How a Bill Becomes a Law (And What You Can Do Along the Way)

I. **Legislation is Introduced**

Any Member of Congress can introduce a bill. Once a bill is introduced, it is labeled with the sponsor’s name and is given a bill number (e.g. H.R. 1 or S. 1).

Prior to a bill’s introduction, other Members of Congress can contact the bill’s sponsor and ask to become an original co-sponsor of the legislation. During the period prior to a bill’s introduction, you can contact your representatives to encourage them to contact the bill’s sponsor and ask to become an original co-sponsor. Once a bill is introduced, you can contact your representatives to encourage them to contact the bill’s sponsor to show their support for the legislation by becoming a co-sponsor of the bill.

II. **Committee Action**

Once a bill is introduced, it is referred to the appropriate committee by the Speaker of the House or the presiding officer in the Senate. Bills can be referred to more than one committee, or different parts of a bill can be sent to different committees; bills can also be referred to subcommittees within committees. Committees and subcommittees debate the bill, can offer to amend the bill, and may hold hearings on the legislation. In order for a bill to leave committee, it must be voted out of committee. Failure to act on a bill in committee is equivalent to killing the bill.

If your Member of Congress is a member of a committee or subcommittee charged with reviewing a piece of legislation Amnesty International supports, you can contact them to ask them to support the legislation in committee, and to support its passage out of committee to the floor of the chamber. Even if your elected official is not a member of the committee, he or she can support for the legislation by cosponsoring the bill.

III. **Floor Action**

Once a bill is passed out of committee, the legislation is placed on the calendar of the respective chamber, where the Speaker of the House or the Senate Majority leader determine which bills will reach their chamber floor, and when. Once a bill is brought to the floor of the chamber, debate can begin. In the House, the length of debate is determined by rules developed by the Rules Committee. In the Senate, debate is unlimited unless cloture is invoked (a cloture vote requires the support of 60 Senators). Unless cloture is invoked, Senators can use a filibuster to prevent a bill from coming to the floor for a full vote.

Once debate is closed, the bill is voted on. If the bill is passed, it will be sent to the other chamber unless the other chamber is already considering a similar piece of legislation. If either chamber does not pass the bill, the legislation dies. If both chambers pass the same piece of legislation, the bill is sent to the President. And if the House and the Senate pass different bills, they are sent to a Conference Committee for reconciliation.

During the period prior to debate and a final floor vote on the bill, contact your Members of Congress asking them to support the legislation by voting for its passage. If the bill is in the Senate, you can also ask your Senators to show their support for the legislation by becoming a co-sponsor of the bill at any point until a final vote on the bill has taken place.
IV. Conference Committee

Members from each chamber form a conference committee and meet to reconcile the differences between the bills passed by each chamber. If the Conference Committee reaches a compromise, the committee prepares a written report, which is submitted to each chamber. This report must then be approved by both the House and the Senate.

V. The President

Before a bill can become law, it must be sent to the President for review. If the President signs the bill, or does not sign it within 10 days of receiving it if Congress is in session, the bill becomes law. If Congress adjourns before the 10 days, and the President fails to sign the bill, it does not become law. If the President vetoes the law, it is sent back to Congress with a note listing his or her reasons. The chamber that originated the bill can attempt to override the veto by a two-thirds vote. If the veto of the bill is overridden in both chambers, the bill becomes law.

VI. The Bill Becomes a Law

Once a bill is signed by the President or his/her veto is overridden by both chambers, it becomes law and is assigned an official number.

Glossary of Terms

**Cloture**: a procedure used in the Senate to end a filibuster. Under Senate rules, invoking cloture requires an affirmative vote by 3/5 of the entire Senate and will limit remaining debate to 30 hours. Cloture is not a vote on the passage of the bill.

**Co-Sponsor**: A member or members who add his or her name(s) formally in support of another member’s bill. In the House, a member can become a co-sponsor of a bill at any point up until the last authorized committee considers it. In the Senate, a member can become a co-sponsor of a bill at any point before the final vote takes place on the bill.

**Filibuster**: An informal term used in the Senate to describe an attempt to block or delay action on a bill or other matter by lengthy debate, numerous procedural motions or other obstructive actions. It can be stopped only by a three-fifths cloture vote of the senators present and voting.

**Original co-sponsor**: a member who is listed as a co-sponsor at the time of a bill’s introduction.

**Sponsor**: the original member who introduces a bill.

**Veto**: a presidential power to approve or refuse a bill or joint resolution, preventing its enactment into law. A veto can be overturned only by a two-thirds vote in both the Senate and the House.