

“How a Bill Becomes a Law”

*The Congress consists of two chambers, the **Senate** and the **House of Representatives**. Each state elects two senators. But every state elects representatives based on its population.*

A "new" Congress convenes every two years, in the January following a November congressional election. The Congress is new in the sense that the entire House of Representatives is elected every two years, even though only about one-third of the Senate is elected biennially. Congresses have been numbered consecutively since the first Congress, which began in 1789.

Typically, each Congress meets in two annual "sessions," one in its first calendar year and another in the second calendar year. Thus, the first session of the 115th Congress occurs in 2017, and the second in 2018. A bill is, technically, available for consideration throughout an entire Congress, unless it is defeated somewhere along the way. However, if a bill has not been acted on before the end of a Congress, it has to be reintroduced in a succeeding Congress and begin the legislative process all over again.

The Long Road of Legislation

Introducing a bill is the first important step toward legislation, but it is only the beginning. A proposed bill must be forwarded to committees, amended, debated, and then if it passes in one House of Congress, it moves to the next. Here is the short version of what happens to a bill once it has been introduced or sponsored.

1. **Introduction.** The bill is introduced by a member of Congress, usually in the House. Sometimes it is introduced with a statement which provides immediate information about the bill and its importance.
2. **Committee.** Next, the bill is assigned to Committee. The House has about 20 standing committees for reviewing bills.
 - The committee studies the bill, often hearing testimony from experts. Then it may make amendments or changes, which is known as the "mark up." The committee may decide to table the bill, which means it is put aside so the House cannot vote on it. Or it may release the bill, with a recommendation to pass it, or revise the bill and then release it. Releasing a bill is called "reporting it out."

3. **Calendar.** The released bill goes on a "calendar" -- a list of bills awaiting action. The House Rules Committee may call for the bill to be voted on quickly, limited in debate, or prohibit amendments. Undisputed bills may be passed by unanimous consent.
4. **House Debate.** The bill goes to the floor of the House for consideration. A complete reading of the bill occurs. If the bill passes by simple majority, the bill moves to the Senate.
5. **Senate.** The bill is introduced in the Senate, where it is then assigned to a new committee. The Senate has about 20 Standing Committees.
6. **Senate Debate.** Once the committee releases the bill, it goes to the Senate floor. Bills are debated in the order they come from the committee. The Senate can debate a bill indefinitely. Once the debate is over, the bill is voted on. A simple majority passes it.
7. **Conference Committee.** The bill now moves to yet *another* committee! The Conference Committee is made up of members from each House. This group works out any differences between versions of the bill. The revised bill is sent back to both houses for their final approval. At this phase, the combined bill will often receive a new number. The bill is then printed by the U.S. Government Printing Office in a process called *enrolling*. The clerk from the House that introduced the bill certifies the final version.
8. **Signing or Veto.** Now known as an *enrolled bill*, it is signed by the Speaker of the House, and the Vice President, who is also the leader of the senate. Then it is sent to the President, who has 10 days to sign it or veto it. If the President vetoes a bill, it can still become a law if two-thirds of each house vote in favor of it.

That was an overview of the basic process. Remember, the proposed bill can be stopped at any time until it is signed into law. This is why advocacy is so important: the interest, enthusiasm and important message behind the legislation must be sustained long after the bill has been introduced.

Only about 6% of all the bills introduced in the two-year life span of a Congress reach enactment? That means 94% are tabled or stopped somewhere else in the process!