



## How Bills Become Laws in Washington, D.C.

In Washington, D.C., politicians, lobbyists, and other participants understand that the policymaking process is fluid. Political gamesmanship and bargaining may hold up one bill for the sake of another, even if little or no linkage exists between the two.

In broad terms, a bill follows a similar path through both the House and the Senate:

### 1. The bill is drafted.

The bill must be introduced by a member of Congress.

### 2. A member of Congress introduces the bill, and the clerk assigns it a number.

Most bills never receive press attention after the introduction. Members of Congress often issue press releases regarding a bill's introduction, both to generate publicity for it and to create a paper trail for their reelection campaigns.

Other stakeholders who support or oppose the bill may get their opinions out too, either to make sure the bill is dead on arrival or to mobilize support to see it through to the next round.

### 3. The bill is referred to committee and (possibly) subcommittee.

The Speaker of the House and the presiding officer in the Senate are responsible for assigning a bill to a committee in their respective chambers. The committee chair may then assign it to a subcommittee.

Committee assignments are sometimes obvious; for example, the ratification of a free trade agreement falls under the House Ways and Means or Senate Finance subcommittees for trade. But often, which committee has jurisdiction over a bill is less clear-cut. Because committees can bring newly proposed legislation to a screeching halt, supporters naturally favor assigning a bill to a committee in which it's likely to receive the most support.

### 4. Committee hearings are held.

A committee hearing is the primary method for members of Congress to learn about an issue. Hearings usually include a panel of stakeholders from different sectors who discuss the many aspects of the bill in consideration. Hearings are usually required to be publicly accessible unless specific sensitivities, such as national security concerns, come into play.

Most bills never leave this stage. Instead they are *tabled*, which means set aside and likely never looked at again.

#### **5. The subcommittee and full committee members mark up the bill.**

When hearings are complete, subcommittee and committee members examine the bill line by line and offer amendments. While some amendments may be intended to genuinely improve the bill (at least in the proposing member's opinion), less politically palatable amendments known as *poison pills* may be offered with the intent to wreck the whole process and force supporters to vote against their own legislation later on.

#### **6. The bill is reported out and calendared.**

The bill and a written report about it prepared by the committee are sent to the relevant chamber and placed on its calendar.

#### **7. The bill is read on the floor of the chamber, and amendments are debated.**

As with the committee process, floor procedures are used by supporters in Congress to try to push a bill to a vote with minimum commotion and by opponents to effectively kill it in its tracks. This step is the final chance for stakeholders to influence the text of a bill before it goes to a vote.

#### **8. The bill goes to a full vote.**

Like any vote, congressional votes are moments when each side scrambles to mobilize supporters and make sure they show up to make their opinions count. While private sector and special interest groups obviously cannot vote themselves, they work to galvanize support within Congress, the media, and public opinion.

#### **9. A bill that passes goes to conference committee.**

The House and Senate must both pass the same bill for it to be forwarded to the President's desk. But at this stage, they likely have passed similar but still different pieces of legislation. To reconcile the differences, an ad hoc committee of members from both chambers (a *conference*) comes together and negotiates a common text.

#### **10. The House and Senate vote on the revised bill.**

After the conference committee hammers out a common text, both chambers vote on the revised bill. If the bill is approved, it's then delivered to the President's desk.

#### **11. The President signs or vetoes the bill.**

Even if he signs a bill into law, a president often uses so-called *signing statements* to attach his own interpretation to the measure, which can affect how it's implemented.

If a president vetoes a bill, Congress may override the veto with a two-thirds majority in each chamber.

#### **12. The bill becomes law.**

Laws often leave it up to federal bureaucrats and regulators to determine the exact

way in which it will be applied. Drafting such regulations is another key element of Washington's policymaking process.

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