

# NATIONAL/FEDERAL ISSUES



## Part Two: Navigating the US Congress

Important:

- Maintain your sense of humor: it's hard for a bill to become a law. Consider watching Schoolhouse Rock's "I'm Just a Bill" video again: [Schoolhouse Rock: America - I'm Just a Bill Music Video](#)
- 20,000+ bills are introduced each congressional session.
- Only 3% per congressional session become a law.
- Stakeholders from across the country must spread a compelling message. Build a coalition of congressional reps, of champions of your cause, or it will not work.
- Individual bills can get packaged together.

**How a Bill Becomes a Federal Law:** (for much more detail on this process, click here <https://www.gcamerica.org/members/nal#resourceid=743> )

- Idea
- Creation and Introduction

**When legislation is introduced:**

- The bill is assigned a number, e.g. S.101 (Senate) or H.R. 101 (House of Representatives).
- The sponsor's name is on the bill. Original co-sponsors are also listed. Additional co-sponsors can sign on later, and sometimes legislators "market" their bills to collect as many as possible. Sometimes House members try to attract 218 sponsors—one more than half the entire House—to demonstrate the strength or popularity of the bill.
- Committee deliberations (some sub committees) and amendments
- Debates and votes (brought to the floor)
  - **Getting to the House floor:**
    - The House and Senate have different procedures for taking a bill to the Floor. With 435 members in the House, debate must be limited and streamlined. Otherwise even simple measures could require weeks of consideration before all members had had their say.
  - **Getting to the Senate Floor:**
    - With just 100 members, the Senate has not found it necessary to use a system of "rules" for consideration of bills. Nevertheless, the Senate has many procedures that are just as arcane as those in the House.
- Different versions may get passed in the Senate and Congress: must have a Committee work out the differences.

### **Conference:**

- In order to clear a measure for the president, both the House and Senate must pass it in identical form. If the versions passed by the two bodies do not differ very much, it is sometimes possible to avoid going "to conference." Instead, the body that acted last sends the bill back to the other body which can accept the other body's amendments or amend those amendments with further amendments and send it back. Through such a "ping-pong" procedure, final agreement can sometimes be achieved.
- More typically, however, each body appoints conferees who then meet to work out differences. On some bills, the differences are vast, particularly if the Senate added language which would be considered non-germane in the House or if

either body amended the text with a complete substitute. Staff prepare for conference by producing voluminous “side-by-side” documents showing, for each provision, the original law if any, the House version, the Senate version and an empty column for the conference decision.

- Conferees of each body vote as a unit. Thus there is no advantage for either house to appoint a large number of conferees. Eventually, a compromise is worked out.
- If conferees reach agreement, a conference report is written which is then submitted to both chambers for their approval.
- When both bodies have voted to accept the conference report, the enrolling clerk of the body where the bill originated prepares a final copy which is sent to the Government Printing Office for “enrollment,” a procedure which sometimes can sometimes require weeks and even months. Eventually the enrolled bill is presented to the Speaker of the House who signs it, and to the Vice President in the Senate. Then it is transmitted to the president.

#### **President’s action:**

- After receiving a bill, the president has 10 days (Sundays excepted) under the Constitution in which to act. If the president approves the bill, he signs it, giving the date.
- In the event the president does not approve a bill, but is unwilling to veto it, he may permit it to become law without his approval simply by not returning it within 10 days. When the 10-day limit extends beyond the date of final adjournment of Congress, if the president does not sign the bill before the 10 days are up, it fails to become a law. This is called a pocket veto.
- When Congress is in session and the president vetoes a bill, the bill is returned to the body where it originated together with the president’s veto message stating



his objections. A two-thirds vote of those present in both bodies is required to pass the bill, the president's veto notwithstanding. This is called a veto override.