
Chapter 2: ADVOCACY RESOURCES

How Laws Are Made

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The lawmaking process can be initiated in either chamber of Congress: the House of Representatives or the Senate. Revenue-related bills must originate in the House of Representatives. Legislators initiate the lawmaking process by crafting a bill or a joint resolution.

Although Members of Congress introduce bills and help maneuver legislation through the lawmaking process, congressional staff also play an essential role in the process. Members of Congress have staff working in their personal offices and those who serve as Chair or Ranking Members of committees or subcommittees have separate committee staff as well. Both personal and committee staff have significant input in the legislative process.

The following steps, adapted from the Government Printing Office (GPO), describe the process of enacting a bill that is introduced in the House of Representatives into law. Enacting a joint resolution into law requires the same steps as a bill.

ENACTING A BILL INTO LAW

1. When a representative has an idea for a new law, he or she becomes the sponsor of that bill and introduces it by submitting it to the clerk of the House of Representatives or by placing it in a box called the “hopper.” The clerk assigns a legislative number to the bill, with H.R. for bills introduced in the House of Representatives (and S. for bills introduced in the Senate). GPO then prints the bill and distributes copies to each representative.
2. The bill is assigned to a committee by the Speaker of the House so that it can be studied. The House has standing committees, each with jurisdiction over bills in certain areas. The standing committee, or often a subcommittee, studies the bill and hears testimony from experts and people interested in the bill. The committee then may release the bill with a recommendation to pass it, or revise the bill and release it, or lay it aside so that the House cannot vote on it. Releasing the bill is called “reporting it out,” while laying it aside is called “tabling.”
3. If the bill is released, it then goes on a calendar, which is a list of bills awaiting action. Here the House Rules Committee may call for the bill to be voted on quickly, may limit the debate, or may limit or prohibit amendments. Undisputed bills may be passed by unanimous consent or by a two-thirds majority vote if members agree to suspend the rules.
4. The bill then goes to the floor of the House for consideration and begins with a complete reading of the bill. Sometimes this is the only complete reading. A third reading of the title only occurs after any amendments have been added. If the bill is passed by simple majority (218 of 435), the bill moves to the Senate.
5. In order to be introduced in the Senate, a senator must be recognized by the presiding officer and announce the introduction of the bill. Sometimes, when a bill has passed in one chamber, it becomes known as an act; however, this term usually means a bill that has been passed by both chambers and becomes law.
6. Just as in the House, the bill is then assigned to a committee in the Senate. It is assigned to one of the Senate’s standing committees by the presiding officer. The Senate committee studies and either releases or tables the bill just like the House standing committee.
7. Once released, the bill goes to the Senate floor for consideration. Bills are voted on in the Senate based on the order in which they come from the committee; however, an urgent bill may be pushed ahead by leaders of the majority party. When the Senate considers the bill, it can be debated indefinitely. When there

is no more debate, there is a vote on the bill. In many cases, a simple majority (51 of 100) passes the bill. In recent years, however, the Senate has needed 60 votes to overcome the threat of a filibuster.

8. The bill now moves into a conference committee, which is made up of Members from each chamber of Congress. The conference committee works out any differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The revised bill is sent back to both chambers for their final approval. Once approved, the bill is printed by the GPO in a process called enrolling. The clerk from the introducing chamber certifies the final version.
9. The enrolled bill is now signed by the Speaker of the House and then the vice president. Finally, it is sent for presidential consideration. The president has 10 days to sign or veto the enrolled bill. If the president vetoes the bill, it can still become a law if two-thirds of the Senate and two-thirds of the House then vote in favor of the bill and override the veto.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Legislative Process, from the U.S. House of Representatives: <https://www.house.gov/the-house-explained/the-legislative-process>.

Ben's Guide to the U.S. Government: <https://bensguide.gpo.gov/how-laws-are-made>.