How Are Laws Made?

1.1 Welcome

Welcome to “How Are Laws Made?” an online civics tutorial for students in 7th grade.
1.2 Objectives

Think of the laws-big and small-that Americans need to follow every day. We are a nation of laws. But the law, or legislation, comes to be only at the end of a long and complicated process.

By the end of this tutorial, you should understand how a bill, an idea for a law, becomes a law.

You will see how bills are passed by Congress and signed into law by the President.

And you will understand how all three branches of government play a role in determining the laws of our land.

This complicated process ensures that our laws are fair and can withstand the tests of time.
1.3 Review: Three Branches of Government

First, let's review some things you probably already know.

The federal, or national, government of the United States is split into three branches. All three have a role to play in establishing our laws.

First, the legislative branch makes the nation's laws. This branch is known as Congress.

The executive branch carries out, or enforces the laws. The President of the United States is its leader.

And the judicial branch interprets the laws if there is confusion about what they mean. Our federal court system, with the Supreme Court at the top, makes up this branch.

Our government's system of checks and balances ensures that each branch is able to influence in some way the actions of the others. We will see this very clearly as we learn about the law-making process.
1.4 Review: Legislative Branch

Although all three branches of government are important, this tutorial will focus the most on the legislative branch, because of its important role in making laws.

In fact, making laws is the main job of the legislative branch. The word legislative means lawmaking.

What do you think the word legislator means? It means lawmaker, or a member of Congress.

How about legislation? Right! Legislation is just a fancy word for a law.

The two parts of Congress responsible for legislation are the House of Representatives and the Senate. They are equally important and must cooperate to make laws.

Remember that all Congressmen and women are elected by us, the voters. So who really decides what the laws will be? Ultimately, all of us do, through our decisions on Election Day.
1.5 Practice

Notes:

Let's try a quick, easy practice to make sure you've got all that. You'll see four terms on the left and phrases that describe them on the right. Drag and drop the phrases with your mouse so they match the correct terms.

Then click Submit to check your work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drag Item</th>
<th>Drop Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Target - Legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawmakers</td>
<td>Target - Legislators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Branch</td>
<td>Target - Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half of Congress</td>
<td>Target - Senate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Feedback when correct:

Nice work! Now let’s learn how lawmaking takes place.

Feedback when incorrect:

The correct matches are displayed here. Legislation refers to a law, and legislators are those who make it: the lawmakers. Congress is the legislative branch of our government, and it has two parts: the House of Representatives and the Senate.
1.6 How a Bill Becomes a Law

Notes:

Some people say laws are like sausages-you really don't want to know how they're made! Obviously, we don't agree, but the process is complicated.

Take a look at this diagram, which shows all the different stages a bill moves through to become a law. It looks a little like a roller coaster...or maybe the most complicated board game you've ever played.

Don't worry-we'll break the process down step by step.

Click Next when you're ready.

---

Step 1 Popup transcript

New bill is introduced.

---

Step 2 Popup transcript

House Committee formed. Committee debates, amends bill and votes.

---

Step 3 Popup transcript

House of Representatives votes on the bill.

---

Step 4 Popup transcript

Senate committee formed. Committee debates, amends bill and votes.
---

**Step 5 Popup transcript**
The Senate votes on the bill.

---

**Step 6 Popup transcript**
House re-votes or conference committee forms a compromise and both House and Senate re-vote.

---

**Step 7 Popup transcript**
President signs the bill into law or vetoes it.

---

**Judicial Review Popup transcript**
Checks & Balances. Supreme Court reviews *some* laws to make sure they are constitutional.
1.7 Step 1: Meet Mr. Bill

Notes:

Every federal law, no matter how significant, starts its life as a lowly bill. Think of a bill as a proposal for a law. Only a congressperson or senator can introduce one, but the idea for a bill can come from anywhere, including citizens, lobbyists, or even the president.

A bill can begin its life in either the House of Representatives or the Senate, although both must eventually approve it. For the purposes of our example, this bill will originate in the House. Its sponsor, the person who introduces it, is Congressman Riley of Florida. Mr. Riley gets a little scared when people drive too fast, so he is introducing a bill to create a national speed limit of 65 miles per hour on our nation's interstate highways.

Once it is introduced to the entire House of Representatives, the bill gets a number. We'll call this one H.R. 123456. The “H.R.” stands for “House of Representatives.”
1.8 Step 2: The House – Committee Assignment

The bill is next assigned to a committee, a smaller group of congressmen within the House of Representatives.

There are more than 20 committees in the House, covering topics such as the budget, energy, and homeland security, among many others. Each bill is sent to the most appropriate committee for study and debate.

Which of these committees do you think will study Congressman Riley’s bill? Click the best choice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Armed Services</td>
<td>This committee would deal with military matters. Think about our speed limit bill and try again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Right! Transportation means going places and moving things around, including cars and people. This is the committee that would take up discussion of our speed limit bill. Its full name is the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>This committee would deal with matters of international relations. Think about our speed limit bill and try again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>This committee would deal with farming matters. Think about our speed limit bill and try again.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.9 Step 2: The House – In Committee

Notes:

In the committee, which may or may not include Congressman Riley, the chairperson leads the 63 committee members in discussion and debate.

A number of things can happen now. Amendments, or changes, may be introduced to the bill. There may be public hearings and opportunities for supporters or opponents of the bill to speak for, or against it. The committee might call in experts or seek feedback from the public. All this can take quite a while.

Bills may be “tabled” in committee if there is little support for them, which means that they “die” and go nowhere. Many bills suffer this fate.

But our bill does not. After much discussion, the members of the Committee on Transportation vote on H.R.123456. By a vote of 33 to 30, the committee votes Yes on our bill.

Does this mean it is a law? Far from it! The bill is now added to the calendar of the House of Representatives for the entire body to debate and vote on it.
1.10 Step 3: House of Representatives

Notes:

On the appointed date, the entire House of Representatives, all 435 congressmen and women, take up discussion and debate of H.R. 123456.

This offers an opportunity for more edits, amendments, and even the addition of earmarks, which are pet projects of specific congressmen that might send money to their home states or districts in exchange for their support.

House members may give speeches speaking for-or against-the bill. Our bill's sponsor, Congressman Riley, would very likely speak to the House member in support of his own bill.

Pretend you are the congressman. In the box, type at least one strong argument he might make for instituting this new national speed limit. Remember, this law would apply to all the nation's interstates. Currently, states are allowed to set their own speed limits.

When you are satisfied with your response, click Submit.

Feedback:

Interesting! Did you include any of these ideas?

The new law would discourage speeding, so automobile deaths may go down.

A national speed limit would be less confusing for people traveling from state to state.

Identical road signs could be printed, which might save the government money.

If your answer was different from any of these, that’s OK, too!
1.11 What Do You Think?

What if you were a voting member of the House of Representatives? Would you vote Yes or No on Congressman Riley's bill? Click your answer.

---

Vote Feedback:
Thank you for your opinion! Your vote will be one of 435 that determines the fate of this bill.
1.12 Step 3: House Vote

Eventually, it will be time for the House of Representatives to vote. All it takes is a simple majority, or more than half, of the members to vote yes. That's 218.

So...does the bill pass? Yes! If not, this tutorial would be over.

By a comfortable margin, 240 to 195, the bill passes the House of Representatives.

Does this mean it is a law? Not even close! Now the bill is sent to the Senate, the other half of Congress.
**1.13 Practice**

**Notes:**

Let’s review the steps you’ve learned so far. See if you can put in correct order the first steps of how a bill becomes a law.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drag Item</th>
<th>Drop Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The bill is introduced by its sponsor and given a number.</td>
<td>Target - Step 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bill is sent to the appropriate House committee for discussion, debate and voting.</td>
<td>Target - Step 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The entire House of Representatives votes Yes or No on the bill.</td>
<td>Target - Step 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Feedback when correct:**

Correct! Let’s see what happens to our bill next.

**Feedback when incorrect:**

The correct sequence is shown here. Bills are first introduced by their sponsor, then go to a committee, and then are voted up or down by the entire House of Representatives.
Notes:

Now that it has passed the House, our bill goes to the United States Senate. Remember that the lawmaking process can move in either direction. Although this bill begins in the House and then goes to the Senate, it is just as likely for legislation to begin in the Senate and then go to the House.

The Senate follows the same steps we have already seen in the House. The bill is first sent to the appropriate Senate committee, in this case, the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. Here, the bill can once again be “tabled” or approved by the committee.

Luckily for our bill, the committee does approve it, but after one important amendment. Some senators on the committee think a 65 mile per hour speed limit is a little too slow. They recommend it be changed to 75 miles per hour.

By a majority vote of 16 to 8, the committee agrees, and approves the bill with the amendment.

Does this mean it is a law? No way!
1.15 Step 5: The Senate

Notes:

Just like in the House, all 100 Senators now have a chance to debate and vote on this amended version of the bill. All it takes is a simple majority, or more than half, of the members to vote yes. That's 51.

By a comfortable margin, 63 to 37, the bill passes the Senate.

Does this mean it is a law? Not on your life! There is more legislative work yet to be done.
1.16 Step 6: Conference Committee

Notes:

Although the Senate has passed the bill, there is one big problem remaining. Can you see what it is? The bill the Senate approved is no longer the same bill that the House of Representatives approved, because of the Senate amendment changing it from 65 to 75 miles per hour.

This means the bill needs to go back to the House-again-for a re-vote. In our case, the House members, including Congressman Riley, do not approve the Senate's version of the bill. Luckily, there's still a chance. When the House and Senate pass different versions of the same bill, a conference committee is formed to resolve the differences.

Conference committees include members of the Senate and the House, and if they fail to reach a compromise, the bill can die. Our bill, however...survives! The committee members reach a compromise that everyone can live with. Seventy miles per hour will be the new interstate speed limit. The compromise version of the bill goes back to the House and Senate for one last re-vote in each. In our case, the final version of the bill is approved!
1.17 Practice

Notes:
Let's review these last few steps. See if you can put in correct order steps 4 through 6 of how a bill becomes a law.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drag Item</th>
<th>Drop Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The bill is sent to the appropriate Senate committee for discussion, debate and voting.</td>
<td>Target - Step 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The entire Senate votes Yes or No on the bill.</td>
<td>Target - Step 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A conference committee resolves differences between the House &amp; Senate versions of the bill.</td>
<td>Target - Step 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Feedback when correct:
Correct! Let’s see what happens to our bill next.

Feedback when incorrect:
The correct sequence is shown here. Bills passed by the House next go to the Senate committee, and then are voted up or down by the entire Senate. Then a conference committee works out any needed compromises to resolve different versions of the bill.
Notes:

Congressman Riley must be feeling like a proud papa about now. The House and Senate both have approved his bill.

As you have seen, to become a law, a bill must pass through an obstacle course of difficulties, with many chances to fail. Most bills never make it this far.

So, does this mean it is a law? Of course not. The bill now proceeds to the desk of the President of the United States.
1.19 Step 7: The President

Notes:

The President is not a legislator, but he does play an important role in the legislative process. Any bill passed by Congress goes to the President's desk for his signature...or his veto.

Only bills signed into law with the President's pen become real, actual laws. But if the President believes that a law is bad, or wrong for our nation, he can veto it. In Latin, the word veto means “I forbid.”

If a bill is vetoed, is that the end of it? Probably, but not always. Congress can overrule a presidential veto with a two-thirds vote in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This is very difficult to achieve, so most vetoed bills do die.

But not our bill! The President, no speed demon, approves of the compromise bill that Congress passed. He signs it into law.
Notes:

Let's review all that you've learned. See if you can put in correct order steps one through seven to show how a bill becomes a law. Good luck!

**Correct Order**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>The bill is introduced by its sponsor and given a number.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>The bill is sent to the appropriate House committee for discussion, debate and voting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>The entire House of Representatives votes Yes or No on the bill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>The bill is sent to the appropriate Senate committee for discussion, debate and voting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>The entire Senate votes Yes or No on the bill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Conference committee resolves differences between the House &amp; Senate versions of the bill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>The president signs (or vetoes) the bill, and it becomes a law (or not).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Feedback when correct:**

Excellent work! That was a lot of steps, but turning a bill into a law is no easy task.

**Feedback when incorrect:**

The correct sequence is shown here. Please review this important information before moving on.
1.21 Checks and Balances: Judicial Review

Notes:

Congratulations, Congressman Riley! With the help of Congress and the President, your bill is now a law!

But will it remain one? Just like the executive branch, the judicial branch has a small but important role to play in our government's system of checks and balances.

The U.S. Supreme Court has the power of judicial review. This means that the Court can cancel out any law of Congress that it finds illegal or unconstitutional.

The Supreme Court doesn't strike down a law very often. Saying that Congress and the President both “got it wrong” is a big deal. But the power of judicial review remains one final check and balance on our legislative process.
1.22 Practice

Notes:

Time for one final practice before you finish this tutorial. Now that you have seen exactly how a bill becomes a law, see if you can match up each step in the lawmaking process with the branch of government responsible for that step. Click and drag each step to the correct branch of government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drag Item</th>
<th>Drop Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debates a bill in committee</td>
<td>Target - Legislative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tables” (kills) a bill</td>
<td>Target - Legislative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May review a law’s constitutionality</td>
<td>Target - Judicial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overrides a veto</td>
<td>Target - Legislative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs a bill into law</td>
<td>Target - Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes to approve a bill</td>
<td>Target - Legislative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vetoes a bill</td>
<td>Target - Executive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Feedback when correct:

Fantastic! Nicely done.
Feedback when incorrect:

Sorry. Let’s look at the right answers. The legislative branch, or Congress, debates bills in committees, can “table” them, votes to approve them, and can even override a presidential veto. The executive branch, or President, can veto a bill or sign it into law. And the judicial branch, or Supreme Court, has the power of judicial review, by which it determines a bill’s constitutionality.
1.23 Lesson Review

Notes:

In this tutorial, you have learned how laws are made in the United States federal government.

From bill to law, the legislative process has many steps and is complex, but this guarantees that the process is fair and has plenty of “eyes” monitoring it at each step.

Although Congress has the primary legislative role, our government's system of checks and balances ensures that each branch is able to influence in some way the actions of the others in the law-making process.

---

Credits

All images licensed from iStock.com and/or Thinkstock.com, unless otherwise noted.

- Photo of Bill: https://c2.staticflickr.com/8/7333/9740026677_4b606b959a_h.jpg


- Senate Seal: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f0/Seal_of_the_United_States_Senate.svg/2000px-Seal_of_the_United_States_Senate.svg.png

- Photo of President Obama: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Obama_signs_FDA_Food_Safety_Moderniz
• Congressman Jim Langevin Presides Over the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, https://www.flickr.com/photos/speakerpelosi/4832057388, CC by 2.0