

# 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 will explain 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 one of the main sources of ideas, and the draft, originate with a newly elected Congressman. The new Congressman may have based some, or all, of his campaign on introducing legislation on a particular issue. Also, a Congressman, new or old, may be petitioned by the citizens or businesses of his district to introduce new legislation.

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

## A Proposed Bill

There are two types of bills, public and private. A public bill is one that 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 but all bills for raising revenue must originate in the House. By

tradition, general appropriation bills also originate in the House. The letters "H.R." followed by a number designates a bill originating in the House of Representatives. The letter "S" then followed by its 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. You may also locate bill numbers through subject indexes in the *Congressional Index*, the index to the *Congressional Record* and in the *Digest of Public General Bills*.

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

A bill will become 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.

The 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 either signed by the President or passed by a vote overriding a veto, that affect the general public. The Government Printing Office (GPO)

prints these laws. The GPO chronologically assigns numbers to the laws as they are received. Public laws (P.L.) and then the number are laws by Congress. For example, P.L. 104-340 refers to the 340<sup>th</sup> Public Law enacted by the 104<sup>th</sup> 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 United States Code (U.S.C.) and reprinted in United States Code Annotated (U.S.C.A.), and United States Code Service (U.S.C.S.). Tables at the end of each set refer from the P.L. cite to the code cite. Code sections are often indicated in the margin of the public law.

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

1. If you know only the name of the act, check *Shepard's Acts and Cases by Popular Name*, ask a staff member at the Reference Desk for this volume. You should also check 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.

2. Check the subject index in the *Congressional Index* (CCH), which may refer you to a House or Senate bill by reference number. Look up the bill reference number in the *Congressional Index*. The *Congressional Index* will indicate when the bill was enacted and give you the public law citation. All of these indexes will cite by both subject and by the title of the bill or act.

3. If all you have is the bill number check the Congressional Index (CCH). This will tell you the Public Law number if the bill became law. Go to the *U.S. Code Congressional & Administrative News* and look up the public law.