

# How an Idea Becomes a Law

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## Process

### BILL CREATION

All laws start with an idea. Anyone can have an idea for a **bill**, but only a member of Congress can introduce a bill in Congress. Congress is broken into two different **chambers**: the **House of Representatives** (members are referred to as Representatives or Congressmen/women) and the **Senate** (members are referred to as Senators). An idea for a law can get started in either the House or the Senate.

### BILL INTRODUCTION

Any member of Congress can introduce a bill. The member of Congress who introduces the bill is known as the bill's **sponsor**, and other members who support the bill can be **cosponsors**. Once a bill is introduced in the House or the Senate, the bill is assigned a number. All House bills start with H.R. (which stands for House of Representatives), and all Senate bills start with S. (which stands for Senate). Sometimes, identical bills will be introduced in both chambers.

### COMMITTEE ACTION

Once a bill has been assigned a number, it is assigned to a **committee**. Committees in both the House and Senate are subgroups that deal with specific issues (or multiple issues) like aging, education, housing, and healthcare. Bills can be referred to one or multiple committees. Committees will consider and “**markup**” the bill, and they will decide if they want changes - or **amendments** - to be made. Committees may also refer bills to **subcommittees**, particularly if they want the bill to be more closely examined and researched. They may decide to hold a hearing on the bill. Once a subcommittee finishes their review, the bill is voted on and, if passed, sent back to the committee. Sometimes committees decide not to vote on a bill, and that stops it from moving forward. If the Committee votes on a bill and it passes, they send the bill and a report on the bill to the full House or Senate to be voted on.

## **CHAMBER VOTES**

When a bill gets to the full House or Senate, they will debate it and then they will vote on the bill and any amendments that have been proposed. An ordinary bill requires a simple majority – over 50% - to pass. If either chamber votes no, the bill dies. If they vote yes, the bill goes to the other chamber and the process starts over again on that side.

## **CONFERENCE COMMITTEE**

If both chambers pass identical versions of the bill, it will move to the next step. But if the bills are not identical, the bill goes to a **Conference Committee** made up of equal numbers of House and Senate members who work to compromise between the two bills. When a compromise bill is finalized, the Conference Committee refers the bill back to both the full House and Senate to vote on. Both chambers must vote yes, in order to move on to the next step.

## **THE PRESIDENT**

The next step is the President. The President can do nothing, in which case the bill becomes law after 10 days if Congress is in session. The President can also sign the bill, making the bill officially a law. Or, the President can decide to **veto** the bill. If the President vetoes a bill, Congress can decide to accept that, or they can try one more time to make the bill a law. Congress can try to overturn the veto, and if 2/3 of both the House and the Senate vote yes, the veto is overridden and the bill becomes a law. If it does not get a 2/3 vote, the bill does not become a law.

## **How An Ordinary Person Can Make A Difference**

Have you ever wondered how **legislators** come up with the laws they vote on? Have you ever had an idea you thought should be law?

All laws start with an idea. Luckily, any person can have an idea. But to get passed into law, this idea needs to be popular with the people who make the laws: legislators. So, the first step is to talk with your legislator or their staff.

After discussing your idea with a legislator, you will research this idea with the legislator and staff. When enough information is gathered, this idea is written up as a bill.

To introduce a bill in the House, you would work with a Congressperson who agrees to be a bill's sponsor.

## **Glossary**

**Amendment:** A proposal to change the text of a bill or other legal document.

**Bill:** A legislative proposal introduced by lawmakers that, if passed, becomes a law.

**Chamber:** Each of the two houses of Congress – the House of Representatives and the Senate – is considered a chamber.

**Committee:** A Congressional committee is a legislative sub-organization that handles a specific issue and tasks.

**Conference Committee:** A temporary committee consisting of House and Senate members that is formed to resolve differences in legislation that has passed both chambers.

**Cosponsor:** A member, or members, of Congress who formally adds their name in support of another member's bill.

**House of Representatives, or House:** One of two chambers of the U.S. Congress. The House consists of 435 Representatives who are elected to represent specific districts.

**Legislator:** A person who makes laws. Members of Congress are legislators.

**Markup:** A process by which a Committee reviews, debates, amends, and rewrites a bill.

**Senate:** One of two chambers of the U.S. Congress. The Senate consists of 50 Senators (2 from each of the 50 states) who are elected to represent their state.

**Sponsor:** The member of Congress who introduces a bill. This person is the first name to be listed when a bill is introduced.

Subcommittee: A Congressional subcommittee is established to handle specific areas of jurisdiction that fall under the full committee.

Veto: A procedure that allows the President to refuse to approve of a piece of legislation.