each side arguing for its own version of the bill. That's where the legislative differences are resolved so a bill can become law.

Several major bills this year have been sent to conference, never to reappear, as the Republican-controlled House and the Democratic-led Senate jockey for political advantage before the fall elections.

For instance, the Senate joined the House in moving to overhaul the nation's bankruptcy system 11 months ago. But a deal to resolve differences between the rival versions of the legislation still seems far off.

Both bodies last year passed bills to give patients greater leverage against HMOs. Only now, after private talks between congressional leaders and the Bush administration failed to resolve differences over when and where patients may sue HMOs, is Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) talking about naming Senate representatives to a conference.

The House in December and the Senate in April passed measures designed to improve the nation's election system to avoid a repeat of the 2000 presidential election problems. The two sides are still arguing over how much power the federal government should wield over states and whether tough anti-fraud measures hurt minority voters.

Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) a key player in the election change negotiations, said he was frustrated by the failure to reach a deal, saying, "I haven't seen the energy behind this that I think we need."

"Given the divided Congress, the divided country and an election year, it's virtually impossible to get anything passed," said Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio) chairman of the House education committee.

Boehner achieved one exception, working with Senate Democrats to craft a major education bill that President Bush signed in January. Conferences have been used since 1789 to settle differences between House and Senate bills, and it's rare for either chamber - both of which must approve the compromise for the measure to become law - to reject a measure worked out by conferees. But the Constitution says nothing about how conferences should be made up or conduct business. The result can be dissension and stalemate.

In most cases, a few bill sponsors and senior members from the relevant committees are chosen as conferees.

Conferences on spending bills generally go more smoothly because the sides can split the differences."