

HOW NEW LEGISLATION BECOMES LAW

An Announcement of Initiative and Search for Allies

Years of advocacy work with other organizations and some leaders in Congress are required in order to bring this issue to the forefront of U.S. government policy priorities. Congress would not only have to pass legislation authorizing the framework for such a new initiative, but also as a second and more important step, appropriate the funding each year.

Introduction of a Bill

Any Senator or House member can introduce a bill on any issue. Once introduced, bills are numbered. In the Senate, bills always begin with the letter “S” and in the House with the letters “H.R.” The bill is then printed.

Usually when a bill that reflects the group policy priorities is introduced, an alert is sent out. This is also an opportunity to thank the legislator that introduced the legislation. Expressing appreciation for a Member’s action in Congress always goes a long way to show support and encourage their continued leadership on important issues.

Committee Consideration

After a bill is introduced it is usually referred to the appropriate committee for consideration. The committee chairperson then decides whether to forward the bill to a corresponding subcommittee, or whether the full committee should consider it. According to the Senate’s website, approximately 3,000 bills and resolutions are referred to Senate committees during each two-year congressional session. However, only a small number of bills are actually ever considered.

While our legislative affairs staff is meeting with members and their staffs in Washington, D.C., it is critical for these congressional offices to simultaneously hear from their constituents about the same issue.

Hearings

Once a bill has been referred to the appropriate committee, a hearing is scheduled and a wide range of witnesses, such as Administration officials, representatives of business, labor and nonprofit organizations, and members of the general public are invited to testify. Often expert testimony is given. For example, CRS routinely provides joint testimony with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops before congressional Appropriations Committees on our priorities relating to international assistance. This allows CRS to be “on record” with specific policy recommendations and to engage members of Congress about how U.S. policy could best address international issues that affect the poor.



Committee Markups

At the completion of the hearing process, committees usually “mark up” or revise one or more related bills, often preparing a consolidated, or clean, bill.

CRS and its coalition partners will closely monitor the Committee markup to ensure that any amendments we support are indeed offered and approved, and those amendments we oppose defeated.

The advocacy efforts of our grassroots partners are critical during this process, especially those whose members of Congress sit on the Committee. The more that members hear from their constituents about their support or opposition for specific amendments, the greater the chance they will be swayed in one direction or another when it comes time for them to cast their votes.

Committee Reports

Once the Committee has voted on a bill, it is referred to the full Senate or House and placed on the Senate or House calendar.

Final Passage

The full House and/or Senate first votes on all amendments adopted by the referring Committee. Then, amendments may be offered to any part of the measure in any order. A simple majority can then pass the bill. At any time before its passage, a bill may be laid on the table or postponed indefinitely, either of which motions has the effect of killing the bill. Typically at this stage of the legislative process, CRS would encourage all of our grassroots advocates to contact their congressional delegation to ensure their support for any amendments that may be important, as well as for the bill as a whole.

Referral to the Other Chamber

A bill passed by the Senate is transmitted to the House for consideration and vice versa. A bill must pass both bodies in the same form. While bills can be amended during this process, changes to a bill must be accepted by the other chamber. This back-and-forth negotiation is often resolved by establishing a Conference Committee, made up of members from both chambers to work out differences between bills.

Presidential Action

A bill that has passed both the House and Senate is sent to the president, who can sign it into law or veto it and return it to Congress. In the case of a veto, Congress may override it by a two-thirds majority vote in both chambers, which allows the bill to become law without the president’s signature. If the president neither signs nor vetoes a bill within ten days of receiving it, it automatically becomes law. If, on the other hand, the president receives a bill less than ten days before the Congress adjourns and does not act, the bill is effectively killed.

For more information about the legislative process, current legislative proposals, and other resources relating to policymaking, please visit <http://thomas.loc.gov/>.

