



Week 3: How Bills Become Laws: All About Legislation

Do you ever wonder who made the laws we are expected to follow? Who gets to decide that you have to be 16 years old to get a driver's license? Essentially, who is in charge of deciding what is right and wrong? Well, you'll enjoy this week's lesson!

Every law that we follow started out as an idea, then a bill, and that bill had to go through an obstacle course to finally graduate and become a law by which you and I are expected to abide.

Let's take a look at how a bill grows, and the steps it takes to become a law:

1. **Idea.** Before a bill is born, it starts as an idea, such as that people need to be 16-years-old in order to drive. This can come from anyone, not just political leaders and officials. Did you know that even a citizen can propose an idea to become a bill? If any American citizen has a big idea that they think should be a new law, they can propose the idea to their elected officials, who will decide whether they agree. If they do, the officials will write a bill, and that bill will start the process toward becoming a law!
2. **Bill.** Once the idea has been turned into a bill, a Senator or Representative who will be the primary sponsor of the bill is responsible for introducing it to the other members of Congress.
3. **The Hopper.** A wooden box called "The Hopper" is where bills are placed before being sent to a committee. In the Hopper, the bill is assigned a legislative number.
4. **Committee.** When a Speaker of the House decides to move forward with the bill, he or she will send it to committee, where Representatives or Senators meet in a small group to discuss, research, and make any amends to it. Maybe they think that people need to be 18-years-old in order to drive. The

bill can be revised as necessary, and then, the committee votes to accept or reject the bill (original or with revisions).

5. **Congress.** After the bill is accepted by committee, it is sent to the House or Senate floor for debate. Then, members of the House and Senate will debate the bill and propose any changes before taking a vote. If the majority agree and vote to pass the bill, it moves to the other house to go through the same process of committees, debates and voting. Both houses must agree on the same final bill before it moves on to the President.
6. **The President.** Once the bill reaches the President, he or she can approve and pass the bill, veto (reject) the bill, or choose no action.

Presidential Action: What Happens?

If the President accepts the bill, he or she will sign and approve it, and the bill will become a law.

If the President vetoes the bill, Congress may override the veto (rejection) with 2/3 vote of those present in both the House and Senate, and the bill will become a law.

If the President decides to take no action, the bill may become a law if Congress is in session and does not get an answer from the President in 10 days.

Another option is available. If Congress goes out of session (adjourns) within the 10 day period after submitting the bill to the President, he or she can choose not to sign it, and the bill will not become law. This is called a **pocket veto**.

Federal Laws

There are hundreds of general and permanent federal laws for all American citizens. These can be found in the United States Code. They are laws on things like education, work & labor, hospitals, highways, drugs, crime, agriculture, patriotic observances, transportation, patents, commerce and trade, foreign relations, and so much more. While these laws are permanent, any proposed bill that becomes a law can change the way a general law is carried out. Laws determined at the federal level include:

- Social security (SSI) Laws
- Immigration laws
- Federal criminal laws (i.e. fraud)
- Bankruptcy laws

- Civil rights laws (i.e. anti-discrimination)
- Patent and copyright laws

State Laws

Each state's laws are made by state legislatures. State courts may review these laws for removal if they deem them as not agreeable with the state's constitution. Laws determined at the state level include:

- Welfare, public assistance & Medicaid
- Divorce and family matters
- Criminal matters
- Real estate & other property
- Business contracts
- Personal injuries
- Work injuries and workers compensation
- Wills, inheritances, and estates

Local Laws

Cities, towns, and counties usually have their own sets of laws and regulations regarding matters which are applicable to maintaining a safe, healthy and productive community. Laws determined at the local or municipal level include:

- Local and neighborhood safety
- Zoning laws
- Rent and other housing matters

Lobbying

We've talked about the steps of a bill, state & local laws, and how legislation is carried out. But there's something else that comes into play in all of this - lobbying.

What is lobbying? Simply put, it's the act of attempting to influence or persuade the actions, policies, or decisions of government leaders regarding laws.

A lobbyist is defined by Merriam-Webster as "one who conducts activities aimed at influencing or swaying public officials and especially members of a legislative body on legislation."

Most lobbying is aimed at the national level, typically toward executive teams, committees of Congress that consider laws, or agencies that are in charge of creating and enforcing rules and regulations.

Many lobbyists have past experience in government and have formed relationships with government officials, which gives them key insight into how best to lobby, based on their knowledge of the people they have worked with and how government is run.

What do lobbyists do? Lobbyists are professional advocates who speak at committee hearings, provide staff members with information and explain why a bill is necessary and what impact it will have if it becomes a law. They are paid by clients to bring issues before members of Congress and other government officials with the goal of changing legislation or enacting new legislation based on their client's special interest.

Do you think any differently about the legislation in our country and in our states, knowing that laws may have been created or changed due to lobbying?

Next week, we'll talk about campaigns and discover how politicians run for office, secure votes, and fund their race to office!

Source: <https://www.usa.gov/laws>