How a Bill Becomes a Law

Teacher’s Guide
INTRODUCTION
This Teacher's Guide provides information to help you get the most out of How a Bill Becomes a Law. The contents in this guide will allow you to prepare your students before using the program and present follow-up activities to reinforce the program's key learning points.

This program examines the process of making laws. The legislative branch of government, also known as Congress, is responsible for nominating, reviewing, and approving new laws. Whether a law is proposed in the Senate or in the House of Representatives, it must go through the same nine-step process. How a Bill Becomes a Law describes each step in this process and presents testimony from delegates, lobbyists, and representatives from special interest groups about the value of the United States legislative system.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After viewing the program, students will be able to:
- Define the system of checks and balances in government.
- Describe the roles and responsibilities of the legislative branch at the state and federal level.
- Identify the two houses of Congress.
- Identify the nine steps of the lawmaking process.
- Describe the roles of delegates, lobbyists, and other organizational representatives.

EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS
National Standards
This program correlates with the National Standards for Civics and Government from the Center for Civic Education and the National Standards for History from the National Center for History in the Schools. The content has been aligned with the following educational standards and benchmarks from these organizations.
- Understand the purposes and uses of constitutions.
- Understand the relationship of limited government to political and economic freedom.
- Identify the conditions under which constitutional government flourishes.
- Understand the necessity of politics and government.
- Understand shared powers and parliamentary systems.
- Identify the criteria for evaluating rules and laws.
- Identify the major responsibilities of state and local governments.
- Identify who represents you in legislative and executive branches of your local, state, and national governments.
- Understand the organization and the responsibilities of state and local governments.
- Understand distributing, sharing, and limiting powers of the national government.
- Understand the institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.
- Understand the extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800.

The National Standards for History, Basic Edition reprinted with permission from the National Center for History in the Schools.

English Language Arts Standards
The activities in this Teacher’s Guide were created in compliance with the following National Standards for the English Language Arts from the National Council of Teachers of English.
- Apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- Use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).
- Adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
Employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

Conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries.

Participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

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Technology Standards

The activities in this Teacher’s Guide were created in compliance with the following National Education Technology Standards from the National Education Technology Standards Project.

- Demonstrate proficiency in the use of technology.
- Practice responsible use of technology systems, information, and software.
- Use a variety of media and formats to communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences.
- Use technology tools to enhance learning, increase productivity, and promote creativity.
- Use technology to locate, evaluate, and collect information from a variety of sources.

The National Education Technology Standards reprinted with permission from the International Society for Technology Education.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

This thought-provoking video deciphers the legislative process by explaining how an idea becomes a bill and a bill is made a law. One-on-one interviews with prominent legislators, lobbyists, and special-interest group representatives carefully explain how a bill is conceived, moved through or killed in committee, amended, prepared for a vote, and sent for the president’s or governor’s signature. Straightforward presentation helps students evaluate how political, economic, social, regional, and moral issues are taken into consideration when legislators make laws that affect the people of the United States. Taking a look at both state and national legislatures, this important program opens viewers’ minds to the vital role the legislative process plays in their lives, and how individuals and groups can have a voice in shaping the laws that govern our country.

MAIN TOPICS

Topic 1: Defining Democracy
The program begins with an overview of the structure of government, including the three branches of government, the system of check and balances, and the roles and responsibilities of the legislative branch of government.

Topic 2: The Legislative Branch
This section of the program describes the legislative process for passing laws at the city, state, or national level. Some of the steps in this process include introducing the bill, sending it to committee, voting on it, getting approval in the alternate House, and obtaining the signature of approval from the chief executive.

Topic 3: Going to Committee
Over 10,000 bills are proposed each year, but only a handful are introduced in committee. This section of the program explains the review process of bills in committee, and describes how committees are formed.

Topic 4: Lobbying a Bill
A bill is likely to die in committee unless it has support from the delegates. A lobbyist takes on the role of presenting facts and information about a bill to the committee members, as discussed in this portion of the program.

Topic 5: Compromise
This section of the program emphasizes the importance of compromise. Viewers learn that a Conference Committee, consisting of members from both Houses, must work together to amend a bill so that it is acceptable to both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Topic 6: Becoming a Law
The last phase of passing a bill requires the signature of the president or governor. This section of the program outlines four scenarios that determine the fate of a bill.
FAST FACTS
- The Constitution of the United States was written in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1787.
- The U.S. Constitution has 4,400 words. It is the oldest and the shortest written constitution of any government in the world.
- The process for amending the Constitution is described in Article V.
- The first ten amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights.
- Congress has specific powers: to collect taxes, raise armies, declare war, regulate commerce, and provide for the general welfare.
- Congress enacts legislation, but cannot implement it.
- Each two-year term of the U.S. Congress is called a Congress.
- The House has an electronic voting system that automatically records the votes and displays them on a giant electronic board behind the Speaker’s desk.
- Congress has five types of committees — standing committees, subcommittees, special or select committees, joint committees, and conference committees.
- Since 1789, over 12,000 individuals have served as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate.
- On average, a House Member serves on two committees, and a Senator serves on four.
- Each House Member represents about 650,000 people; a Senator represents the entire population of a state.
- Composed of the House of Representatives and the Senate, Congress brings together 435 representatives of the people, 100 Senators from 50 states, and 5 delegates from the territories of the United States — an assembly of 540 to make the laws that govern the nation.
- The Senate has sometimes been called the upper body and the House, the lower body. These are popular misnomers, arising from the fact that when Congress first met in New York City, the Senate chamber was located on the floor above the House.

VOCABULARY TERMS
amendment: In government and law, an addition or alteration made to a constitution, statute, or legislative bill or resolution.
bicameral legislature: Refers to a two-house legislature.
Bill of Rights: The first ten amendments to the Constitution that were adopted in 1791. These are the basic rights that all Americans have and its purpose is to protect the people from the government.
bipartisan: Two-party. If a bill has bipartisan support, it means that both major political parties, the Republicans and Democrats, support it.
checks and balances: A system set by the Constitution in which the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government have the power to check each other to maintain a balance of power.
chief executive: A principal executive officer; a president of a republic; a governor of a state.
Congress: America’s legislative branch of government consisting of two chambers, the House of Representatives and the Senate.
consent: To agree or approve; to be in agreement in opinion or sentiment.
constitution: A group of customs, traditions, rules and laws that sets forth the basic way a government is organized and operated.
constitutional: A determination by the U.S. Supreme Court as to whether Congress enacted a law that is within the powers granted by the Constitution.
democracy: The governmental philosophy in which the people ideally have a high degree of control over political leaders.
exclusive branch: The U.S. President and the departments that carry out the laws of the federal government.
federal supremacy clause: This refers to Article VI, Section 2 of the United States Constitution which states that the Constitution and all federal laws and treaties shall be the supreme law of the land.
filibuster: The technique used in the United States Senate to delay proceedings and prevent a vote on a controversial issue.
founders: Individuals who made significant intellectual contributions to the Constitution.
framers: Individuals who helped craft the Constitution.
**full faith and credit clause:** A constitutional provision in Article IV of the Constitution that requires all states to honor the laws, judgments, and public documents of every other state.

**government:** The organization, machinery or agency through which a political unit exercises authority and performs functions and which is usually classified according to the distribution of power within it; the complex of political institutions, laws and customs through which the function of governing is carried out.

**House of Representatives:** The lower chamber, it is the larger of the two chambers of Congress. The number of representatives depends on each state's population but is limited to a total of 435 members.

**impeach:** To remove from office, especially for misconduct.

**initiative:** The procedure that allows voters to initiate legislation by obtaining signatures on a petition.

**joint committee:** A committee made up of members of both houses of government in order to speed action on legislation.

**judicial branch:** One of the three branches of our government; its purpose is to interpret laws.

**legislative branch:** The division of government that makes the laws; Congress.

**legislature:** Elected representatives.

**line item veto:** The authority of the executive (often the governor) to veto parts of bill without vetoing the entire piece of legislation.

**lobbyist:** A person who works for an organized special interest group, association, or corporation. An attempt is made to influence policy decisions primarily in the legislative branch.

**majority floor leader:** The legislative position held by the party member who is elected by the majority party in caucus or conference. The floor leader serves as the chief Senate spokesperson for their party, and manages and schedules the legislative and executive business of the Senate.

**minority floor leader:** The party leader in each house of government elected by the minority party.

**National Security Council:** A part of the executive branch of government that is a planning and advisory group whose function is to assist the president on matters of national security.

**necessary and proper clause:** The implied powers clause located in Article I, Section 8, Clause 18 of the Constitution. It states that aside from the enumerated powers given to the federal government, it also has the power to pass any law that can be traced back to those powers delegated in the Constitution.

**override:** To overrule; refers to the aspect of the checks and balances system in which Congress can override a presidential veto by a two-thirds vote.

**ratify:** To pass or approve.

**representative government:** An indirect democracy; a republic. This is when the people elect representatives to make laws for their benefit.

**reserved power:** Powers that are reserved for the states, as identified in the 10th Amendment.

**Senate:** One of the two houses of Congress, historically known as the upper house, that contains two representatives from each state regardless of population. Presently there are 100 members in this body.

**separation of powers:** The philosophy of a balanced government in which each of the three branches (executive, legislative, judicial) have their own powers.

**Speaker of the House:** The presiding officer of the United States House of Representatives who is selected by a caucus of his/her party, and is formally elected by the entire House.

**standing committee:** The name given to a permanent congressional committee.

**U.S. Supreme Court:** The highest federal court in the nation. U.S. Supreme Court justices are appointed by the president on the advice and consent of the Senate.

**unconstitutional:** A legislative act or presidential action that violates the Constitution based on the interpretation of the Supreme Court.

**unicameral legislature:** Refers to a one-house legislature.

**veto:** To reject or refuse to sign a bill from Congress. This is the check that the president has on the powers of the legislative branch of government.

**whip:** The party leader who is the intermediary between the leadership and the rank and file in the legislature.

**PRE-PROGRAM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**
1. What document describes the purpose of the legislative branch of government? What does it say this purpose is?
2. What is a democracy?
3. What are some of the powers of the legislative branch of government?
4. Describe a situation when you tried to convince a person or group that an idea you had was a good one.
5. What are some of the laws in our society? Can you think of any additional laws that this country should have?
POST-PROGRAM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What power does the legislative branch of government have to balance the power of the executive and judicial branches?
2. What power do the executive and judicial branches have to keep the legislative branch in check?
3. Describe the nine steps that a bill must go through before becoming a law.
4. How are the Senate and the House the same? How are they different?
5. Why might a president refuse to sign a bill?

GROUP ACTIVITIES

The Lobbyist
Break up the class into small groups. Each group will research some of the bills that have been introduced in Congress, and choose one that interests them. Then, divide each group into two competing sides to act as lobbyists for that particular bill. Half of the group will lobby in favor of the bill, and the other half will lobby against it. Both arguments will then be presented before a committee (the rest of the class). After all arguments have been made, the committee will vote on whether or not to accept the bill. Have students keep track of the progress of the actual bill and report on its status at a later date.

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT PROJECTS

Positive Publicity
Use the Internet, local newspapers, or library resources to find out more about your state representatives and senators. What bills have they voted on in the last six months? Did they vote for or against these bills? Which person voted most often the way you would have voted? Create a persuasive campaign advertisement for this representative or senator (election poster, advertisement, radio announcement, etc.). Choose a particular topic or angle you would like to focus on and support your ad with facts regarding the legislator’s voting history, one or more committees he or she has served on, and any bill(s) he or she has introduced. Be sure to accurately cite all information sources.

INTERNET ACTIVITIES

Leading Congress
Pretend that you have just been elected to the House of Representatives for a district in the United States and you need to make an informed decision about electing your political leader. Depending on your political party affiliation, you will be voting for the Speaker of the House (if your political party is in the majority) or the Minority Leader (if your political party is in the minority). You must decide the qualifications the person should have, and explain your position to your constituents.

Step 1: Choose a district and find out who its Congressperson is, and to which political party he or she belongs.

Step 2: Create a list of high-quality Internet sites that have information about congressional leadership positions, and the people who serve in these positions.

Step 3: Determine which political party is in the majority in the House.

Step 4: Research the responsibilities of the Speaker of the House and the Minority Leader.

Step 5: Write a report to your constituents explaining what your leader does, and what qualities you think are necessary for him or her to be successful.


ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Q: Laws for the United States are made by __________.
   (a) the president
   (b) Congress
   (c) the Senate
   (d) the Supreme Court

A: (b)

Feedback: Congress consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Both chambers are responsible for making the laws.
Q: Which of the following is not included in the legislative branch of the U.S. government?
   (a) Congress 
   (b) Senate 
   (c) House of Representatives 
   (d) The President
A: (d)
Feedback: Although the president has the power to veto laws made by the legislative branch, he is part of the executive branch of government.

Q: Members of the House of Representatives are elected for ________ years.
   (a) two 
   (b) four 
   (c) six 
   (d) eight
A: (a)
Feedback: The length of term for members of the House of Representatives is two years.

Q: The number of representatives from each state is determined by ______________.
   (a) population 
   (b) total square miles 
   (c) major party affiliation 
   (d) all of these
A: (a)
Feedback: States with larger populations have more representatives than states with smaller populations.

Q: The length of a term for a Senator is ____ years.
   (a) two 
   (b) four 
   (c) six 
   (d) eight
A: (c)
Feedback: Senators used to be appointed by the president, but now they are elected by the people for a six-year term.

Q: Voters in every state elect two or three senators, depending on the state’s population. 
   (True or False)
A: False
Feedback: Every state has two senators, regardless of the size of the state. The number of representatives depends on the state’s population.

Q: After a bill has been sent to the President, it becomes a law if he does not sign it within __________.
   (a) 1 week 
   (b) 10 days 
   (c) 15 days 
   (d) 1 month
A: (b)
Feedback: If a president doesn’t sign a bill after 10 days, it automatically becomes a law. However if Congress’s session ends before the 10 days expire, then the bill does not become a law. This is known as a “pocket veto.”

Q: Congress has the power to:
   (a) propose amendments to the Constitution.
   (b) elect the president, in some instances.
   (c) print money.
   (d) all of these.
A: (d)
Feedback: Congress has the power to propose amendments to the Constitution, print or coin money, and to elect a president if there is not a majority of electoral votes.

Q: Congress has the power to override a president’s veto by a two-thirds majority vote in at least one of the two houses. (True or False)
A: False
Feedback: If the president vetoes a bill, then it must be approved by two-thirds majority in both of the houses.
Q: What are the nine steps a bill must go through in order to become a law?

Answer/Feedback: (1) A bill must be introduced in one of the houses by a delegate; (2) The bill goes to committee for evaluation; (3) A floor vote is taken to approve the bill; (4) The bill is sent to the other house for review; (5) The bill goes to committee in the second house; (6) A floor vote is taken in the second house; (7) A conference committee is created with members of both houses to review the bill; (8) The bill is sent to both houses for a floor vote; (9) The bill is sent to the chief executive for a signature of approval.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The White House
www.whitehouse.gov

The U.S. Constitution Online
www.usconstitution.net

Government Resources
THOMAS (The Library of Congress)
http://thomas.loc.gov/links

The National Archives
America’s Historical Documents
www.archives.gov/historical-docs

GovSpot
U.S. government, state government & more
www.govspot.com

Govtrack.us
a civic project to track Congress
www.govtrack.us

OpenCongress
Track bills, votes, senators, and representatives in the U.S. Congress
www.opencongress.org

United States Senate
www.senate.gov

United States House of Representatives
www.house.gov

The Supreme Court of the United States
www.supremecourtus.gov

PUBLICATIONS


OTHER PRODUCTS

**U.S. Government: How It Works**
While the complexities of the American political system have never been greater, the right visual aid can help students sift through them—and even develop a passion for the subject. This six-part series is an ideal tool for introducing and exploring key aspects of U.S. government and public policy. Using a combination of eye-catching graphics, dynamic video footage, and interviews with legal and political scholars, each episode celebrates a particular dimension of American democracy while equipping students to candidly discuss political issues. Topics range from the Constitution and the three branches of government to the electoral process and the responsibilities of citizenship. Viewable/printable instructor’s guides are available online. A Films for the Humanities & Sciences Production. 6-part series (21-26 minutes each) © 2010

**Moyers: Report from Philadelphia Video Clip Collection—Themes**
This two-part set composed of 76 clips (2:35 each) is arranged into groupings that take a thematic approach to the Constitutional Convention of 1787. A viewable/printable instructor’s guide is available online. 2-part set.

**Themes from the 1787 Constitutional Convention—Part 1**
This program uses 38 video clips (2:35 each) to explore seven themes that emerged during the Constitutional Convention of 1787, some of which are still relevant today. (104 minutes)

**Themes from the 1787 Constitutional Convention—Part 2**
This program uses 38 video clips (2:35 each) to explore seven more themes of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, including National Powers: War, Taxes, and National Defense. (104 minutes)
Order #: 39942, www.films.com, 1-800-257-5126

**The Amendments to the Constitution: Bill of Rights and Beyond**
This comprehensive three-part series explores each Constitutional amendment, its origins, its real-world applications, its history of interpretation in America’s courts, and its implications for the future. A Cambridge Educational Production. 3-part series (43-61 minutes each)

**Bill of Rights: Bill of Responsibility**
Bill Maher hosts this witty inquiry into the meaning of the U.S. Constitution in our lives today.

**Symbols of Freedom, Posters**
This laminated poster set beautifully captures the reassuring dignity and inspirational power of six national icons while providing dozens of fascinating facts about them.
Order #: 36962, www.cambridgeeducational.com, 1-800-468-4227