

Congress at Work: The Legislative Process

“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)

Summary: Students will analyze documents which were created in Congress at different points in the legislative process to identify what step in the process is illustrated by each document.

Rationale: The abstract concept of the legislative process is made concrete in this lesson. In carefully examining each document, students will see a moment of the process in action. They will be able to more easily describe what is actually happening as a bill moves forward in Congress.

Guiding Question: How are laws made?

Materials:

18 document facsimiles

Process Cards

Congress at Work: The Legislative Process chart

Worksheet 1

Worksheet 1 Answer Key

Recommended grade levels: Grades 7-12

Courses: U.S. Government; Civics

Topics included in this lesson: Legislative process

Time Required: 60 minutes

Learning Activities:

1. Introduce the Legislative Process and Document Analysis

Review the basic steps of the legislative process with your students using your textbook or the overview available from [C-SPAN](#). If students are not familiar with how to analyze a primary source document, review this as well. For tips on working with primary source documents see the [National Archives Educators' Toolbox](#).

2. Define the Steps of the Process

Divide students into small groups. Distribute to each group both pages of the handout *Congress at Work: The Legislative Process* and a set of the Process Cards. The handout is an outline of the 12-step legislative process with a basic description of each step. Each Process Card contains a randomly lettered statement of a step in the legislative process. Groups should read each Process Card then match it to the appropriate step on the handout by placing the card on top of the correct step. After they have matched all the cards, students should use *Worksheet 1* or a sheet of notebook paper numbered 1-12 to record their answers (students should write the letter of each Process Card or Cards next to the number of the corresponding step). When all groups have finished, review all steps as a class to check for understanding and correct answers before going on to the next step.

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3. Legislative Process in Action

Students will apply their understanding of the legislative process to analyze documents that were created or received by Congress during the creation of laws. Groups of students should examine 18 documents in random order to determine at which step in the process each was created. They should carefully read each document and look for clues to determine what action is illustrated in the document. Students will then match each document to the Process Card which describes the action taking place in the document. Groups should take 2-3 documents at a time from the 18 document set and continue to switch until they have seen and matched all documents. If students have trouble determining the appropriate step for a particular document, encourage them to continue with other documents and return later to the difficult one. Students should mark *Worksheet 1* with the numbered document that matches each of the twelve steps. When all groups have finished, hold a class discussion to check for understanding and to discuss any documents students found difficult.

4. Reflection

Conduct a class discussion about the nature of the legislative process. The discussion could include these questions:

- About 3-6% of bills introduced in Congress become law. Is this passage rate good or bad? Why?
- Members of Congress know that a bill they introduce has a very small chance of passing. Why do they do it anyway? What purpose is served by introducing a bill?
- To what extent is each step of the process an opportunity for elected officials to represent the interests of their constituents?
- How does the legislative process enable the House and Senate to test ideas before they become law?
- How does the process by which legislation is made affect its outcome?
- What do the documents studied in this lesson show about how citizens can affect the legislative process?
- What do you think the public does not know but should learn about how Congress works?
- What features of the legislative process do you think should be preserved? What features should be changed?
- In what way does understanding the legislative process factor into voters' opinions in favor of or against incumbent candidates?

5. Extend the Lesson

To extend the lesson, assign a pair of students to explore the historical background of one of the documents used in this lesson. Students can investigate the history of events that led to the proposal for legislation or find out more about the legislative action reflected by the document. Alternately, assign students to learn more about Congress as a representative institution by researching the step of the process that the document illustrates. Document Source Citations can be used to identify the documents used in this lesson.

Further Resources:

Legislative Process lesson in DocsTeach from the National Archives
<http://docsteach.org/activities/6833>

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Legislative Process from CSPAN

<http://www.c-span.org/US-Congress/The-Legislative-Process/>

Legislative Process from the U.S. Senate

http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/d_three_sections_with_teasers/process.htm

Legislative Process from Thomas at the Library of Congress

http://thomas.loc.gov/home/laws_made.html#

Legislative Process from the U.S. House of Representatives

http://www.house.gov/content/learn/legislative_process/

Numbers of bills introduced in Congress, 93rd to 110th Congresses, from *Roll Call*:

<http://www.rollcall.com/pdfs/ProductivityChart.pdf>

Statistical data relating to all legislative business transacted by the Senate and House, by session of Congress, from the *Congressional Record*

http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/reference/two_column_table/Resumes.htm