

How a Bill Becomes a Law

Thanks to the Founding Fathers' foresight, the process of creating a law does not rest in the hands of just one person -- or even one branch. While their directions were rather vague, the beliefs of those men who shaped our government in its infancy were strong enough, and open enough, to recognize that the process they put into place would continue.

In Article 1, Section 7, it simply states: *Every Bill which shall have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, shall, before it become a Law, be presented to the President of the United States.*

The process that has developed over time begins -- rightly so -- with the people. An idea for a bill can come from anyone. It is not a "right" reserved for specific groups. If a person has a concern, then he or she can contact their congressman or congresswoman and discuss this concern. While some concerns are not material for a federal bill (e.g., removing the yellow traffic light and having just the red and green traffic lights), others may have a lot of potential (e.g., ideas relating to tax reform or health care policy). Of course, members of Congress can also come up with bills. In the end, the needs of the people and of the nation drive the creation of bills.

Ideas are great, but they cannot do much on their own. The next step is to draft the bill. Then, introduce the bill.

Introductions are done by either senators or representatives. Senators introduce their bills to the Senate. Representatives introduce their bills to the House of Representatives. In each case, the bills are sent to the appropriate committee -- for example, farming bills are sent to the agriculture committee -- and the committee reviews it, marking it up as needed. Decisions are made in this step! Bills may be pigeonholed, which means that they are killed and go no further, or they will be sent to the floor for debate.

Bills that make it to the floor are debated. If the House of Representatives approves it by the end of the debate, then it is sent to the Senate. If the Senate approves it at the end of the debate, then it is sent to the House of Representatives. Bills that are not agreed upon are not sent onward.

Once the House's bill reaches the Senate, or the Senate's bill reaches the House, the whole debate process begins again... and the bill either passes onward or it dies.

If the bill makes it through the second debate, then it usually goes to the conference committee, a group that reconciles the changes made by the House and by the Senate. The conference committee comes up with the final version of the bill, which both the House and the Senate vote on.

If the two houses of Congress are in agreement, then the bill goes to the President of the United States, who has to decide if he or she will sign and pass the bill, turning it into a law... or if he or she will refuse to sign it, which means that it is vetoed. This decision typically kills bills, though if two-thirds of Congress votes for its passage, the vetoed bill is revived and becomes a law after all.

A final thought on the process: even though a bill can become a law, that does not always mean that it will stay a law. It is the job of the judicial branch to make sure that all laws passed are constitutional. In rare cases, if laws are found to be unconstitutional then they are struck down.

As you can see, this is not a simple process! Of the tens of thousands of ideas presented, only a fraction become bills, and of those bills, few ever make it out of committee. . While it can be frustrating to know that so few ideas make it to passage as a law, it can also be a relief in knowing that a tough process exists to screen out bad proposals