



How a Bill Becomes a Law

Legislation is Introduced – Any member of the House and Senate can introduce a piece of legislation.

House: Legislation is handed to the clerk of the House or placed in the hopper.

Senate: Members must gain recognition of the presiding officer to announce the introduction of a bill during the morning hour of business. If any senator objects, the introduction of the bill is postponed until the next day.

Both Chambers:

- The bill is assigned a number (e.g. HR 1 or S 1).
- The bill is labeled with the sponsor's name.
- The bill is sent to the Government Printing Office (GPO), where copies are made.
- Members can cosponsor the piece of Legislation. In the Senate, a bill can be jointly sponsored.

Committee Action – The bill is referred to the appropriate committee of jurisdiction by the Speaker of the House or the presiding officer in the Senate. Most often, the actual referral decision is made by the House or Senate parliamentarian. Bills may be referred to more than one committee, and may be split, so that parts of the bill are sent to different committees.

Bills are placed on the calendar of the committee to which they have been assigned. The Speaker of the House may set time limits on committees. Failure to act on a bill is the equivalent to "killing" it. Bills in the House can only be released from committee without a proper committee vote by a discharge petition signed by a majority of the House membership (218 members).

Committee Steps:

- Comments about the bill's merit are requested by government agencies.
- Bills can be assigned to a subcommittee by the Chairman.



- Hearings may be held.
- Subcommittees report their findings to the full committee.
- Finally, there is a vote by the full committee.
- A committee will hold a “mark-up” session, where it will make revisions and additions. If substantial amendments are made, the committee can order the introduction of a “clean bill” that includes the proposed amendments. This new bill will have a new number, and will be sent to the floor while the old bill is discarded. The chamber must approve, change or reject all committee amendments before proceeding to 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. Committee members who oppose a bill sometimes write a dissenting opinion in the report. The report is sent back to the whole chamber, and is placed on the calendar.
- In the House, most bills go to the Rules Committee before reaching the floor. The committee adopts rules that will govern the procedures under which the bill will be considered by the House. A “closed rule” sets strict time limits on debate, and forbids the introduction of amendments. These rules can have a major impact on whether the bill passes. The Rules Committee can be bypassed in three ways: 1) members can move rules to be suspended (requires 2/3 vote); 2) a discharge petition can be filed; or 3) the House can use a Calendar Wednesday procedure.

Floor Action – Legislation is placed on the Calendar.

House: Bills are placed on one of four House Calendars. They are usually placed on the calendars in the order in which they are reported. Yet, they don’t usually come to the floor in this order; for example, some bills never reach the floor at all. The Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader decide what will reach the floor and when. (Legislation can also be brought to the floor by a discharge petition.)



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 & Vote – Legislation is debated and voted on by the House and Senate.

House: Debate is limited by the rules formulated in the Rules Committee. The Committee of the Whole debates and amends the bill, but cannot technically pass it. Debate is guided by the sponsoring committee, and time is divided equally between proponents and opponents. The committee decides how much time to allot each person. Amendments must be germane to the subject of a bill – no riders are allowed. The bills are reported back to the House (to itself), and are voted on. A quorum call is a vote to make sure that there are enough members present to have a final vote. If there is not a quorum, the House will adjourn or will send the Sergeant at Arms out to round up missing members.

Senate: Debate is unlimited unless cloture is invoked. Members can speak as long as they want, 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 – The bill is voted on. If passed, it is then sent to the other chamber, unless that chamber already has a similar measure under consideration. If either chamber does not pass the bill, then it dies. If the House and Senate pass the same bill, it is then sent to the President. If the House and Senate pass different bills, they are sent to a Conference Committee. Most major legislation goes to a 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, who are appointed by the presiding officers of the committee that originally dealt with the bill. The conferees from each chamber work to maintain their version of the bill.



- If the Conference committee reaches a compromise, it prepares a written conference report, which is submitted to each chamber.
- The conference 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 a 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/her 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.

