

Main Idea

The main job of Congress is to make laws. The process of making laws is well established and orderly.

Reading Focus

1. How are bills introduced in Congress?
2. What happens to a bill in committee?
3. What happens to a bill on the floor of the House and Senate?
4. What is a conference committee?
5. What actions can a president take on a bill?

Key Terms

rider

joint resolution

concurrent resolutions

discharge petition

Committee of the Whole

quorum

roll-call vote

conference committee

pocket veto

Bills in Congress (p. 150)

Laws start out as bills introduced in Congress. Ideas for bills come from many sources, including constituents, interest groups, the president, and members of Congress. Only a member of Congress can introduce a bill.

Introducing Bills Both senators and House members can introduce bills. Any bill for raising revenue must come from the House. By custom, appropriations bills also come from the House. In the House, a member introduces a bill by placing it in a wooden box called a hopper. A senator hands the paperwork to a clerk. Bills in the House are assigned the letters “H.R.” and a number. Senate bills are labeled with “S.” and a number.

There are two types of bills: public or private. Public bills affect the entire country. Private bills affect only one person or a small group.

A bill may cover one subject or several. Some bills have riders attached to them. A **rider** is a provision, or measure, that bears little relationship to the bill’s main topic. The goal of a rider is to add an unpopular measure to a bill that has a good chance of being passed. A rider may also be added in hopes of killing a bill.

Other Types of Action House and Senate members also deal with other types of measures in addition to bills. A **joint resolution** is much like a bill—it follows the same procedures as a bill, and it has the force of law if it is passed by both houses of Congress and is signed by the president. Joint resolutions are used for out-of-the-ordinary circumstances, such as the passing of a constitutional amendment. Congress also sometimes considers **concurrent resolutions**, by which both houses of Congress address matters that affect the operations of both chambers or express an

opinion. These are not signed by the president and do not have the force of law.

Finally, each chamber may also pass a resolution that applies only to matters within that chamber. Such resolutions can be used to express opinions on certain subjects and do not have the force of law.

Reading Check Summarizing What are some of the legislative actions that Congress can take?

Bills in Committee (pp. 150–153)

Most of the work on bills takes place in committee. Here, bills are studied and adjusted, or they may die if committee members do not act on them.

Referral Bills are assigned to committees in a process known as referral. The Speaker is mostly responsible for referring bills in the House. In the Senate, the majority leader assigns bills. The bill may go to one or more committees, depending on the subjects covered by the bill. The committee may send the bill to one of its subcommittees for further study.

Committee and Subcommittee

Hearings Committees or subcommittees often hold public hearings on bills. Witnesses may appear to speak about the bills. Sometimes witnesses are forced to appear by subpoena. Who appears to testify is controlled by the chair of the committee, who is a member of the majority party.

The Subcommittee's Report After hearings the subcommittee issues its report. The bill will be reported favorably, unfavorably, or without comment. Or, the subcommittee may recommend that the committee not act on the bill, thereby killing it. House subcommittees may also amend the bill. In the Senate, amendments are made by the full committee.

The Markup Process Markup occurs in the full committee, which hears any subcommittee reports, debates the bill further, and adds any amendments. Then, members vote on how to report the bill out of committee—favorably, unfavorably, or without recommendation. If many changes have been made, the committee may submit an entirely new bill. If the committee takes no further action on the bill, it will die in committee. In the House, however, a majority of members may sign a **discharge petition**, forcing the bill out of committee. Although they are rare, discharge petitions have been used successfully.

House Rules Most bills pass through the Rules Committee before reaching the full House. The members of the Rules Committee are chosen by the Speaker and the minority leader. The rules assigned by the committee determine how a bill will be debated or amended.

There are three main types of rules: open, closed, and modified. Open rules allow amendments to a bill. Closed rules mean that there can be no amendments. Modified rules limit amendments to certain parts of the bill. Rules also limit the time available for debate. Some bills, such as those for the federal budget, can bypass the Rules Committee. Also, if two-thirds of the House agrees, rules can be suspended, or set aside, for some noncontroversial bills.

Reading Check Identifying

Supporting Details What is the role of a subcommittee?

The Bill on the Floor (pp. 153–154)

Once a bill leaves a committee and receives a rule, it goes to the full House or Senate for consideration. The process differs somewhat in the two chambers.

The Bill in the House The steps in the House are:

1. The rules of the Rules Committee are adopted.
2. The bill *may* be debated by the whole House. In many cases, however, the House forms itself into a **Committee of the Whole**. In effect, all House members become a single committee. The Speaker names a member of the majority party to serve as chair. For the Committee of the Whole, the **quorum**, or the number needed to legally conduct business, is only 100. This allows the House to function when many members are not present.
3. Debate occurs, and time is divided equally between the two parties. Amendments, if any, are made. Amendments are supposed to be related to the subject matter of the bill, but this does not always happen.
4. The Committee of the Whole dissolves when its work is done.
5. The House first votes on amendments to the bill, then the bill and its amendments as a whole. The most important votes are usually record votes, in which each member is required to publicly state his or her vote. Such a vote is sometimes called a **roll-call vote**. According to the Constitution, a roll-call vote takes place when one-fifth of the lawmakers present demand it.

The Bill in the Senate The Senate does not have a Rules Committee or a Committee of the Whole. In addition, Senate rules generally do not limit debate or the right to offer amendments. A senator can request that such limits be made. A request requires the unanimous consent of the Senate to be granted. The unanimous-consent requirement opens the door to the filibuster, discussed in Section 4. The Senate can end debate with a three-fifths majority vote on a cloture motion.

When debate is complete on a bill, the Senate votes on the bill and its amendments. Important bills are subject to roll-call votes.

Reading Check Contrasting How does floor debate on a bill differ in the House and Senate?

The Conference Committee

(p. 154)

Bills can become law only after they are passed in identical form by both houses of Congress. Any differences between House and Senate versions of a bill must be resolved before the bill can be sent to the president for signature. For major bills, resolving the differences between the House and Senate versions is the job of a **conference committee**. Members from both chambers are named to the committee. In the House, the Speaker names the members; in the Senate, the presiding officer names the members.

If a conference committee cannot reach an agreement, the bill may die. Most of the time, the committee reaches agreement and issues a conference report, which is given to both houses. No changes may be made to the report unless a chamber requests a change from the conference committee and it is granted. If and when both sides accept the report, it goes to the president.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea

What is the purpose of a conference committee?

Presidential Action on a Bill

(p. 155)

The president may act on a bill in one of several ways.

1. The president may sign the bill.
2. The president may choose not to sign the bill. After 10 days (not counting Sundays), if Congress remains in session, the bill becomes law. But, if

during those 10 days Congress adjourns—ends its session—the bill does not become law. This last tactic is known as a **pocket veto**.

3. The president may veto the bill and send it back to the house it came from with a “veto message” that includes specific objections.

Presidents have used the veto at varying levels over history. Congress can override a veto with a two-thirds majority vote in each chamber. Overrides are rare. Governors have line-item veto power—the ability to veto specific parts of a bill—but the Supreme Court has ruled that it is

unconstitutional for the president to have this power.

President George Bush has issued few vetoes but has frequently used signing statements that declare his plan to enforce the law in a certain way. Many presidents have used signing statements. Some people believe that they are an appropriate use of presidential power, while others think that they limit the powers of the legislative and judicial branches.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea What are the different ways the president can respond to a bill?

SECTION 5 ASSESSMENT

1. **Recall** What are the types of measures considered by Congress?
2. **Identify** What is the purpose of a **discharge petition**?
3. **Describe** What is the significance of the **Committee of the Whole**?
4. **Recall** Who makes up a **conference committee**, and what is its purpose?