

How Federal Laws Are Made

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Congress is the legislative branch of the federal government and makes laws for the nation. Congress has two legislative bodies or chambers: the [U.S. Senate](#) and the [U.S. House of Representatives](#). Anyone elected to either body can propose a new law. [A bill](#) is a proposal for a new law.

Steps in Making a Law

1. A bill can be introduced in either chamber of Congress by a senator or representative who sponsors it.
2. Once a bill is introduced, it is assigned to a committee whose members will research, discuss, and make changes to the bill.
3. The bill is then put before that chamber to be voted on.
4. If the bill passes one body of Congress, it goes to the other body to go through a similar process of research, discussion, changes, and voting.
5. Once both bodies vote to accept a bill, they must work out any differences between the two versions. Then both chambers vote on the same exact bill and, if it passes, they present it to the president.
6. The president then considers the bill. The president can approve the bill and sign it into law or [not approve \(veto\)](#) a bill.
7. If the [president chooses to veto a bill](#), in most cases Congress can vote to override that veto and the bill becomes a law. But, if the president [pocket vetoes](#) a bill after Congress has adjourned, the veto cannot be overridden.

Differences Between the House and Senate Procedures

The Senate and the House have some procedural differences between them. Learn more about each body's process:

- [How a bill becomes law when it originates in the House of Representatives](#)
- [Active legislation in the House](#)
- [How a bill becomes law when it originates in the Senate](#)
- [Active legislation in the Senate](#)

Federal and State Laws, Regulations, and Related Court Decisions

Federal laws apply to people living in the United States and its territories. Congress creates and passes bills. The president then may sign those bills into law. [Federal courts](#) may review the laws to see if they agree with the Constitution. If a court finds a law is unconstitutional, it can strike it down.

Find Federal Laws

The [United States Code](#) contains general and permanent federal laws. It does not include regulations, decisions, or laws issued by:

- Federal agencies
- Federal courts
- Treaties
- State and local governments

New [public and private laws](#) appear in each edition of the United States [Statutes at Large](#). There is a new edition for each session of Congress.

- Find [bills and resolutions introduced](#) by the current and earlier sessions of Congress. This includes new laws that have not yet been assigned a public law number.
- Find [laws and joint resolutions](#) that have been assigned public law numbers.
- Visit the Law Library of Congress to [research U.S. code, statutes, and public laws](#).
- To find older laws, visit a law library or a [Federal Depository Library](#).

Federal Regulations

Regulations are issued by federal agencies, boards, and commissions. They explain how agencies plan to carry out laws. Regulations are published yearly in [the Code of Federal Regulations](#).

The Rulemaking Process

Federal regulations are created through a process known as [rulemaking](#). If an agency wants to make, change, or delete a rule, it will:

1. Publish the proposal in the [Federal Register](#)
2. [Seek public comment](#)
3. Consider the public's comments and change the rule if necessary. The agency then publishes the final version in the Federal Register along with:
 - A description of the comments received
 - The agency's response to those comments
 - The date the rule goes into effect

Federal Court Decisions

Federal courts do not write or pass laws. But they may establish individual “rights” under federal law. This happens through courts' interpretations of federal and state laws and the Constitution. An example is the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in [Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka](#). The court decided that state laws which segregated public school students by race violated the

14th Amendment. It said that "separate but equal" schools cause minority children to feel inferior. And that hurts their educational opportunities.

[Research decisions of the Supreme Court and lower federal courts.](#)

State Laws and Regulations

State legislatures make the laws in each state. State courts can review these laws. If a court decides a law doesn't agree with the state's constitution, it can declare it invalid.

Find state laws and regulations with the Law Library of Congress's [guide for each state](#).

Executive Orders and Other Presidential Actions

The president creates many documents to issue orders and make announcements. These [executive or presidential actions](#) can include:

- Executive orders
- Presidential memoranda
- Proclamations

Executive Orders

An [executive order](#) has the power of federal law. Presidents can use executive orders to create committees and organizations. For example, President John F. Kennedy used one to create the Peace Corps. More often, presidents use executive orders to manage federal operations.

Congress may try to overturn an executive order by passing a bill that blocks it. But the president can [veto](#) that bill. Congress would then need to override that veto to pass the bill. Also, the [Supreme Court](#) can declare an executive order unconstitutional.

Presidential Memoranda

Presidential memoranda are like executive orders. The president can use memos to direct government operations. But executive orders are numbered and published in the [Federal Register](#). Presidential memos are not.

Presidential Proclamations

Presidential proclamations are statements that address the public on policy matters. They are mainly symbolic and are usually not enforced as laws.

Find Presidential Actions

The White House posts [presidential actions issued by the current president](#).

The [National Archives and Records Administration \(NARA\)](#) maintains [older executive orders](#). These date back to 1937.