

# ***OUR FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, HOW A “BILL” BECOMES A “LAW***

## **FEDERAL BILLS**

A proposed piece of legislation is called a bill. It may be introduced in either the House of Representatives or the Senate and is numbered sequentially during each 2-year session of Congress. The first bill introduced in the Senate during a session is designated S.1; likewise, the first bill introduced in the House is labeled H.R. 1. About 10,000 bills are introduced during each Congress, but very few will go on to become laws.

After a bill is passed in one chamber, it is sent to the other chamber for consideration. A bill must be approved in identical form by both the Senate and the House of Representatives, or it cannot be sent to the President for signature. It is important to note that a bill that is not passed during a specific Congress (e.g., 106th Congress) does not carry over to the next Congress (e.g., 107th Congress). If the sponsors of failed legislation want the next Congress to consider it, the sponsors must submit the measure in the form of a new bill. A measure resubmitted in a new Congress gets a new bill number.

Once a bill has been introduced, it is referred to a committee for review. Frequently, the first step in the committee's analysis of the proposed legislation is to hold hearings.

## **HEARINGS**

Congress will frequently hold hearings before a bill is introduced. These hearings - generally held by either a standing or special committee in one of the chambers -- can be used to discuss controversial situations, to explain or help determine the need for legislative intervention, or to bring useful information to the Congress prior to its consideration of a particular bill.

There are three different types of committees:

**Standing committees** - permanent Congressional bodies that are assigned a particular area of expertise and routinely handle all bills in that area (e.g. Ways & Means).

**Special committees** - formed to handle technical or complex issues (e.g. the Senate Special Committee on Aging). Once a special committee has delivered its report to Congress, it is dissolved.

**Conference committees** - used to mediate differences between House and Senate versions of a bill.

## **REPORTS**

After a committee reviews a bill, makes amendments, and analyzes its content, the committee will decide if the bill should go for a vote by the full chamber which introduced the bill. If the committee recommends passage, it will issue a report to the chamber.

Committee reports are generally given more weight than other legislative history documents in constructing a legislative history, because committee members are the legislators most intimately familiar with the intent behind the bill, its language and effects. Note: bills which die in committee do not have reports.

## **CONGRESSIONAL DEBATES**

Congressional debates occur on the floor of the House and the Senate. During the debates, members of Congress offer arguments for or against the pending legislation. Frequently, a member of Congress will offer interpretations of confusing or obscure language or provide insight into the goals of the bill.

## **CONFERENCE COMMITTEE REPORTS**

Remember that a bill can only be sent to the President for signature if each chamber passes it in identical form. If different versions of a bill are passed by the House and the Senate, a conference committee consisting of members from both bodies is formed to work out the differences in the two bills and come up with a compromise bill. Once completed, the compromise version of the bill is then sent to each chamber for final approval. This compromise version of the bill will be accompanied by a report from the conference committee.

Conference committee reports are similar in scope and substance to a committee report, except that their function is to explain how and why the Conference Committee harmonized the different houses' versions of the bill. Conference committee reports are especially influential in determining legislative intent, because it is during this process that a committee made up of members of both

houses (rather than a single committee from one house) compromise on differing language and state their rationales for settling on one version over others.

## **PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENTS**

The final step before a bill becomes a law is the presidential signature. Once a bill has passed both the House and the Senate, it is forwarded to the President, who can either sign the bill enacting it into law or veto the bill, sending it back to Congress. When acting on a bill, the President often issues a statement which gives his reasons for the action or his opinion as to what the bill means. These statements made by the President are also a part of the legislative history.



