



Bill Goes to Washington

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The main function of Congress is the making of laws. Congress, the lawmaking body of the United States, is divided into two houses, the House of Representatives and the Senate. The U.S. constitution states that: “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”. Legislation is just a fancy Latin word for lawmaking. Both houses of congress work together to create and review proposed laws. A proposed law is also known as a bill. And for a bill to be signed into law in needs to be approved by a majority vote in both houses of congress and then finally approved by the president.

The Senate is composed of 100 members—two from each state, regardless of population or area—and each senator serves for six years. Senators have longer terms than both the president and members of the house, which gives them the ability to make hard decisions without fearing voters’ wrath (Longley). The House of Representatives is composed of 435 members elected every two years from among the 50 states, apportioned to their total populations. Members of the House serve severely short terms, which mean they are more likely to vote for the immediate desires of their constituents, or else they will be voted out of office (Longley). Also while a bill can be introduced in either house, most bills start in the House of Representatives.

So if Congress is responsible for drafting, introducing, revising, debating and ultimately approving bill, where does the idea for a law start? And who can propose a bill? The idea and proposal for a bill can start anywhere by anybody (I’m Just a Bill). But the majority of bills or the ideas for bills originate from congressmen or electoral candidates during an election campaign in which they promise, if elected, to

introduce legislation on a particular subject (Johnson 4). Or a congressman may become aware after taking office the need for revision or repeal of a certain law, or even the need for new law. Congressmen can become aware of these needs through their constituents, whether individuals or a group, who create petitions and transmit their proposals to their respective congressmen. Many awesome laws have started this way, through active citizens utilizing their First Amendment right to petition (Johnson 9). Consider the women’s suffrage, civil rights and the infamous prohibition movements of the 20th century. These ground breaking laws and constitutional amendments would not have passed, if it were not for active citizens petitioning their government and their congressmen to listen and to change the laws of the land.

These bills were successful because they were supported by a vocal and persistent group of citizens, who contacted their congressmen, petitioned the government and protested in the streets. So while contacting our congressmen and petitioning our government can lead to the drafting of a bill, even the most popular bill, can “die in committee” (I’m Just a Bill).

After a bill is introduced in Congress is then submitted to a specialized committee for review. The members of that committee and of sub-committees working under it will consider the bill and what action to take on it.

The committee names refer to the type of legislation that each committee deals with: Agriculture, Judiciary, Armed Services, and Appropriations are examples. Each committee will hold public hearings on each bill, will consider amendments to the bill, and ultimately will decide whether to recommend Congress members to vote Yes or No on the bill.

Congressmen usually follow the recommendations of committees in how to vote for the bill. This is because no one congressman can be thoroughly acquainted with all the details of every bill that they vote upon and they rely upon recommendations made by the committees (Johnson 10).

If the bill does not die in committee or on either the floor of the House of Representatives or the Senate, it is sent to the president. If he signs the bill, it will become a law. If the president exercises his right to veto the bill, he will refuse to sign it, give his reasons, and send it back to the house in which it was first introduced. Congress has the power to override a Presidential veto if they can muster a 2/3 vote in each house, but this is extremely hard to do (I’m Just a Bill).

In the end if a bill is signed into law it is a combination of proactive citizens making their voice heard, and good government.

For information to contact your elected representatives please visit these websites:

<http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml>
<http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/>

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Be Informed

VOTE

