

HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

Creating laws is the U.S. House of Representatives' most important job. All laws in the United States begin as bills. Before a bill can become a law, it must be approved by the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate, and the President. Let's follow a bill's journey to become law.

The Bill Begins

Laws begin as ideas. These ideas may come from a Representative—or from a citizen like you. Citizens who have ideas for laws can contact their Representatives to discuss their ideas. If the Representatives agree, they research the ideas and write them into bills.

The Bill Is Proposed

When a Representative has written a bill, the bill needs a sponsor. The Representative talks with other Representatives about the bill in hopes of getting their support for it. Once a bill has a sponsor and the support of some of the Representatives, it is ready to be introduced.

The Bill Is Introduced

In the U.S. House of Representatives, a bill is introduced when it is placed in the hopper—a special box on the side of the clerk's desk. Only Representatives can introduce bills in the U.S. House of Representatives.

When a bill is introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, a bill clerk assigns it a number that begins with H.R. A reading clerk then reads the bill to all the Representatives, and the Speaker of the House sends the bill to one of the House standing committees.

The Bill Goes to Committee

When the bill reaches committee, the committee members—groups of Representatives who are experts on topics such as agriculture, education, or international relations—review, research, and revise the bill before voting on whether or not to send the bill back to the House floor.

If the committee members would like more information before deciding if the bill should be sent to the House floor, the bill is sent to a subcommittee. While in subcommittee, the bill is closely examined and expert opinions are gathered before it is sent back to the committee for approval.

The Bill Is Reported

When the committee has approved a bill, it is sent—or reported—to the House floor. Once reported, a bill is ready to be debated by the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Bill Is Debated

When a bill is debated, Representatives discuss the bill and explain why they agree or disagree with it. Then, a reading clerk reads the bill section by section and the Representatives recommend changes. When all changes have been made, the bill is ready to be voted on.

The Bill Is Voted On

There are three methods for voting on a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives:

1. Viva Voce (voice vote): The Speaker of the House asks the Representatives who support the bill to say "aye" and those that oppose it say "no."
2. Division: The Speaker of the House asks those Representatives who support the bill to stand up and be counted, and then those who oppose the bill to stand up and be counted.
3. Recorded: Representatives record their vote using the electronic voting system. Representatives can vote yes, no, or present (if they don't want to vote on the bill).

If a majority of the Representatives say or select yes, the bill passes in the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill is then certified by the Clerk of the House and delivered to the U.S. Senate.

The Bill Is Referred to the Senate

When a bill reaches the U.S. Senate, it goes through many of the same steps it went through in the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill is discussed in a Senate committee and then reported to the Senate floor to be voted on.

Senators vote by voice. Those who support the bill say "yea," and those who oppose it say "nay." If a majority of the Senators say "yea," the bill passes in the U.S. Senate and is ready to go to the President.

The Bill Is Sent to the President

When a bill reaches the President, he has three choices. He can:

1. Sign and pass the bill—the bill becomes a law.
2. Refuse to sign, or veto, the bill—the bill is sent back to the U.S. House of Representatives, along with the President's reasons for the veto. If the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate still believe the bill should become a law, they can hold another vote on the bill. If two-thirds of the Representatives and Senators support the bill, the President's veto is overridden and the bill becomes a law.
3. Do nothing (bill becomes a law OR pocket veto)—if Congress is in session, the bill automatically becomes law after 10 days. If Congress is not in session, the bill does not become a law.

The Bill Is a Law

If a bill has passed in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate and has been approved by the President, or if a presidential veto has been overridden, the bill becomes a law and is enforced by the government.