HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW

in Plain English

How Congress Turns an Idea into Federal Law, Step by Step

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How a Bill Becomes Law in Plain English: How Congress Turns an Idea into Federal Law, Step by Step

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Quotations from the Constitution of the United States come from the transcription published by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. Quotations from House, Senate and other federal government publications are works of the U.S. government.

This book explains how federal laws are made, in everyday words. It does not take sides on any issue, party or law, and it is not legal advice. House and Senate rules, web addresses and phone numbers change, and everything in this book was checked in October 2026. For the latest rules, see the official sources listed in the back.

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How to Use This Book

Most of us learned how a bill becomes a law in a school lesson that took about ten minutes. A bill starts in Congress, both chambers pass it, the President signs it, and it's law. That's true as far as it goes. But if you've ever watched the news and wondered why a bill with plenty of support never got a vote, or why the Senate needs 60 votes for some things and 51 for others, the ten-minute version leaves you guessing.

This book fills in the rest, in plain words. I'll walk you through the whole trip a federal bill takes, from somebody's idea to a printed law, and I'll explain the terms you hear on the news along the way: committee markup, the Rules Committee, suspension of the rules, filibuster, cloture, conference committee, pocket veto and more.

What this book covers

This book is about how Congress makes federal laws. It also covers three things people often mix up with laws passed by Congress: executive orders signed by the President, regulations written by federal agencies, and rulings handed down by the courts. You'll find a short chapter on the federal budget, a chapter on how you can take part, and a chapter on how state legislatures compare.

It does not tell you what any law should say, and it doesn't take sides on any issue or party. The process works the same way no matter who is in charge, even when the people in charge use it in different ways.

Where the facts come from

The steps in this book come from official sources: the Constitution itself, the rules of the House of Representatives, the Senate's own explanations of its procedures, and *How Our Laws Are Made*, a guide written by the Parliamentarian of the House (the House's expert on its rules). The full list is in the back, by chapter. House and Senate rules can change, so everything here was checked against the rules in effect in October 2026.

How the book is laid out

Each chapter follows the bill one step further. Words in **bold** are terms worth knowing, and they're defined where they first appear and again in the glossary. Boxes marked "Tip" point out something useful. Each chapter ends with a few "Check Yourself" questions, and the answers are in the back. Chapter 14 follows two real bills from start to finish, so you can see the steps play out. In the back you'll also find a one-page summary of the whole process, a glossary, and the list of sources.

Chapter 1: Where Lawmaking Starts

Federal lawmaking starts with the very first sentence of the Constitution after the Preamble. Article I, Section 1 says: "All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives."

That one sentence tells you two big things. First, the power to make federal laws belongs to Congress, not to the President or the courts. Second, Congress has two parts, called **chambers**, and a bill has to get through both of them. A system with two chambers is called **bicameral**.

The House of Representatives

The House has 435 voting members, a number set by federal law after the 1910 census. Seats are divided among the states by population, so a large state like California has many representatives and a small state has as few as one. Every member of the House is up for election every two years.

To serve in the House, the Constitution says a person must be at least 25 years old, a citizen for at least 7 years, and live in the state they represent.

The House also has six members who can't vote on bills when the full House votes: a **Resident Commissioner** from Puerto Rico and **Delegates** from the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands. They can introduce bills, serve and vote on committees, and speak in debate.

The House is led by the **Speaker**, who is chosen by the members and is usually the leader of the party with the most seats, the **majority party**. The Speaker has a lot to say about which bills reach the floor and when.

The Senate

The Senate has 100 members, two from each state no matter how many people live there. Senators serve six-year terms, and the terms are staggered so about one-third of the Senate is up for election every two years. Since the 17th Amendment was ratified in 1913, senators have been

elected directly by the voters of their state. Before that, state legislatures chose them.

A senator must be at least 30 years old, a citizen for at least 9 years, and live in the state they represent.

The Vice President of the United States is the President of the Senate, but votes only to break a tie. Day to day, the person who sets the Senate's schedule is the **Majority Leader**, the leader of the party with the most senators.

A "Congress" is two years long

You'll often hear about "the 119th Congress." Each Congress lasts two years, starting in January after a national election. The 119th Congress runs from January 2025 to January 2027. It's divided into two **sessions**, one for each year.

This matters for bills. A bill has to pass both chambers and become law during the Congress in which it was introduced. If it doesn't, it dies when that Congress ends. To try again, someone has to introduce it again with a new number and start from scratch.

Equal partners, with a few differences

You may hear the Senate called the "upper" chamber and the House the "lower" one. The House Parliamentarian's own guide says those labels don't really apply, because both chambers have equal power to make laws. There are a few differences the Constitution builds in:

- Bills to raise taxes must start in the House (Article I, Section 7). By tradition, the yearly spending bills start in the House too.
- Only the Senate votes to approve treaties and confirm the President's nominees, such as Cabinet members and federal judges.
- The House impeaches (formally charges) federal officials, and the Senate holds the trial.

Tip: Want to see the exact words? Article I of the Constitution covers Congress, and Section 7 is the short paragraph that lays out how a bill becomes law. It's worth reading once in full.

Check Yourself

1. Which part of the Constitution gives Congress the power to make federal laws?
2. How many voting members does the House have, and how many members does the Senate have?
3. What happens to a bill that hasn't become law when a Congress ends?
4. What kind of bill must start in the House?

Chapter 2: Four Kinds of Legislation

Not everything Congress votes on is a bill. There are four forms a proposal can take, and each one has its own label. Once you know the labels, a lot of what you see on the news or on Congress.gov starts to make sense.

Bills

A **bill** is the form used for most laws. A bill that starts in the House is labeled "H.R." plus a number, such as H.R. 1. The letters stand for "House of Representatives," not "House resolution," which is a common mix-up. A bill that starts in the Senate is labeled "S." plus a number. A bill keeps its number all the way through the process.

Every bill opens with the same words, set by law back in 1871: "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled."

There are two types of bills:

- A **public bill** affects the public in general. Almost every bill you hear about is a public bill.
- A **private bill** affects one named person or business, such as a person's immigration case or a claim against the government.

A bill can start in either chamber, with one big exception from the Constitution: bills to raise revenue (taxes) must start in the House.

Joint resolutions

A **joint resolution** is labeled "H.J. Res." or "S.J. Res." The word "joint" doesn't mean it starts in both chambers at once. It starts in one, like a bill. In practice there's little difference between a joint resolution and a bill. Both have to pass both chambers and go to the President, and both become law the same way.

There's one important exception. A joint resolution that proposes an amendment to the Constitution needs a two-thirds vote in each chamber, and it does **not** go to the President. It goes to the Archivist of the United

States, who sends it to the states. It becomes part of the Constitution only when three-fourths of the states ratify it.

Concurrent resolutions

A **concurrent resolution** is labeled "H. Con. Res." or "S. Con. Res." It's used for matters that affect both chambers, such as setting a joint session or adopting the yearly budget plan. Both chambers pass it, but it doesn't go to the President, so it is **not a law**. The Supreme Court made that clear in 1983 in *INS v. Chadha*.

Simple resolutions

A **simple resolution** is labeled "H. Res." or "S. Res." It deals with the business or opinion of one chamber only, such as setting its rules or honoring someone. Only that chamber votes on it, and it isn't a law either.

Form	Label	Goes to the President?	Becomes law?
Bill	H.R. or S.	Yes	Yes, if enacted
Joint resolution	H.J. Res. or S.J. Res.	Yes, except proposed constitutional amendments	Yes, if enacted (an amendment needs the states instead)
Concurrent resolution	H. Con. Res. or S. Con. Res.	No	No
Simple resolution	H. Res. or S. Res.	No	No

Tip: When you look up a bill on Congress.gov, the label tells you a lot. If it says "H. Res." or "S. Res.", you're looking at something only one chamber votes on, and it won't become a law.

Check Yourself

1. Does "H.R." stand for "House resolution"?
2. Which two kinds of legislation go to the President and can become law?
3. Where does a joint resolution proposing a constitutional amendment go after Congress passes it?
4. Is a concurrent resolution a law?

Chapter 3: From Idea to Bill

Every law starts as an idea. You might ask, "Whose idea?" The honest answer is almost anyone's.

Where ideas come from

The House Parliamentarian's guide lists several common sources:

- **Members of Congress.** A member may have promised a law during a campaign, or found a problem with an existing law after taking office.
- **Constituents.** People and groups can send ideas to their representative or senators. The First Amendment protects the right to "petition the Government for a redress of grievances."
- **State legislatures.** A state legislature can pass a resolution asking Congress to act. These are called memorials.
- **The President and federal agencies.** The executive branch often sends Congress drafts of bills it wants passed, called **executive communications**. The biggest one each year is the President's budget request.

Ideas can come from anywhere, but a bill has to be introduced by a member of Congress. When the executive branch sends over a draft, the chair or the top minority member of the committee that handles the subject often introduces it.

Writing it down

Writing a law is a skill. Every word matters, because judges, agencies and citizens will read it for years to come. Members can get help from the Office of the Legislative Counsel in each chamber. Those offices help put a member's idea into proper legal language.

Introducing a bill in the House

In the House, any member, Delegate or the Resident Commissioner can introduce a bill while the House is in session. They do it by dropping it into the **hopper**, a wooden box at the side of the rostrum in the House

Chamber. No permission is needed. The member's signature has to be on the bill. Under current House rules, the sponsor must also file a short statement, printed in the Congressional Record, naming the power in the Constitution that allows Congress to pass it.

The member who introduces the bill is the **sponsor**. Other members can sign on as **cosponsors** to show their support. There's no limit on the number of cosponsors for a public bill.

The Clerk gives the bill its number. Then the Speaker, with help from the Parliamentarian, **refers** it to the committee or committees that handle that subject. A bill about farm programs goes to the Agriculture Committee, a tax bill goes to the Ways and Means Committee, and so on. A big bill can be sent to several committees, each looking at its own part.

Introducing a bill in the Senate

In the Senate, a senator usually introduces a bill by handing it to a clerk at the presiding officer's desk. A senator can also stand up on the floor and introduce it with a speech. The bill is then referred to the committee that handles most of its subject.

Where you can follow along

Once a bill is introduced, its text, sponsor, cosponsors and every action on it show up on **Congress.gov**, which the Library of Congress calls the official website for U.S. federal legislative information. Search by the bill number or a keyword.

> **Tip:** Search by the bill number, not the nickname you hear on the news. Bills often get catchy names, and two bills can have very similar ones, but the number is unique within each Congress.

Check Yourself

1. Who can introduce a bill in Congress?
2. What is the hopper?
3. What extra statement must a House sponsor file with a new bill?
4. What is the official website for following federal legislation?

Chapter 4: Committees, Where Most of the Work Happens

If you only remember one thing from this book, make it this: committees are where a bill gets its closest look, and a bill the committee never acts on usually goes no further. The House Parliamentarian's guide calls committee action "perhaps the most important phase of the legislative process." It's where a bill gets studied line by line, and it's where the public gets its chance to be heard.

What a committee is

A **committee** is a smaller group of members who focus on one area, such as agriculture, armed services, education or taxes. Both the House and the Senate have their own **standing committees**, which are permanent and carry over from one Congress to the next. Most committees split their work further among **subcommittees**.

Seats on each committee are divided between the two parties, and the majority party holds more of them. The senior member of the majority party on a committee is usually its **chair**. The top member of the minority party is called the **ranking member**.

Step 1: Getting input

One of the first things a committee does with a bill is ask the federal departments and agencies that would be affected what they think. It may also ask the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Congress's own watchdog agency, for its views. Those reports carry weight, but the committee doesn't have to follow them.

Step 2: Hearings

If a bill is important enough, the committee or subcommittee holds a **hearing**. Witnesses testify: Cabinet officers, agency officials, experts, business owners, advocates and everyday citizens. Some come on their own and some are called by subpoena.

In the House, committees must announce a hearing at least one week ahead, unless they find good cause to start sooner. Hearings are open to the public unless the committee votes to close part of one, for reasons such as national security. Each committee member gets five minutes to question each witness. In the House, the minority party can also call its own witnesses for at least one extra day of hearings if a majority of its committee members ask for it.

Step 3: Markup

After hearings, the subcommittee or full committee holds a **markup**. That's the meeting where members go through the bill section by section, offer changes called **amendments**, and vote on them. Each member has one vote, regardless of party.

At the end, the committee votes on whether to **report** the bill, which means send it to the full chamber. It can report the bill favorably, unfavorably, or with no recommendation, and with or without amendments. If there are many changes, the committee may roll them into one big amendment that replaces the whole text, or write a new "clean" bill that includes them.

When a committee doesn't act

Here's the part the ten-minute version leaves out. A committee doesn't have to act at all. It can **table** a bill, which sets it aside, or simply never schedule it. When that happens the bill usually goes nowhere, and when the Congress ends, it dies.

The House does have a way around a committee that won't act. It's called a **discharge petition**, and Chapter 5 explains it.

Step 4: The committee report

When a House committee reports a bill, its staff writes a **committee report**. It explains what the bill does and why the committee supports it, goes through it section by section, and shows exactly how it would change

current law. It also includes a cost estimate, usually from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). Members who disagree can add their own views.

Committee reports matter long after the vote. Courts, agencies and the public use them to understand what Congress meant when it passed a law.

> **Tip:** Committee hearings are usually streamed live and posted online. If a bill you care about gets a hearing, watching it is one of the best ways to learn the arguments on every side.

Check Yourself

1. What is a markup?
2. What does it mean when a committee reports a bill?
3. What happens to a bill a committee never acts on?
4. Who usually provides the cost estimate in a House committee report?

Chapter 5: On the House Floor

Once a committee reports a bill, it goes on a **calendar**, which is the House's list of bills that are ready for the floor. But being on the calendar doesn't mean a bill will get a vote. Bills are placed on the calendar in the order they're reported, and if the House took them up strictly in that order, an urgent bill could sit behind hundreds of others. So the House uses several shortcuts to decide what comes up and when. The majority party's leaders, led by the Speaker, have the most say.

Path 1: Suspension of the rules

Many bills, especially ones with wide support, come up under a procedure called **suspension of the rules**. It's fast, with strict limits:

- Debate is limited to 40 minutes, split evenly between supporters and opponents.
- No amendments can be offered from the floor.
- It takes a two-thirds vote of the members voting to pass.
- Under House rules, suspension motions are taken up on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Because of the two-thirds bar, suspension works for bills that most members of both parties support.

Path 2: A "rule" from the Rules Committee

Bigger or more disputed bills usually need a **rule**, which is a special resolution written by the **Rules Committee**. The Rules Committee has more majority party members, in proportion, than other committees.

A rule is like the instructions for that bill's trip across the floor. It sets how long debate will last and who controls the time. It also says which amendments, if any, members can offer. A rule that limits or blocks floor amendments is called a **closed rule** or a **modified closed rule**. The full House has to vote to adopt the rule before it can take up the bill.

Tip: When you hear that the House "passed the rule" on a bill, that's not the vote on the bill itself. It's the vote on the ground rules for debating it. The vote on the bill comes later.

The Committee of the Whole

Many bills, including tax and spending bills, are debated in what's called the **Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union**. Despite the name, it's not a separate group. It's the full House sitting under looser rules to speed things up. For example, only 100 members are needed to do business, instead of a majority of the House, and the Speaker hands the gavel to another member to preside.

Debate usually happens in two stages:

1. **General debate.** Supporters and opponents speak for and against the bill, for the amount of time the rule allows, split evenly between the two sides.
2. **The amendment stage.** Members offer the amendments the rule allows. Under the **five-minute rule**, the member offering an amendment gets five minutes to explain it, and one opponent gets five minutes to respond.

House rules also require amendments to be **germane**, which means on the same subject as the bill. You can't attach an unrelated proposal to a bill in the House. (The Senate is different, as you'll see in Chapter 6.)

When the amendment stage is done, the Committee of the Whole "rises," and the full House votes on the amendments that were adopted and then on the bill.

The motion to recommit

Right before the final vote, a member who opposes the bill, usually from the minority party, gets one more chance: a **motion to recommit**. It asks the House to send the bill back to committee. Under current House rules, this motion can't carry instructions to change the bill. If it passes, the bill

goes back to committee; if it fails, the House moves straight to the vote on passage.

How the House votes

The House votes in a few ways:

- **Voice vote.** The presiding officer asks those in favor to say "Aye" and those opposed to say "No," then judges which side was louder.
- **Division vote.** Members stand to be counted for and against.
- **Recorded vote.** Each member's vote is recorded by name, using the House's electronic voting system. Under the Constitution, a recorded "yeas and nays" vote must be taken if one-fifth of the members present ask for it.

A bill passes the House with a simple majority of those voting, as long as a quorum (a majority of the members) is present. If every member votes and every seat is filled, that's 218 of 435.

Going around a committee: the discharge petition

Back in Chapter 4, I mentioned that a committee can bury a bill by never acting on it. The House has a way around that called a **discharge petition**. Once a bill has been in committee for 30 legislative days, any member can file a petition at the Clerk's desk to pull it out. If a majority of all House members (218 when every seat is filled) sign it, the petition goes on a special calendar, and after a waiting period one of the signers can bring it up for a vote. The names of members who sign are made public.

A discharge petition goes around both the committee and the chamber's leaders, so it only works when a majority of all members are willing to put their names on it.

After the House passes a bill

When the House passes a bill, a clerk prepares a clean, official copy with every adopted amendment in exactly the right place. This is called **engrossing** the bill, and the engrossed copy is signed by the Clerk of the House. Technically, the bill is now called "An Act," because one chamber

has passed it, though most people still call it a bill. Then it's sent to the Senate.

Check Yourself

1. What vote does it take to pass a bill under suspension of the rules?
2. When the House "passes the rule" on a bill, has it passed the bill?
3. How many members does the Committee of the Whole need to do business?
4. How many signatures does a discharge petition need?

Chapter 6: On the Senate Floor

When a House-passed bill reaches the Senate, it's referred to a Senate committee, which can hold its own hearings and markup and report it with or without changes. Often the Senate has been working on its own version of the same idea at the same time. Either way, the floor is where the Senate really differs from the House.

The House has 435 voting members and strict rules to keep things moving. The Senate has 100 members and rules that protect each senator's right to speak and to offer amendments. That one difference explains most of what you hear about the Senate.

Getting a bill to the floor

In the Senate, the Majority Leader decides what comes to the floor. A bill can be brought up in a few ways:

- **Unanimous consent.** The Majority Leader asks to take up a bill, and if no senator objects, it's done. The House Parliamentarian's guide notes that the Senate relies heavily on unanimous consent. A noncontroversial bill can pass in minutes with little or no debate.
- **A unanimous consent agreement.** For bigger bills, the leaders often work out an agreement ahead of time, sometimes called a time agreement. It can limit debate and list the amendments that will be voted on. Like any unanimous consent request, a single senator's objection can stop it.
- **A motion to proceed.** If senators won't agree, the Majority Leader can make a motion to take up the bill. That motion itself can be debated at length, which leads to the next topic.

The filibuster

Senate rules generally don't limit how long senators can debate. A **filibuster** is the Senate's own word for "action designed to prolong debate and delay or prevent a vote on a bill." Senators who oppose a bill can keep

debate going, by speeches or by other delaying steps, so the bill never gets to a final vote.

Cloture: how the Senate ends debate

The way to end a filibuster is called **cloture**. Here's how it works for most bills:

1. At least 16 senators sign a cloture motion.
2. The vote comes one hour after the Senate meets on the second day after the motion is filed. For example, a motion filed on a Monday gets its vote on Wednesday.
3. Cloture passes with three-fifths of all senators "duly chosen and sworn." With no vacancies, that's 60 votes.
4. After cloture, debate is limited to 30 more hours, and amendments must be germane.

This is why you hear that a bill "needs 60 votes in the Senate." Passing the bill itself only takes a simple majority. The 60 votes are needed to end debate so the final vote can happen.

> **Tip:** The Senate adopted its first cloture rule in 1917, which took a two-thirds vote. In 1975 it lowered the bar to three-fifths of all senators, where it stands today for most legislation.

Exceptions to the 60-vote rule

A few things can't be filibustered, or follow different rules:

- **Budget reconciliation bills.** The Congressional Budget Act of 1974 sets up a special process for bills that carry out the yearly budget plan. In the Senate, debate on them is limited, so a simple majority can pass them. In exchange, they have to stick to budget matters. A Senate rule known as the **Byrd Rule** lets any senator object to a provision that's "extraneous," meaning not really about the budget, and it takes three-fifths of the Senate (60 votes) to waive that objection.

- **Nominations.** In 2013 and 2017, the Senate changed its practice so that cloture on all presidential nominations, including Supreme Court justices, takes only a majority of senators voting. That change applies to nominations, not to bills.

Amendments in the Senate

Here's another big difference from the House. In the Senate, amendments generally don't have to be germane. A senator can offer an amendment on a completely different subject from the bill, unless cloture has been invoked, the bill is a general spending bill, or the senators have agreed otherwise. On spending bills, Senate rules bar a **rider**, which is an amendment that adds new legislation to an appropriations bill, unless two-thirds of the Senate votes to allow it.

How the Senate votes

The Senate votes by voice or by a recorded roll call, where the clerk calls each senator's name. A bill passes with a majority of senators voting, a quorum being present. If the Senate is tied, the Vice President can cast the deciding vote.

Check Yourself

1. What is cloture?
2. How many votes does cloture take on most bills?
3. How many votes does it take to pass a bill in the Senate once debate is over?
4. Name one exception to the 60-vote rule.

Chapter 7: Getting Both Chambers to Agree

Here's a rule that has no exceptions: before a bill can go to the President, the House and the Senate must pass the exact same text, word for word and comma for comma. Close isn't good enough.

That's easy when the second chamber passes the bill without changing it. Then it's done, and the bill goes on to be prepared for the President. But often the second chamber makes changes. When that happens, the two chambers have two main ways to settle their differences.

Way 1: Trading amendments back and forth

The first chamber can simply accept the other chamber's changes. If the changes are small or noncontroversial, that's often the end of it.

If not, a chamber can change the bill again and send it back, and the other chamber can accept that version or change it again. This back-and-forth is known as an **exchange of amendments** between the chambers. It keeps going until one chamber accepts the other's latest version, or until the effort stalls.

Way 2: A conference committee

For bigger disagreements, the chambers can set up a **conference committee**. Each chamber appoints members, called **conferees** or managers, usually from the committees that handled the bill. Their job is to work out one version both sides can accept.

A few things to know about conferences:

- A conference can only happen after one chamber has taken the other chamber's bill and amended it. Two separate bills on the same subject aren't enough.
- The House and Senate teams don't have to be the same size, because each chamber's team gets one vote in the conference, decided by a majority of its own conferees.

- Conferees are supposed to stay within the differences between the two versions. They're not meant to add brand-new material that neither chamber passed.

When they reach a deal, the conferees sign a **conference report** and write a joint explanatory statement describing what they agreed to. Then each chamber votes on the conference report as a whole, up or down. Neither chamber can amend it. If both approve it, the bill is ready for the President. If either one turns it down, the disagreement goes on.

Enrolling the bill

Once both chambers have agreed to the same text, a clerk in the chamber where the bill started prepares the **enrolled bill**, the final official copy. This is painstaking work. Every amendment both chambers agreed to has to appear exactly as adopted, down to the punctuation. The enrolled bill is printed on parchment paper.

By tradition, the Speaker of the House signs it first, and then the Vice President (as President of the Senate) or the Senate's President pro tempore signs it. Then it goes to the White House.

Check Yourself

1. What must be true before a bill can go to the President?
2. What are the two main ways the chambers settle their differences?
3. Can a chamber amend a conference report?
4. What is the enrolled bill?

Chapter 8: The President's Turn

The Constitution says every bill that passes both chambers must be "presented to the President of the United States" before it becomes law. In practice, a clerk delivers the enrolled bill to the White House and gets a receipt. That delivery starts the clock.

The four ways it can go

The President has 10 days, not counting Sundays, to act. Here's what can happen:

1. **The President signs it.** The bill becomes law. Presidents usually write "approved" and the date, but the Constitution only requires a signature.
2. **The President vetoes it.** The President sends the bill back to the chamber where it started, with a written explanation of the objections, called a **veto message**. The bill does not become law unless Congress overrides the veto.
3. **The President does nothing, and Congress is in session.** After 10 days (Sundays excepted), the bill becomes law without the President's signature.
4. **The President does nothing, and Congress has adjourned.** If Congress has adjourned and that keeps the bill from being returned, the bill does not become law. This is called a **pocket veto**, because it's as if the President put the bill in a pocket and left it there.

> **Tip:** The pocket veto has a gray area. Congress's position is that a pocket veto only works when Congress has adjourned at the end of a two-year Congress, not during shorter breaks, when a clerk can still receive a veto message. The House Parliamentarian's guide notes that the courts have never fully settled how far the pocket veto reaches.

Overriding a veto

Congress can override a regular veto, but it takes a lot. The chamber where the bill started votes first, then the other chamber. Each must vote by two-thirds of the members present, with a quorum present, and the vote must be a recorded vote, with each member's name and position entered in the record. If both chambers reach two-thirds, the bill becomes law over the President's objections. If either falls short, the veto stands.

A pocket veto can't be overridden, because the bill was never returned to Congress. The only way forward is to pass the bill again in a new Congress.

No line-item veto

Many governors can veto just part of a bill, especially parts of a budget. That's called a **line-item veto**. The President can't. A Line Item Veto Act was in effect from 1997 until 1998, when the Supreme Court struck it down as unconstitutional in *Clinton v. City of New York*. Today the President has to accept or reject a bill as a whole.

Check Yourself

1. How long does the President have to act on a bill?
2. What happens if the President does nothing while Congress is in session?
3. What does it take to override a veto?
4. Why can't a pocket veto be overridden?

Chapter 9: After a Bill Becomes Law

Signing a bill isn't the last step. A law only works if people can find it and read it, so there's a process for publishing it.

A number and a slip law

After the President signs a bill, or it becomes law without a signature, the original enrolled bill goes from the White House to the Archivist of the United States. If Congress overrode a veto, the chamber that voted last sends it instead.

The new law gets a **public law number**. The first part is the number of the Congress and the second part shows its order. For example, the first public law of the 110th Congress was Public Law 110-1. Private laws, the ones that affect a single person or business, get their own series of numbers.

The first official printing of the law is called a **slip law**, a separate pamphlet for each one. It shows the law number, the date it was approved and the bill number, along with notes on its legislative history.

The Statutes at Large

At the end of each session, the slip laws are collected into bound volumes called the **United States Statutes at Large**. The Statutes at Large keeps every law in the order it was passed, as a permanent record.

The United States Code

Here's a problem with keeping laws in date order. A single subject, say, federal highways, may be covered by dozens of laws passed over many years, each one changing the last. To find out what the law says today, you'd have to read them all.

That's why we have the **United States Code**. It takes the general and permanent laws and arranges them by subject into titles, showing the current text with all the changes worked in. It's prepared by the Office of

the Law Revision Counsel of the House of Representatives, and you can search it free online at uscode.house.gov.

Then the agencies get to work

Many laws tell a federal agency to carry them out, and often to write detailed rules for how they'll work. Those rules are called regulations, and Chapter 10 explains how they're made.

> **Tip:** If you know a law's popular name but not where it is, the U.S. Code website has a Popular Name Tool that points you to it.

Check Yourself

1. What does the first number in a public law number tell you?
2. What is a slip law?
3. How are the Statutes at Large and the U.S. Code different?
4. Where can you search the U.S. Code for free?

Chapter 10: Rules That Don't Come From Congress

When people say "there's a new law," they don't always mean a bill passed by Congress. Three other things carry real weight, and it helps to know how each one differs from a law: executive orders, regulations and court rulings.

Executive orders

The Office of the Federal Register, which publishes them, puts it this way: "The President of the United States manages the operations of the Executive branch of Government through Executive orders." An **executive order** is a written instruction from the President to the executive branch, the departments and agencies that carry out the laws.

Here's how an executive order compares to a law passed by Congress:

- **Who makes it.** The President signs it alone. Congress doesn't vote on it.
- **Where its power comes from.** To have legal effect, an executive order has to rest on one of the President's sources of power: Article II of the Constitution or a power Congress gave the President by law.
- **How long it lasts.** A later President can change or revoke it with a new order. This happens regularly. For example, on January 20, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 13992, which revoked several earlier orders, and on January 20, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14148, which revoked dozens of earlier orders.
- **Who can check it.** Congress can cancel the legal effect of an order that relies on a power Congress delegated. Courts can review whether an order is consistent with the Constitution and the laws.

Executive orders are numbered in one long series and published in the Federal Register, the government's daily publication for official notices, at federalregister.gov.

Regulations

Laws passed by Congress often set goals and leave the details to an agency. Regulations, also called **rules**, fill in those details. The Office of the Federal Register's guide to rulemaking says: "Agencies get their authority to issue regulations from laws (statutes) enacted by Congress." Once final, a regulation is binding, but an agency can't go beyond the authority the law gives it or violate the Constitution.

For most regulations, agencies follow an open, public process under a law called the Administrative Procedure Act:

1. **Proposed rule.** The agency publishes its proposal in the Federal Register. All proposed rules must be published there to notify the public.
2. **Public comment.** Anyone can comment on any part of the proposal. Agencies generally allow 30 to 60 days.
3. **Final rule.** The agency publishes the final rule with an explanation of its basis and purpose, a response to major criticisms raised in the comments, and the date it takes effect. The agency has to base its decision on the record, including the comments.
4. **Review.** New final rules must be sent to Congress and the Government Accountability Office before they take effect, under the Congressional Review Act. Courts can also review a rule, and if a court throws one out, it usually sends it back to the agency.

Final rules are collected by subject in the **Code of Federal Regulations**, which the Federal Register guide describes as containing "all of the generally applicable rules of the Federal government with current or future effect."

> **Tip:** You can read and comment on many proposed federal rules at Regulations.gov, the government's official electronic comment site.

Court rulings

Courts don't write laws, but they decide what laws mean when there's a dispute, and whether a law or government action is allowed under the Constitution.

That second power is called **judicial review**. It isn't spelled out in the Constitution. It comes from the Supreme Court's 1803 decision in *Marbury v. Madison*, written by Chief Justice John Marshall. The federal courts' own teaching materials describe judicial review as the power that "allows the Supreme Court to declare unconstitutional acts of Congress and the President."

	Law passed by Congress	Executive order	Regulation	Court ruling
Who makes it	Congress and the President	The President	A federal agency	A court
Based on	The Constitution	The Constitution or a law	A law passed by Congress	The Constitution and the laws
Public input	Hearings, contacting members	None required	Required comment period for most rules	Parties to the case; others may file briefs
Can be undone by	A new law or a court ruling	A later President, a new law or a court ruling	A new rule, a new law or a court ruling	A higher court, a later ruling, a new law or an amendment

Check Yourself

1. Where does an executive order get its legal power?
2. Can a later President undo an executive order?
3. Where do agencies get their authority to issue regulations?
4. Which Supreme Court decision is the source of judicial review?

Chapter 11: The Federal Budget in Brief

Every year, Congress has to decide how to fund the federal government. The Constitution makes this Congress's job: "No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law" (Article I, Section 9). In other words, the government can't spend money unless a law passed by Congress allows it.

The budget follows the same basic path as any other bill, with a few special steps and deadlines of its own.

The fiscal year

The federal government's budget year, called the **fiscal year**, runs from October 1 to September 30. It's named for the calendar year it ends in. So fiscal year 2027 runs from October 1, 2026, through September 30, 2027.

Step 1: The President's budget request

The President sends Congress a budget request by the first Monday in February each year. It lays out how much the administration wants to spend on each program and how it plans to pay for it. It's only a request. Congress decides what actually gets funded.

Step 2: The budget resolution

Under the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974, Congress is supposed to adopt a **budget resolution** each year. It's a concurrent resolution, so it doesn't go to the President and isn't a law. It's Congress's own plan that sets overall limits on spending and revenue and divides the spending among broad areas. Congress aims to finish it by April 15, though it doesn't always meet that target.

Step 3: Appropriations bills

The actual money is provided by **appropriations bills**, the spending bills. The House and Senate Appropriations Committees each work through 12 subcommittees, each covering part of the government, such as Defense or

Agriculture. By tradition, appropriations bills start in the House. Like any bill, they must pass both chambers and be signed by the President.

Appropriations are different from **authorizations**. An authorization law creates or continues a federal program or agency. An appropriation is what actually lets the agency commit and spend money from the Treasury. A program can be authorized and still get no money if Congress doesn't appropriate any.

When time runs out: continuing resolutions

If Congress doesn't pass all its appropriations bills by October 1, it can pass a **continuing resolution** to keep the government running for a set time, generally at the existing funding levels.

Government shutdowns

If neither the regular spending bills nor a continuing resolution becomes law in time, funding lapses. Under a law called the Antideficiency Act, agencies generally can't spend money or make commitments without an appropriation. The Government Accountability Office explains that when there's no funding and no exception applies, an agency "must commence an orderly shutdown," and normal operations resume only after Congress passes a funding law. There are exceptions, such as work needed for emergencies involving the safety of human life or the protection of property.

Reconciliation

The budget resolution can also instruct committees to write a **reconciliation** bill that changes tax or spending laws to meet the budget's targets. As Chapter 6 explained, reconciliation bills get special treatment in the Senate: limited debate, so a simple majority can pass them, as long as they stick to budget matters.

Step	Who	When
President's budget request	The President	By the first Monday in February

Step	Who	When
Budget resolution (Congress's plan)	Congress	Target of April 15
Appropriations bills (the money)	Congress, then the President	Before October 1
Continuing resolution, if needed	Congress, then the President	By October 1, or when the last one runs out

Check Yourself

1. When does the federal fiscal year start and end?
2. Is the budget resolution a law?
3. What is the difference between an authorization and an appropriation?
4. What keeps the government running if the spending bills aren't done by October 1?

Chapter 12: How You Can Take Part

You don't have to be a member of Congress to have a hand in a law. The First Amendment protects your right "to petition the Government for a redress of grievances," and there are plenty of practical ways to use it. Here are the ones that matter most, roughly in the order a bill moves.

Know who represents you

If you live in one of the 50 states, you have one representative in the House and two senators. (Residents of the District of Columbia and the territories have a Delegate or the Resident Commissioner in the House instead, as Chapter 1 explains.) To find your representative, go to house.gov and use "Find Your Representative," which matches your ZIP code to your congressional district. Your senators are listed by state at senate.gov. If you'd rather call, the U.S. Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121 can connect you to any member's office.

Follow a bill

Congress.gov, run by the Library of Congress, is the official website for federal legislative information. Look up any bill by number or keyword to see its text, sponsor, cosponsors, the committees it was sent to, and every action taken on it.

Share an idea

Remember from Chapter 3 that many bills start with constituents. If you see a problem a federal law could fix, write to your representative or senators. Be specific: what's wrong, who it affects, and what you'd like changed. Say you live in their district or state, and keep it short.

Speak up while a bill is in committee

The committee stage is where bills change the most, so it's the best time to weigh in.

- Contact your own members, especially if they sit on the committee handling the bill. Committee websites list their members.
- Watch the hearing. House rules require committees, as far as practical, to make their publications available electronically, and committee websites are the place to look for hearing video and testimony.
- Ask about a written statement. Call or email the committee's office and ask whether it accepts written statements for the hearing record, and how to send one.

Before a floor vote

Call or write your members and tell them how you'd like them to vote, and why. Give the bill number and say plainly whether you support it or oppose it.

Comment on regulations

Once a law passes, the agency that carries it out may write regulations, and most of those go through a public comment period first (see Chapter 10). You can find many proposed rules and submit comments at Regulations.gov.

Vote, and keep track

Every House seat and about a third of the Senate are on the ballot every two years. Recorded votes are public. The Clerk of the House posts House roll call votes at clerk.house.gov, and the Senate posts its roll call votes at senate.gov.

Be respectful and be accurate

Members' offices hear from a lot of people. Be polite, stick to facts you can back up, and say what you want in a sentence or two. That's what gets read, and what gets passed along.

Check Yourself

1. If you live in one of the 50 states, how many members of Congress represent you?
2. What is the phone number of the U.S. Capitol switchboard?
3. At what stage do bills change the most?
4. Where can you comment on many proposed federal rules?

Chapter 13: How State Legislatures Compare

Federal laws are only part of the picture. Most of the laws that touch daily life, on things like driver's licenses, schools, property and most crimes, are state laws. Every state has its own legislature, and they work a lot like Congress, with some important differences. This chapter covers the general picture. Each state's legislature has its own website with the exact rules.

Two chambers, with one exception

Like Congress, every state legislature has two chambers, except one. Nebraska has the only unicameral (one-house) legislature in the country, and it's also the only nonpartisan one, meaning members aren't elected with party labels. It has 49 members, called senators, who serve four-year terms. Nebraska's one-house legislature first met in 1937, after voters approved the change in 1934.

The same basic path

In most states, a bill follows a path you'll recognize from the earlier chapters: a legislator introduces it, it goes to a committee, the committee holds hearings and votes, the full chamber debates and votes, the other chamber does the same, and the governor signs it or vetoes it.

Governors have a veto, and most have more

Every state constitution gives the governor the power to veto an entire bill. Unlike the President, governors in 44 states can also veto individual items in a budget bill, called a line-item veto. The vote needed to override a governor's veto varies from state to state.

Citizens can make laws directly in some states

Here's a big difference from the federal level. There's no national ballot measure in the United States, but in 24 states, citizens can propose laws or constitutional amendments themselves through an **initiative**. Supporters

gather a set number of voter signatures to put the proposal on the ballot, and then the voters decide. The rules, including how many signatures are needed, differ from state to state.

Many states also let voters weigh in on laws through a **referendum**, which puts a law passed by the legislature, or a proposed change to the state constitution, before the voters.

> **Tip:** To find your state legislators and follow state bills, start at your state legislature's website. Congress.gov keeps a list of links to every state legislature's site.

Check Yourself

1. Which state has a one-house legislature?
2. How many governors have a line-item veto?
3. What is an initiative?
4. What is a referendum?

Chapter 14: Two Real Bills, Start to Finish

The earlier chapters walked through the usual path. Real bills don't always follow it step by step. Some take shortcuts, and some go through every hoop there is. In this chapter we'll follow two real bills that both became law, using the official records of every action taken on them.

I picked one small bill and one big one. I'm not taking a side on what either law says. We're only following the path.

A small bill: the Duck Stamp Modernization Act of 2023

Under the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act, waterfowl hunters need a federal stamp, better known as the duck stamp. A 2013 law, the Permanent Electronic Duck Stamp Act, let states issue an electronic version. Under that law, the electronic stamp was good only for a period agreed to by the state and the federal government, up to 45 days. The 2023 bill made the electronic stamp good through the first June 30 after it's issued, and had the actual stamp sent after March 10 each year to everyone who bought an electronic one for the season before.

Here's the trip it took, from the official record:

Date	What happened
March 14, 2023	Introduced in the Senate as S. 788, read twice, and referred to the Committee on Environment and Public Works.
July 27, 2023	The Senate took the bill away from the committee by unanimous consent, then passed it by unanimous consent with an amendment that replaced the text.
August 4, 2023	Received in the House and held at the desk.
December 11, 2023	The House debated it for 40 minutes under suspension of the rules. A recorded vote was requested, and the vote was put off to the next day.
December 12, 2023	The House passed it, 403 to 20. Two-thirds was required.
December 19, 2023	Presented to the President and signed the same day. It became Public Law 118-25.

A few things to notice:

- **The committee never reported it.** Chapter 4 describes hearings, markup and a report. None of that happened here. The Senate **discharged** the committee by unanimous consent, which means it took the bill away from the committee so the full Senate could act on it. That only works when no senator objects.
- **The Senate passed it without a single recorded vote.** As Chapter 6 explains, the Senate runs on unanimous consent, and a bill nobody objects to can pass in minutes.
- **The House skipped its committees too.** The record says the bill was "held at the desk" instead of being sent to a House committee. In December the House took it up directly under suspension of the rules: 40 minutes of debate and a two-thirds vote, just as Chapter 5 describes.
- **No conference was needed.** The House passed the Senate's version without changes, so both chambers had passed the exact same text. Chapter 7's back-and-forth never had to start.

Even a quiet, simple bill like this one took about nine months from introduction to signature.

A big bill: the defense authorization for 2021

Our second bill is the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021. As its official title says, it authorized appropriations for fiscal year 2021 for military activities of the Department of Defense, for military construction and for defense activities of the Department of Energy. Remember from Chapter 11 that an authorization isn't the money itself. The money comes in appropriations bills.

This bill went through nearly every step in this book, including a veto and an override.

Date	What happened
March 26, 2020	Introduced in the House as H.R. 6395 and referred to the Committee on Armed Services.
July 1, 2020	After markup, the committee voted 56 to 0 to report it with amendments.

Date	What happened
July 9, 2020	The committee filed its report, House Report 116-442.
July 20, 2020	The Rules Committee reported H. Res. 1053, the rule setting the terms for debating it.
July 21, 2020	The House passed it, 295 to 125.
November 16, 2020	The Senate passed it by voice vote, with an amendment that replaced the whole text.
November 18, 2020	The House disagreed to the Senate amendment and asked for a conference. The Speaker appointed House conferees.
December 2, 2020	The Senate insisted on its amendment, agreed to the conference, and appointed its conferees.
December 3, 2020	The conferees filed their conference report, House Report 116-617.
December 8, 2020	The House agreed to the conference report, 335 to 78.
December 11, 2020	The Senate voted 84 to 13 to invoke cloture, then agreed to the conference report, 84 to 13. The bill was presented to the President.
December 23, 2020	The President vetoed it.
December 28, 2020	The House voted to override the veto, 322 to 87.
January 1, 2021	The Senate voted 80 to 12 to invoke cloture on the veto message, then voted 81 to 13 to override. The bill became Public Law 116-283.

Here's what this one shows:

- **The full committee path.** Markup, a vote to report, and a written committee report, as in Chapter 4.
- **A rule from the Rules Committee.** The House took it up under a special rule, the second path in Chapter 5.
- **A real conference.** The Senate replaced the House text with its own, so the two chambers had different versions. They went to conference, and each chamber then voted the conference report up or down, as in Chapter 7.
- **Cloture, twice.** Even with wide support, the Senate voted on cloture before the final vote on the conference report and again before the override vote, as in Chapter 6.

- **A veto and an override.** The President sent the bill back with objections, and both chambers voted by more than two-thirds to override, as in Chapter 8. The Senate's override vote came on January 1, 2021, two days before the 116th Congress ended at noon on January 3.

How to read a law

When a bill becomes law, its first official printing is the slip law (Chapter 9). Here's what you'll see on the slip law for the duck stamp bill, Public Law 118-25, from top to bottom.

1. **The heading.** It gives the public law number, the date it was approved, December 19, 2023, and "137 STAT. 129," which means it's printed in volume 137 of the Statutes at Large, starting on page 129.
2. **"An Act" and the long title.** The long title says what the law does: "To amend the Permanent Electronic Duck Stamp Act of 2013 to allow States to issue fully electronic stamps under that Act, and for other purposes."
3. **The bill number.** "[S. 788]" in brackets tells you which bill it came from, so you can look up its history.
4. **The enacting clause.** "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled." Federal law sets these exact words for every Act of Congress.
5. **The short title.** Section 1 says the law "may be cited as the 'Duck Stamp Modernization Act of 2023'." That's the name you'll hear it called.
6. **The sections.** The rest is the law itself. Notes in the margin point to where each part lands in the U.S. Code. For example, "16 USC 718o note" points to title 16 of the Code.
7. **The approval line and the legislative history.** At the end you'll see "Approved December 19, 2023," followed by a short legislative history listing the days each chamber considered and passed the bill.

Why amendments to old laws are hard to read

Many new laws change older ones, and they do it with instructions instead of finished text. Here's a line from the duck stamp law:

"Section 5 of the Permanent Electronic Duck Stamp Act of 2013 (16 U.S.C. 718r) is amended ... by striking 'an actual stamp' and inserting 'the electronic stamp'."

Read by itself, that's like getting directions without a map. You can't see the finished sentence until you make the change yourself. The easy way around it is the U.S. Code, which works every change into the current text (Chapter 9).

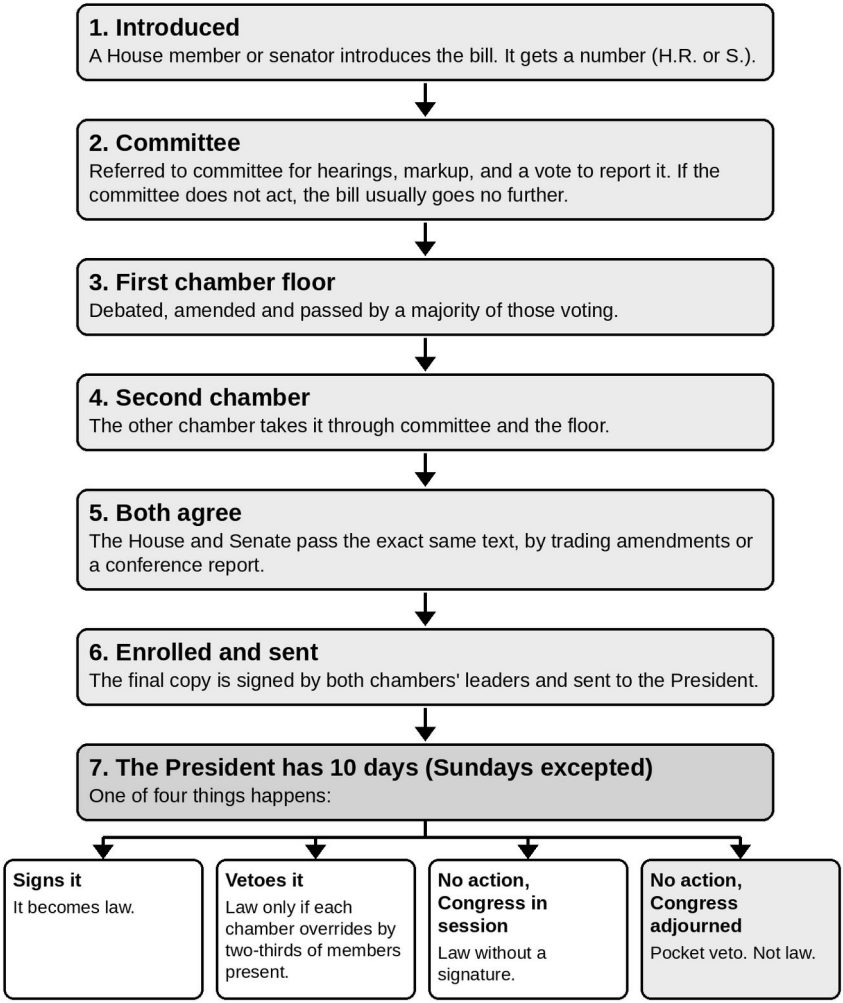
> **Tip:** Read the slip law to see what Congress changed. Read the U.S. Code to see what the law says now. You can find both for free, the slip law on GovInfo.gov and the Code at uscode.house.gov.

Check Yourself

1. How did the duck stamp bill get out of its Senate committee without a committee report?
2. Why didn't the duck stamp bill need a conference?
3. What happened after the President vetoed the 2021 defense bill?
4. If you want to know what a law says today, should you read the slip law or the U.S. Code?

The Whole Process on One Page

This is the usual path for a bill that starts in either chamber. Chapters 3 through 9 cover each step.



Answers to Check Yourself

Chapter 1

1. Article I, Section 1, which says all legislative powers granted in the Constitution belong to a Congress made up of a Senate and a House of Representatives.
2. The House has 435 voting members. The Senate has 100, two from each state.
3. It dies. To try again, someone has to introduce it again in the new Congress with a new number.
4. Bills to raise revenue (taxes), under Article I, Section 7.

Chapter 2

1. No. It stands for House of Representatives. H.R. is the label for a House bill.
2. Bills and joint resolutions.
3. To the Archivist of the United States, who sends it to the states. It does not go to the President.
4. No. It doesn't go to the President, so it isn't a law.

Chapter 3

1. Only a member of Congress. In the House that includes the Delegates and the Resident Commissioner. The idea itself can come from almost anyone.
2. The box at the side of the rostrum in the House Chamber where a member drops a bill to introduce it.
3. A statement naming the power in the Constitution that allows Congress to pass it.
4. Congress.gov, run by the Library of Congress.

Chapter 4

1. The committee meeting where members go through a bill section by section, offer amendments and vote on them.

2. It sends the bill to the full chamber, with or without amendments.
3. It usually goes nowhere, and it dies when the Congress ends.
4. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

Chapter 5

1. Two-thirds of the members voting.
2. No. It has adopted the ground rules for debating the bill. The vote on the bill comes later.
3. 100.
4. A majority of all House members, which is 218 when every seat is filled.

Chapter 6

1. The Senate's way to end debate so a final vote can happen.
2. Three-fifths of all senators duly chosen and sworn, which is 60 with no vacancies.
3. A simple majority of senators voting, with a quorum present.
4. Budget reconciliation bills, or cloture on presidential nominations.

Chapter 7

1. The House and Senate must have passed the exact same text.
2. Trading amendments back and forth, or a conference committee.
3. No. Each chamber votes the conference report up or down as a whole.
4. The final official copy of the bill as both chambers passed it, printed on parchment and sent to the President.

Chapter 8

1. 10 days, not counting Sundays.
2. After 10 days (Sundays excepted), the bill becomes law without a signature.
3. A two-thirds vote of the members present in each chamber, with a quorum present, by recorded vote.

4. Because the bill was never returned to Congress. The only way forward is to pass it again in a new Congress.

Chapter 9

1. The Congress that passed it. Public Law 110-1 was the first public law of the 110th Congress.
2. The first official printing of a new law, a separate pamphlet for each one.
3. The Statutes at Large keeps every law in the order it was passed. The U.S. Code arranges the general and permanent laws by subject, with the changes worked in.
4. uscode.house.gov.

Chapter 10

1. From Article II of the Constitution or from a power Congress gave the President by law.
2. Yes, by changing or revoking it with a new order.
3. From laws (statutes) passed by Congress.
4. Marbury v. Madison, decided in 1803.

Chapter 11

1. It runs from October 1 to September 30, and it's named for the calendar year it ends in.
2. No. It's a concurrent resolution, Congress's own plan, and it doesn't go to the President.
3. An authorization creates or continues a program. An appropriation is what actually lets the agency commit and spend the money.
4. A continuing resolution.

Chapter 12

1. Three: one representative in the House and two senators.
2. (202) 224-3121.
3. In committee, so that's the best time to weigh in.

4. Regulations.gov.

Chapter 13

1. Nebraska. It's also the only nonpartisan legislature.
2. Governors in 44 states.
3. A way for citizens to propose a law or constitutional amendment themselves by gathering signatures to put it on the ballot. 24 states have one.
4. A vote of the people on a law passed by the legislature, or on a proposed change to the state constitution.

Chapter 14

1. The Senate discharged the committee by unanimous consent.
2. The House passed the Senate's version without changes, so both chambers had passed the exact same text.
3. The House voted 322 to 87 and the Senate voted 81 to 13 to override, and it became Public Law 116-283.
4. The U.S. Code. The slip law shows what Congress changed, and the Code shows the current text with the changes worked in.

Glossary

Amendment. A proposed change to a bill. (Not the same as an amendment to the Constitution.)

Appropriation. A law that provides money for government programs.

Authorization. A law that creates or continues a federal program or agency. It doesn't provide the money by itself.

Bicameral. Having two chambers. Congress is bicameral: the House and the Senate.

Bill. The form used for most proposed laws, labeled H.R. (House) or S. (Senate).

Budget resolution. Congress's yearly plan for total spending and revenue. It isn't a law.

Byrd Rule. The Senate rule that lets senators strike provisions from a budget reconciliation bill that aren't really about the budget.

Calendar. A chamber's list of bills that are ready for floor action.

Chamber. One of the two parts of Congress, the House of Representatives or the Senate.

Cloture. The Senate procedure for ending debate. For most bills it takes three-fifths of all senators, which is 60 with no vacancies.

Code of Federal Regulations. The collection of federal regulations, arranged by subject.

Committee. A smaller group of members of one chamber who study bills on certain subjects.

Committee of the Whole. The full House, sitting under simpler rules to debate and amend a bill. Its quorum is 100 members.

Committee report. The written explanation a committee issues with a bill it sends to the floor.

Concurrent resolution. A measure passed by both chambers that doesn't go to the President and isn't a law.

Conference committee. A temporary committee of House and Senate members formed to settle differences between the two chambers' versions of a bill.

Conference report. The agreement reached by a conference committee. Each chamber votes on it as a whole, without amendments.

Congress (numbered). The two-year term of Congress, such as the 119th Congress (2025 to 2027).

Continuing resolution. A temporary spending law that keeps the government running when regular appropriations haven't passed.

Cosponsor. A member of Congress who formally signs on to support a bill.

Discharge. To take a bill away from a committee that hasn't reported it, so the full chamber can act on it.

Discharge petition. A House petition that, once signed by a majority of all members, lets the House take up a bill a committee hasn't acted on.

Enacting clause. The opening words of every Act of Congress: "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled."

Engrossed bill. The official copy of a bill as passed by one chamber.

Enrolled bill. The final official copy of a bill, passed in identical form by both chambers and sent to the President.

Exchange of amendments. The back-and-forth in which each chamber changes a bill and sends it back until both agree.

Executive communication. A message from the President or a federal agency to Congress, often with a draft bill attached.

Executive order. A written instruction from the President to the executive branch.

Federal Register. The government's daily publication of rules, proposed rules, executive orders and notices.

Filibuster. Action designed to prolong debate and delay or prevent a vote in the Senate.

Fiscal year. The federal budget year, from October 1 through September 30.

Germane. On the same subject. House amendments must be germane to the bill.

Hearing. A committee meeting where witnesses testify about a bill or issue.

Hopper. The wooden box in the House Chamber where members drop bills to introduce them.

Initiative. A process in some states that lets citizens propose a law or constitutional amendment by petition and put it to a public vote.

Joint resolution. A proposal labeled H.J. Res. or S.J. Res. It becomes law the same way a bill does, except when it proposes a constitutional amendment.

Judicial review. The power of courts to decide whether a law or government action is allowed under the Constitution.

Line-item veto. The power to reject parts of a bill while approving the rest. Many governors have it; the President does not.

Long title. The formal title at the top of a bill or law that says what it does.

Majority Leader. The leader of the majority party in a chamber. In the Senate, the Majority Leader controls the schedule.

Markup. The committee meeting where members amend a bill and vote on whether to report it.

Motion to recommit. A last motion, before the House votes on passage, to send the bill back to committee.

Pocket veto. When the President doesn't sign a bill and Congress's adjournment prevents its return, so it doesn't become law.

Private bill. A bill that affects one named person or business rather than the public.

Public law number. The number given to a new law, such as Public Law 110-1: the 110th Congress, first law.

Quorum. The number of members who must be present to do business, which is a majority unless the rules say otherwise.

Ranking member. The senior member of the minority party on a committee.

Reconciliation. A budget process that lets certain tax and spending bills pass the Senate by a simple majority, with limited debate.

Refer. To send a bill to a committee for study.

Referendum. A public vote on a law passed by the legislature or a proposed change to a state constitution.

Regulation (rule). A detailed rule written by a federal agency under authority given by a law.

Report (a bill). For a committee to send a bill to the full chamber, with its recommendation.

Rider. In Senate rules, an amendment that adds new legislation to a spending bill. People also use the word for any unrelated provision attached to a bill.

Rule (special rule). A resolution from the House Rules Committee that sets the terms for debating and amending a specific bill.

Short title. The name a law says it may be cited by, usually in Section 1.

Shutdown. What happens when funding lapses and agencies must stop most work that isn't allowed by an exception.

Simple resolution. A measure passed by one chamber about its own business or opinion. It isn't a law.

Slip law. The first official printing of a new law, as a separate pamphlet.

Speaker of the House. The presiding officer of the House, chosen by its members.

Sponsor. The member of Congress who introduces a bill.

Statutes at Large. The bound collection of every law passed, in the order passed.

Suspension of the rules. A fast House procedure for bills with wide support: 40 minutes of debate, no floor amendments, and a two-thirds vote to pass.

Table. To set a bill or motion aside, which usually ends it.

Unanimous consent. Agreement by every member present. One objection blocks it.

Unicameral. Having one chamber. Nebraska's legislature is the only unicameral state legislature.

United States Code. The general and permanent federal laws, arranged by subject and kept up to date.

Veto. The President's rejection of a bill, sent back to Congress with a written explanation.

Veto override. Passing a bill over the President's veto by a two-thirds vote in each chamber.

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