

How a Bill Becomes a Law



Going from a bill to a law is much like a game of Chutes and Ladders. You go up four squares and then slide back down a little, or sometimes a lot. Because Congress was created to check and balance power, deciding on actions and new legislation can take time and multiple consideration from different committees.

1. A bill is introduced

- a. This can be done with either the senate or the house of representatives
 - i. Many times two bills are introduced (one to each side of congress)
- b. Any member can introduce a piece of legislation
- c. The bill is assigned to a committee for review

2. Committee meeting

- a. Bills may go through more than one committee or split for review
- b. Speaker of the House can set time limits on committees
- c. Bills are placed on calendars for their respective committees
- d. Steps by the committee
 - i. Comments about the bill's merit are requested by government agencies
 - ii. Bills may be assigned to sub-committees
 - iii. Hearings may be held
 - iv. Sub-committees report their findings to the rest of the committee
 - v. Marking-up the bill
 1. They revise and make additions
 2. A "clean bill" can be introduced as a new bill with the proposed amendments and have to be sent to the floor again – in this case the original bill is discarded
 - vi. The chamber must approve, change, or reject all committee amendments before conducting a final passage vote
 - vii. In the House, bills go to the Rules committee before the floor
 1. Sets rules determining how the bill will be considered by the House
 2. A "closed rule" sets strict time limits on debate and forbids amendments
 3. This process can be bypassed
 - a. Members can move rules to be suspended
 - i. 2/3 vote
 - b. A discharge petition can be filed
 - c. Using a Calendar Wednesday procedure
 - i. Committees can bring up any bill for consideration that has been reported on the floor on or before the previous day
 - ii. Debates may only go on for two hours
 - d. Things that can go wrong
 - i. If no action is taken on the bill, it dies
 - ii. A discharge petition can release bills without a proper committee vote
 1. Needs to be sign by a majority of the House membership

3. On the floor

- a. Legislation is put on the Calendar
 - i. House of Reps
 1. Bills are placed on one of four calendars
 2. The Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader decide what will reach the floor and when
 - ii. Senate
 1. Placed on the Legislative Calendar
 2. The Majority Leader decides on what will reach the floor and when

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3. Bill may be brought to the floor whenever a majority of the Senate chooses
 - b. Debating
 - i. House of Reps
 1. Must follow the rules put in place by the Rules committee
 2. Time is divided equally between supporters and opponents
 3. Amendments must be relevant to the subject of the bill
 - a. No riders are allowed
 4. The bill is reported back to the House and is voted on
 - a. There must be enough members present to have a final vote
 - b. If there are not enough members, the House will suspend or send someone out to round up missing members
 - ii. Senate
 1. Members can speak as long as they want
 2. Amendments can be relevant to the bill or not
 - a. Riders can be offered
 - b. Bills can be offered as amendments to other bills
 - c. Voting
 - i. Voting begins
 1. If passed it is sent to the other chamber of Congress
 2. If either chamber rejects it, the bill dies
 3. If they both pass the bill, it is sent to the President
 4. If there are two separate but similar bills that are passed, they are both sent to Conference Committee
4. **Conference Committee**
 - a. Members from each house meet and work out their differences
 - b. Once they reach a compromise they prepare a conference report and submit it to both chambers
 - c. The report must be approved by both the House and the Senate
 5. **The President's vote**
 - a. If the President signs off the bill, it becomes a law
 - b. If the bill is not signed within 10 days one of two things can happen
 - i. If Congress is in session, it becomes a law
 - ii. If Congress breaks before the 10 days, it does not become a law (Pocket Veto)
 - c. The President can also veto or reject the bill and send it back to Congress
 - i. The chamber that originally proposed the bill can try to override the veto by a 2/3 vote
 - ii. If the bill is voted on by both houses and passed, it becomes a law
 6. **A law is born**
 - a. If the President signs the bill it becomes a law and is assigned an official number
 - b. If the President's veto is overridden by Congress, it becomes a law and is assigned an official number