

PUBLIC LAWS & BILLS

"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." Article I, Section 1, of the United States Constitution.

This single, simple sentence is the foundation of our complex legislative process. But, how does that process work and how do you keep track of the laws Congress generates? This pathfinder explains how to access the laws generated by the Congress of the United States.

The Origin of Ideas for Laws

Ideas for legislation are unlimited, but a main source of ideas is a newly elected Congressman, who may have based some or all of his campaign on introducing legislation on a particular issue. Any Congressman, new or old, may be petitioned by citizens or businesses of his district to introduce new legislation.

The process begins when a member of Congress introduces a proposal in one of four forms: a bill, joint resolution, concurrent resolution, or simple resolution. This pathfinder explains the process using a House of Representatives bill, the most commonly used method of introduction, but the process is the same for all types of bills.

A Proposed Bill

There are two types of bills: public and private. A public bill affects the general public at large. A bill that affects a single, specific individual or private entity is a private bill.

Bills may originate in either the House or the Senate. The letters "H.R." followed by a number designates a bill originating in the House of Representatives. The letter "S" followed by a number

designates a Senate bill. Each house of Congress has a separate numbering sequence for bills.

Bill numbers are found in the legislative history notes at the end of each public law. They are also located through subject indexes in the *Congressional Index*, the index to the *Congressional Record* and in the *Digest of Public General Bills*.

Bills may be reintroduced each Congress if they did not pass during the previous Congress. However, bills carry over from one session to another. Each Congress is 2 years; there are two sessions per Congress, each session lasting one year. The First Congress under the Constitution was held in 1789-90.

A bill will become a law only after both houses agree to it in identical form and:

- 1) The President approves it; or
- 2) If the President fails to return it with objections to the House that originated it within 10 days while Congress is in session; or
- 3) If both houses override a presidential veto by a two-thirds vote of each House.

A bill does not become law without the President's signature if Congress, by their final adjournment, prevents its return with objections. This is known as a "pocket veto".

Veto messages by the President are found in the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Title 3 of the *Code of Federal Regulations*, and the *Papers of the President* series.

After a Bill Becomes Law

Public laws are acts passed by Congress, and are either signed by the President or passed by a vote overriding a presidential veto. The Government Printing Office (GPO) prints these laws, assigning Public Law (P.L.) numbers as they are received. These numbers reflect both the session and the law number.

For example, P.L. 104-340 refers to the 340th Public Law enacted by the 104th Congress.

Printed copies of public laws are found in: 1) United States Code Congressional and Administrative News; 2) advance sheets for United States Code Service; and 3) advance sheets to United States Code Annotated.

Public laws are later codified in the United States Code (U.S.C.) and reprinted in the United States Code Annotated (U.S.C.A.), and United States Code Service (U.S.C.S.). Tables at the end of each set provide cross-references between Public Laws and U.S. Codes. Code sections are often indicated in the margin of the public law.

Locating Laws by Popular Name, Subject, or Public Law Number

1. **Name of the Act** - *Shepard's Acts and Cases by Popular Name*. The subject indexes and the tables in *U.S. Code Congressional & Administrative News*, U.S.C., U.S.C.A. or U.S.C.S should also be checked.

2. **Subject** - the subject index in the *Congressional Index* (CCH) may make reference to a House or Senate bill by reference number. This index will indicate when the bill was enacted and give the public law citation. This index cites by both the subject and the title of the bill or act.

3. **Bill Number** - Congressional Index (CCH). This index provides the Public Law number if the bill became law. Then look in the *U.S. Code Congressional & Administrative News* for the public law.

4. **Online** - These laws can also be located on-line at www.gpoaccess.gov.