

# How a Bill Becomes a Law

The most important job of Congress is to review and pass laws. Every law begins as a bill, or proposed law. Any member of Congress can propose a new bill. Thousands of new bills are proposed every year. Only a small percentage ever becomes laws. This is because every bill must go through a series of steps before it can become law. At any point in this process the bill might “die” or fail to go forward. New bills may be introduced in either house of Congress: either the Senate or House of Representatives. The one exception is a bill to raise taxes: these bills must always begin in the House of Representatives. For this example, we will assume the bill starts in the House of Representatives.

The first step in the process is the introduction of the bill. This is done differently in the House and Senate. In the House, the bill is dropped into a special box called a “hopper”. In the Senate, a Senator must stand and read the proposal for his bill. Also during this step, the bill is referred to the proper committee. In the House, the Speaker of the House decides which committee will review the bill. In the Senate, the majority and minority leader decide together which committee will consider the bill.

Both the House and the Senate have committees. These are small groups of Congressmen who do most of the work of reviewing proposed bills. Committees are very important. Without committees, it would be impossible for every Congressperson to read and review every proposed bill. Committees help decide which bills are important enough to be debated and voted on by the full House and Senate. Different committees have different areas of responsibility. Bills that would make changes to the military, for example, would be reviewed by the Armed Services Committee. Bills that would affect workers would be referred to the Labor Committee.

The second step in the process is the subcommittee. Subcommittees are small groups that work within committees and are responsible for reviewing specific bills. In both houses, subcommittees study bills and hold hearings. During hearings, Congress invites concerned citizens to come before the subcommittee and give testimony either for or against a proposed bill. For example, if a subcommittee was considering a bill about health care, they might invite medical professionals to come give their opinions on the bill. The subcommittee can also make changes or amendments to the bill. This is also called “marking up” the bill. The subcommittee then makes a recommendation either for or against the bill to the full committee.

The third step in the process is the full committee. After hearing the recommendations of the subcommittee, the full committee then votes on whether or not to recommend the bill. If they vote to approve the bill, the bill then gets debated by the entire House or Senate. If the full committee does not approve the bill, then the bill goes no further and “dies”. Most proposed bills fail to get approved by the full committee. That is, most bills “die” in committee.

If the bill passes the committee, it then goes on to the fourth step: the floor debate. In this step the entire House or the entire Senate get to debate for or against the bill and suggest additional changes or amendments. Floor debates are handled differently in the House and Senate. In the House, a rules committee decides how much time will be allowed for debate. The Rules Committee also decides how many changes or amendments can be added. In the Senate, there is no Rules Committee. The Senate allows unlimited time for debate and any number of amendments may be added. Sometimes Senators will add amendments that are completely unrelated to the bill. These are known as “riders”. Because time for debate is unlimited, Senators may “filibuster”. This means they continue the debate so long that the bill is never voted on. This is another way to “kill” a bill. After debates, the full House or Senate vote to pass or reject the bill. If the bill is approved by one house, it then goes to the other house to be voted on.

Assuming the bill has been passed by both houses of Congress, it then goes on to the fifth step: Conference Committee. A conference committee is made up of members from both houses. Since the two houses might have passed different versions of the same bill, the Conference Committee works out any compromises. The Conference Committee makes sure that both houses pass identical bills. The revised compromise bill is then sent back to the House and Senate for a final vote.

The sixth and final step is Presidential Action. Before any bill can become law, it must be approved by the President. The President has two main options when he receives a bill from Congress. The President can sign the bill and make it a law. He can also veto, or reject the bill. Congress can try to override the President's veto, but they need to pass the bill again with a 2/3 majority in both houses. This rarely happens.

Given all of the steps involved in the process, you can see why so few bills become laws.