

CHAPTER SUMMARY

CHAPTER
7

Congress at Work

★ HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW ★

Members of Congress introduce thousands of bills—draft proposals—in every session. Less than five percent of the bills that are introduced survive the complicated process required to become a law.

- **Introducing a Bill** Representatives can introduce bills by dropping them into the hopper, a box near the House clerk's desk. Senators must formally present a bill after being recognized by the presiding officer.
- **Committee Action** In each chamber new bills are first sent to committees where most die from inaction. If the committee decides to act on a bill, it holds hearings at which interested parties can testify. The committee then revises the bill and decides by majority vote whether it should be "killed" or reported—sent to the floor with a recommendation.
- **Floor Action** Lawmakers almost always agree with the committee recommendation. Floor debates generally focus on amendments which any lawmaker can offer. Riders are amendments on a subject other than the one covered by the bill. Lawmakers often attach riders that provide unrelated benefits for their constituents. After debate and revision, if needed, members vote and majority rule determines whether the bill passes.
- **Conference Committee Action** Both chambers must pass a bill in identical form before it can be sent to the president. A joint committee, known as a conference committee, works out the details of any compromises needed to achieve that end.
- **Presidential Action** The president can sign a bill, making it law. He can take no action for 10 days, and, if Congress is in session, the bill becomes law without the president's signature. The president can also veto a bill, forcing Congress to override his rejection by a two-thirds vote of each chamber.

In addition to bills, Congress also passes resolutions to cover routine matters for which a law is not needed or to express its opinion on a particular matter.

★ TAXING AND SPENDING BILLS ★

The House Ways and Means Committee makes the rules on tax rates, deductions, and benefits. A closed rule once forbade members to offer amendments to tax bills during floor debate. Critics charge that, after the closed rule was abandoned in 1975, tax bills became a collection of amendments written to please special interests.

Congress uses a two-step procedure to approve the spending of government revenues.

- An authorization bill sets up a federal program, specifies how much money may be allocated for the operation of that program, and designates which executive branch agency will administer the program.
- An appropriations bill provides the money needed to operate the program in response to a budget request from the administering agency.

Appropriations committees in each chamber review the appropriations bills. These committees hear testimony from executive agency directors, set a final budget figure for the program, and report the bill to the floor. The final appropriation is almost always less than the amount in the agency's budget request.

Appropriations committees have no authority over money that the government is legally committed to spending each year because of previous legislation. These uncontrollables account for 70 percent of all government expenditures. Some uncontrollables are called entitlements because they are for continuing social programs.

(continued)

CHAPTER SUMMARY Activity

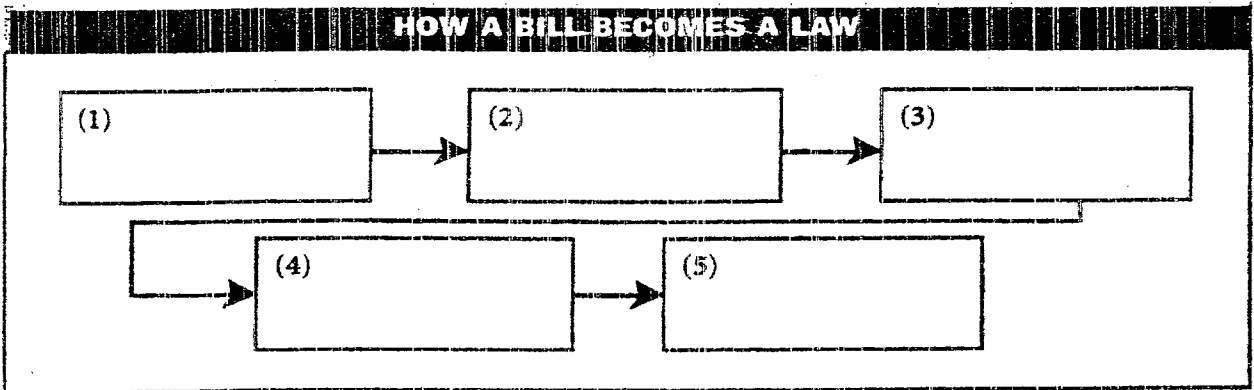


Congress at Work

DIRECTIONS In the space provided, write the word(s) that best completes the sentences.

1. _____ are amendments on a subject other than the one covered by a bill.
2. Congress passes _____ to cover routine matters for which a law is not needed or to express an opinion.
3. A _____ rule forbade members of Congress to offer amendments on the floor during debate.
4. _____ bills set up federal programs and designate which executive agency will administer them.
5. _____ bills provide the money needed to operate a program in response to a budget request.
6. The term _____ refers to uncontrollable spending used to operate continuing social programs.
7. Lawmakers employ _____ to resolve problems that constituents are having with the federal government.
8. _____ bills appropriate money for local projects; _____ legislation describes the abuse of this process.

Organizing Information Examine the following diagram and study the list of steps in the process a bill must follow to become a law. Write each step in the correct order on the flow chart.



- Floor Action
- Committee Action
- Introducing a Bill
- Presidential Action
- Conference Committee Action

Critical Thinking Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

9. Why do you think a congressional committee would “report” a bill to the floor of Congress with a negative recommendation rather than “kill” it in committee?
10. Why do you think senators can be more independent than representatives on party line votes?