

How a Bill Becomes a Law

Steps in the Legislative Process

Bill Drafted and Introduced

A Member of Congress introduces the bill to their respective chamber. This bill might have a companion bill in the other chamber. Upon introduction, the bill is assigned a bill number. The bill number is essential for identifying and tracking the bill. The bill is then assigned to the chamber's respective committee that handles policy issues related to the changes that the bill is intended to make.

Committee Action (or inaction)

With the bill assigned to its committee, there are many options for its future. It might be left to sit while the committee works on other bills that are considered higher priority. Hearings might be held to consider the merits of the bill. For the bill to progress, it must be submitted for markup.

Committee vote

After markup, the committee votes to move the bill out of committee and to the floor of its chamber for a vote. Often before the vote is held, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) will produce a cost estimate for the bill to be enacted. The CBO score is required before floor activity can take place.

Floor Activity

Only a fraction of bills considered by committees reach the floor for a vote. At this stage, the full chamber debates and might changes to the bill. Then, the bill is voted on. If it passes, it is sent to the next chamber and repeats the process of introduction, committee assignment, and so on.

President's Desk

After both chambers pass the bill, it is sent to the President. The President can sign the bill into law or veto it. Vetoes are rare, but when they do occur, a 2/3 majority vote by both Chambers of Congress can override the veto and make the bill law.

Regulatory Action

When a bill becomes law, the relevant federal agency is responsible for enacting the law by way of spending funds, issuing regulations, etc.

Steps in the Advocacy Process

Bill Drafted and Introduced

Advocates and advocacy organizations recognize a problem that needs to be fixed through legislation. They suggest ideas for bills or even draft legislation. Advocates seek sponsors and cosponsors for a bill in both chambers. From the moment a bill is introduced until it passes a floor vote, advocates will ask legislators to sign on as cosponsors. The more cosponsors a bill has, the greater the odds of its passage.

Committee Action (or inaction)

Advocates and advocacy organizations contact committee members urging them to prioritize their bill. If a hearing is held, advocates provide testimony or suggest questions to supporters on the committee to ask. During markup, advocates work with committee members to ensure that the intent and effectiveness of the bill remain intact.

Committee vote

Advocates lobby committee members leading up to the vote. After the vote, advocates thank members who supported the bill—even if it does not pass the committee. The CBO score for a bill can help advocates and legislators understand how much a proposed bill will cost.

Floor Activity

Advocates bolster a swell of outreach through grassroots, coalitions, Congressional champions, and the media to send a message to legislators that this bill is a priority issue. After the vote, advocates thank Congressional supporters, even if the bill does not pass.

President's Desk

Advocates and advocacy organizations continue to rally support for the bill to make it clear to the Administration that this bill is a priority issue and will be celebrated if passed into law. If the bill is signed into law, advocates thank the President.

Regulatory Action

Advocates observe how the law is enacted. If the law is implemented differently than intended, advocates work with regulatory agencies, Congress, and the Administration to provide feedback and seek pathways for continued improvement.