Civic Literacy: How a Bill Becomes a Law

Grades 3-5
Program Overview

Bills and Laws
- What are they and why do we have them?
- How can we solve our problems?

Branches of Government
- What are they and what role does each of them play in our laws?

Making Sense of Civics
- How do you see it?
- Bill to Law Exercise
- What would you do differently?

Left: Tax Bill Political Cartoon (National Archives Identifier: 6011694)
What are laws and why do we have them?

How would you describe this photograph to someone who can’t see it?

What could result from this?

Do you think this is okay?

If not, what can you do about it?

Learn more about Kids at Work: Congress and Child Labor from the National Archives

Right: Children Working in a Textile Mill in Georgia 1/19/1909 (National Archives Identifier: 523148)
The Constitution was signed in 1787, establishing:

- America’s national government and supreme laws
- Basic rights of all Americans

Right: The Signing of the Constitution, painting by Howard Chandler Christy, 1940 (Architect of the Capitol)
Communicating Our Ideas to Shape Our Nation

What can we learn from the Bill of Rights about communicating our ideas with our government?

Why do you think the Bill of Rights was so important in the founding of our nation?

Read more from the National Archives: The Bill of Rights: How Did it Happen?

Right: Freedom of Speech, painting by Norman Rockwell, 1941-1945 (National Archives Identifier: 515599)
Branches of Government: Legislative

The Legislative Branch

- Consists of the House of Representatives, and the Senate; together referred to as Congress
- Housed in the U.S. Capitol Building, Washington, D.C.
- Draft, debate and vote on Bills to be sent to the Executive Branch for approval

Engage your students in the Constitutional debates of America’s founding fathers with Inside the First Congress: Debating the Bill of Rights

Right: United States Capitol Building, 1939 National Archives Identifier: 6219856
How Many Members of Congress are There?

- One U.S. Representative for about every 720,000 Americans; total of 435 members of the House of Representatives
- The Constitution gives each state two Senators, no matter how many people live there; total of 100 Senators in the Senate
- The U.S. population is counted every 10 years in the Census to help determine the number of representatives in Congress

Left: An Enumerator collects a family’s information for the 1940 U.S. Census (National Archives Identifier: 6200775)
Bills and Laws

From Idea to Bill

1. Can begin in either House or Senate
2. Proposed Bill studied by committee or small group of representatives
3. Once approved by committee, shared with rest of House or Senate for debate, changes and vote; steps repeated in other chamber
4. After both chambers pass Bill and work out differences, final Bill sent to President

Left: Political Cartoon, “Vote on Military Bonus Bill” 3/24/1922 (National Archives Identifier: 6011718)
Bills and Laws

What does Congress have to think about when creating a bill?

How can we solve a problem without violating the Constitution?

Who will this bill benefit? Who will it hurt?

Will it have enough votes to pass, and will the President sign it?

Visit DocsTeach to find out what happened next to the bill to grant Harriet Tubman a military pension for serving as the first American woman to lead troops in battle!

Left: Bill Granting a Pension to Harriet Tubman Davis, 1/19/1899 (National Archives Identifier: 306578)
Branches of Government: Executive

The Executive Branch, Led by the President

- Approves or Vetoes Bills
- Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Military
- Makes Treaties with Foreign Nations
- Nominates Federal Judges

Learn more about the powers of the Executive Branch by reviewing Article II of the U.S. Constitution

Right: Anyone Home? Berryman Political Cartoon Collection, 2/24/1920
(National Archives Identifier: 6011590)
Bills and Laws

Is a Presidential Veto the End of a Bill?

• Congress can override a President’s veto if 2/3 or 67% of both the House and Senate vote to do so (House: 290 of 435 votes, Senate: 67 of 100 votes)

• Congress can change the bill to satisfy the President, pass it again in both houses, and send it back to the President to approve

Left: President Jimmy Carter signing ANILCA, 12/2/1980 (National Archives Identifier: 166691808)
Branches of Government: Judicial

Checking Up on Laws: The Judicial Branch

- New bills will not have a good chance of becoming laws if they appear to be Unconstitutional
- Americans can challenge laws they think take away their rights
- The Supreme Court has the final decision on laws

Right: President Barack Obama Greets Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor (National Archives Identifier: 118817965)
Making Sense of Civics

How Do You See It?

1. Why do you think smaller committees review and approve bills before the rest of Congress does?

2. Only about 5% of all bills introduced in Congress become laws. Is this good or bad? Why do you think that?

Left: Women Members of United States 89th Congress, ca. 1965 (National Archives Identifier: 541939)
Bill to Law Exercise: The Safe Ice Cream Act

Adults are worried that children are eating too much high-sugar, high-fat ice cream. Many have written letters or called their representatives in Congress to propose a bill to fix this problem. But there are a lot of people to consider. Thinking about how ice cream is made and where we purchase it, choose which groups below could be affected by this bill:

A. Truck Drivers  
B. Dairy Farmers  
C. Food Stores  
D. Ice Cream Consumers  
E. All of the above  

Right: Uncle Sam’s Ice Cream Cone Labels (National Archives Identifier: 5716617)
Bill to Law Exercise: The Safe Ice Cream Act

Some Members of Congress think high-sugar, high-fat ice cream is not good for students and think the government should regulate consumption. Other members agree but don’t think Congress should tell students what or how much to eat. Choose two options below you think show compromise between these different points of view:

A. No ice cream sold in schools
B. You must be 16 to buy ice cream
C. Only fruit in ice cream, no candy
D. Only low-fat, reduced sugar ice cream sold in schools
E. No new regulation of ice cream

Political Cartoon, Sugar means Ships...Every Spoonful -Every Sip- Means less for a Fighter, ca. 1918 (National Archives Identifier: 512563)
We’re now at the point where our Committee is voting on whether to introduce the Safe Ice Cream Act to the rest of Congress, continue discussion and debate, or take no further action. Choose from one of the following four options:

A. Introduce Choice #1 from previous slide
B. Introduce Choice #2 from previous slide
C. Neither A or B, continue discussion and make changes
D. Take no further action, this isn’t a problem we need to consider
Conclusion

The Legislative Branch works with the other branches of government to pass laws to help solve our nation’s problems.

1. Why is it important for the branches of government to work together?

2. How are Americans given the chance to help shape our nation?

Clockwise from top: Supreme Court Building (National Archives Identifier: 594954) The United States Capitol, 1/15/1977 (National Archives Identifier: 6384310) The White House, 1/15/1977 (National Archives Identifier: 6384319)
Follow-up Assignment

1. Review all of the photographs, documents and artifacts/objects from the presentation and choose one that you would like to look at more closely.

2. Visit the National Archives website and scroll down to Worksheets for Novice or Younger Students, or Those Learning English.

3. Select the right worksheet for your selection and answer as many questions on it as you can (it’s okay if you can’t find all the answers!).

4. Share your answers with your teacher and classmates as directed.