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How a Bill Becomes a Law

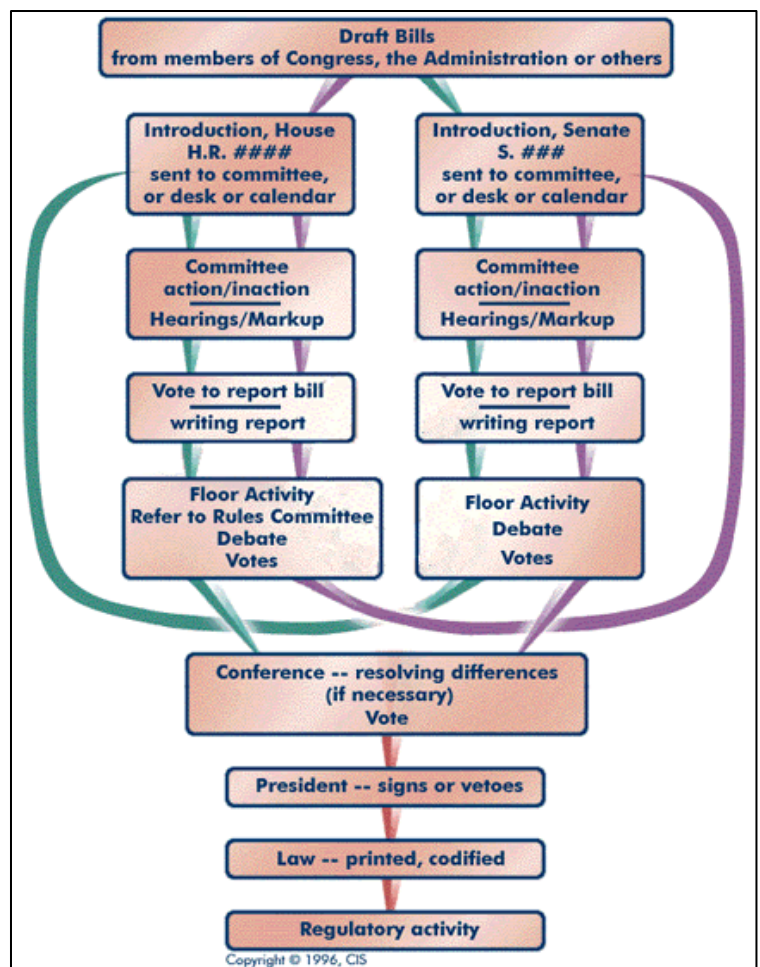
Americans know when Congress passes a piece of legislation or when the President signs a bill into law. But how does a bill originate, and what happens to it as it moves through Congress? After a bill is introduced, it may be months before it is passed and sent to the President. Below is a description of how a bill becomes a law. The process can happen in parallel tracks in both Chambers or begin in one and finish in the other.

Legislation is Introduced

- Any Member of Congress can introduce a piece of legislation. In the House, legislation is handed to the Clerk of the House. In the Senate, Members must gain recognition of the presiding officer to announce the introduction of a bill.
- The bill is assigned a number (i.e. HR 1 or S 1) and labeled with the sponsor(s)'s name(s). It is important to have a bill co-sponsored by multiple, bi-partisan members.

Committee Action

- The bill is then referred to the appropriate Committee or Committees by the Speaker of the House or the presiding officer in the Senate. A bill can also be split into parts and sent to multiple Committees.
- The Chairman often assigns the bill to Subcommittee, where the first hearings take place.
- The Full Committee will hold a "mark-up" session during which it will make revisions and additions to the subcommittee version. The Chamber must approve, change or reject all committee amendments before conducting a final passage vote.
- After the bill is reported, the Committee staff prepares a written report explaining why they favor the bill and why they wish to see their amendments, if any, adopted.



Floor Action

- Once a bill passes the Committee vote, the legislation is placed on the respective Chamber's Calendar.

- House: Bills are placed on one of four House Calendars. The Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader decide what will reach the floor and when. Some bills never reach the floor for consideration.
- Senate: Legislation is placed on the Legislative Calendar. There is also an Executive Calendar to deal with treaties and nominations. Scheduling of legislation is the job of the Majority Leader. Bills can be brought to the floor whenever a majority of the Senate chooses.
- Debate
 - House: Debate is limited by the rules negotiated by the House Rules Committee. Debate is guided by the Sponsoring Committee, and time is divided equally between proponents and opponents. Amendments must be germane to the subject of a bill - no riders are allowed. Once a quorum of members is established, the bill will be voted on.
 - Senate: Debate time can vary, and amendments need not be germane - riders are often offered. Entire bills can therefore be offered as amendments to other bills. Unless cloture is invoked, Senators can use a filibuster to defeat a measure by "talking it to death."
- Vote: Members of the Chambers vote. If the legislation is passed, it is sent to the other Chamber unless that Chamber already has a similar measure under consideration. If either Chamber does not pass its version, then the bill dies. If the House and Senate pass the same bill, it is sent to the President. If the House and Senate pass similar bills, the two versions are sent to Conference Committee.

Conference Committee

- Members from each Chamber form a Conference Committee and meet to work out the differences. The Committee is usually made up of senior members of the Committee that originally dealt with the bill.
- If the Conference Committee reaches a compromise, it prepares a written Conference Report, which is submitted to each Chamber.
- The Conference Bill and Report must be approved by both the House and the Senate.

The President

- The bill is sent to the President for review. A bill becomes law if signed by the President or if not signed within 10 days and Congress is in session. If Congress adjourns before the 10 days and the President has not signed the bill, then it does not become law ("Pocket Veto").
- If the President vetoes the bill, it is sent back to Congress with a note listing his reasons. The Chamber that originated the legislation can attempt to override the veto by a vote of two-thirds of those present. If the veto of the bill is overridden in both Chambers, then it becomes law.

The Bill Becomes a Law

- Once a bill is signed by the President or his veto is overridden by both Chambers, it becomes a law and is assigned an official number.
- After a bill becomes law, it moves to the appropriate agency for the beginning of the regulation process.