

How do Bills become Laws?

Reading and Discussion

Bills are proposed laws that are introduced in **Congress**. Every year, thousands of bills are proposed before Congress, but only a small percentage of them actually become laws. There are several steps that happen before a bill can become a law. A bill begins as an idea for solving a problem. This idea can come from a special interest group, from the president, from a senator or representative, or from a citizen that has sent a letter to a senator or representative.

A senator or representative then prepares the bill, which means they write an explanation of it. A bill that is written by a senator is first introduced in the **Senate**. A bill written by a representative is first introduced in the **House of Representatives**. After the bill has been written and introduced, it is assigned to a standing committee which studies it and then does one of the following:

- Recommends that the bill be passed as it stands;
- Recommends changes to the bill;
- “Kills” the bill, which means that they are saying the bill should not be passed;
- Sets the bill aside for a long time, which results in the bill “dying” because no action is taken

After the committee has agreed, they vote to either kill the bill or to “report it out,” which means to send the bill to the Senate or the House for consideration.

A reported bill is put on the congressional calendar, and it will be reviewed to see whether it continues on or gets killed. The bill is discussed and then voted on. In the House, representatives have a time limit for how long they can speak about a bill, but in the Senate, senators can speak for as long as they want. In fact, when someone does not want a bill to pass in the Senate, a senator will sometimes talk for hours or even days about the bill. This is called a **filibuster**. A filibuster can only be stopped if three-fifths of the Senate vote to limit speeches to one hour.

After discussion, the bill is voted on. In order for a vote to take place, the majority of congressional members must be present. A majority is 51 in the Senate and 218 in the House. In order for a bill to pass, the majority of members present must vote in favor of the bill. Before it can become a law, both the Senate and the House must vote on it. If the bill originated in the House and passed in the House, it is then sent to the Senate for the senators to vote. Likewise, if the bill originated in the Senate and passed in the Senate, it is then sent to the House for the representatives to vote.

If a bill passes in both the Senate and the House, it is then sent to the president. The president can sign the bill into law or he can veto it. A veto is a formal rejection of a bill. If the president vetoes a bill, Congress can override the veto if two-thirds of the House and two-thirds of the Senate vote to override the presidential veto. While overrides are rare, they occasionally happen and they are another way that a bill can become law.

Name _____

Date _____

Activities

Activity A: Multiple Choice:

1. The idea for a bill can come for all of the following EXCEPT:
 - a. Special interest groups
 - b. The media
 - c. The president
 - d. senators

2. This means to send the bill to the Senate or the House for consideration:
 - a. kill it
 - b. pass it
 - c. report it out
 - d. veto

3. A majority in the senate is this many senators:
 - a. 218
 - b. 97
 - c. 135
 - d. 51

Activity B: Fill in the Blanks:

1. A _____ is a formal rejection of a bill.
2. If a bill passes in both the Senate and the House, it is then sent to the _____.
3. When a senator talks for hours or even days about the bill, this is called a _____.
4. A bill written by a representative is first introduced in the _____.

Activity C: True or False:

- ____ 1. If the president vetoes a bill, Congress can override the veto if two-thirds of the House and two-thirds of the Senate vote to override the presidential veto.

- ____ 2. A bill only needs to pass in the House or the Senate in order to become a law.

Name _____

Date _____

Answer Key

Activity A

1. The idea for a bill can come for all of the following EXCEPT:

- a. Special interest groups
- b. **The media**
- c. The president
- d. senators

2. This means to send the bill to the Senate or the House for consideration:

- a. kill it
- b. pass it
- c. **report it out**
- d. veto

3. A majority in the senate is this many senators:

- a. 218
- b. 97
- c. 135
- d. **51**

Activity B

1. A veto is a formal rejection of a bill.

2. If a bill passes in both the Senate and the House, it is then sent to the president.

3. When a senator talks for hours or even days about the bill, this is called a filibuster.

4. A bill written by a representative is first introduced in the House of Representatives.

Activity C

T 1. If the president vetoes a bill, Congress can override the veto if two-thirds of the House and two-thirds of the Senate vote to override the presidential veto.

F 2. A bill only needs to pass in the House or the Senate in order to become a law.