How a Bill Becomes a Law in the US Congress

STEP #1: Referral to Committee
With few exceptions, bills are referred to standing committees in the House or Senate according to carefully delineated rules of procedure.

STEP #2: Committee Action
When a bill reaches a committee, it is placed on the committee's calendar. A bill can be referred to a subcommittee or can be considered by the committee as a whole. It is at this point that a bill is examined carefully and its chances for passage are determined. If the committee does not act on a bill, it is the equivalent of killing it (also called "tabling" it).

STEP #3: Subcommittee Review
Bills are often referred to a subcommittee for study and hearings. Hearings provide an opportunity for the executive branch, experts, public officials, and supporters and opponents of the legislation to provide oral or written testimony that becomes part of the official record. The Federal Register publishes notice of these hearings and instructions on presenting testimony (http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/).

STEP #4: Mark Up
When hearings are finished, the subcommittee may meet to "mark up" the bill, that is, make changes and amendments prior to recommending the bill to the full committee. If a subcommittee votes not to report legislation to the full committee, the bill dies.

STEP #5: Committee Action to Report a Bill
After receiving a subcommittee's report on a bill, the full committee can conduct further study and hearings, or it can vote on the subcommittee's recommendations and any proposed amendments. The full committee then votes on its recommendation to the House or Senate.

STEP #6: Publication of a Written Report
After a committee votes to have a bill reported, the chairman instructs staff to prepare a report. This report describes the intent and scope of the legislation, its impact on existing laws and programs, the position of the executive branch, and views of dissenting committee members.

STEP #7: Scheduling Floor Action:
After a bill is reported back to the chamber where it originated, it is placed on the calendar in chronological order. In the House, there are several different legislative calendars, and the Speaker and majority leader largely determine if, when, and in what order bills come up. In the Senate, there is only one legislative calendar.

STEP #8: Debate
When a bill reaches the floor of the House or Senate, there are rules or procedures governing the debate on legislation. These rules determine the conditions and amount of time allocated for general debate.

STEP #9: Voting
After debate and approval of any amendments, the bill is passed or defeated by the members of the House or Senate.

STEP #10: Referral to Other Chamber
When the House or Senate passes a bill, it is referred to the other chamber, where it usually follows the same route through committee and floor action. The other chamber may approve the bill as received, reject it, ignore it, or change it.

STEP #11: Conference Committee Action
If only minor changes are made to a bill by the other chamber, it is common for the legislation to go back to the first chamber for concurrence. However, when the actions of the other chamber significantly alter the bill, a conference committee is formed to reconcile the differences between the House and Senate versions. If the conferees are unable to reach agreement, the legislation dies. If agreement is reached, a conference report is prepared describing the committee members' recommendations for changes. Both the House and the Senate must approve the conference report.

STEP #12: Final Actions
After both the House and Senate have approved a bill in identical form, it becomes "enrolled" and is sent to the President. If the President approves the legislation, he signs it and it becomes law. Or, the President can take no action for 10 days, while Congress is in session, and the bill automatically becomes law. If the President opposes the bill, he can veto it. If he takes no action after Congress has adjourned its second session, this is considered a "pocket veto" and the legislation dies.

STEP #13: Overriding a Veto
If the President vetoes a bill, Congress may attempt to override the veto. This requires a two-thirds roll-call vote in both the House and Senate of the members who are present in **STEP #8: Debate**
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SOURCES: http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aa010899.htm, http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/, and RESULTS Educational Fund at www.results.org.