

## Learning about Legislation #1: What Schoolhouse Rock Skipped

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If you haven't treated yourself to a few minutes of Schoolhouse Rock nostalgia on Youtube, then you should definitely do so this holiday weekend to warm up for renewed legislative wrangling in the coming weeks. The best quality clip of the incomparable "I'm Just a Bill" piece can be found [here](#). For those of you who haven't had the pleasure or for whom it has been a while, here's the quick version: Someone gets an idea, pitches it to their legislator, who writes and introduces a bill. It goes to committee, where it is debated, and then voted upon. Then it goes to the floor of the House, where it is debated and voted upon. It repeats that process in the Senate, and if it passes it goes to the president, who can veto it or sign it into law. And if it is vetoed, it goes back to the Congress, who need to pull together two-thirds of the members to vote to overturn the veto. And then it is a new law.

That is indeed the process, of course - but Schoolhouse Rock bypassed a couple of steps that don't make for good musical edutainment for children. These steps are nonetheless important status indicators, or process steps that we all need to understand if we are going to track the process of legislation in Congress.

**Mark-up** - After a bill has been introduced, the committees to which the bill has been assigned will often have hearings from experts and interested parties. After those hearings are held, the committee may have a "mark-up session" where they make revisions to the original bill. If you are using Govtrack.org or Congress.org to check on the status of a particular bill, it may still have the initial status of "introduced." If, however, you go into the "Text" section of the bill and see that there are multiple versions of the bill and it has been amended, you can infer that the Committee has had a mark-up session, and is thus giving this bill some level of attention.

**Ordered Reported** - It is a little unfair of me to say that this was skipped by Schoolhouse Rock, as Bill does say at one point in the cartoon "I hope they report on me favorably!" This is a step that occurs after a committee votes on a bill, but before it moves over to the full House or Senate. The Report is kind of like a position paper, in that it explains the purpose and justification for the bill, details how it changes the current laws on its topic, and usually budgets out how much it will cost to implement the bill. Depending on the session of Congress, only between 1/8 and 1/4 of bills ever make it to the reporting stage.

**Added to the Legislative Calendar** - This is where things get political. Just because a bill makes it through committee, doesn't mean that it has to be voted on by the full House or Senate. Being the party in control makes a HUGE difference in that they have 100% control over what gets voted on. This is a little tricky, because there is an official process step called "Legislation is placed on the calendar" but that really means that the bill is put on a docket of things that the legislature \*might\* consider. The real place worth checking is the House Majority Leader's calendar. This is an actual calendar of what is going to be debated in the coming week. You can find it on Rep. Kevin McCarthy's website, [here](#). Right now it is still showing items from the last week of July, because they are on recess. But after Labor Day it will be populated with the actual bills that are going to be handled in the coming weeks.

**Conference Committee** - This step happens after both houses pass a bill, but when the second house makes amendments and everyone has to get on the same page. For a bill to go to the president, the same version has to pass both houses. So each branch of the legislature sends an undefined number of their members to a meeting where they iron out their differences. The two groups don't have to be the same number of people; the key is that the majority of each group agrees to the changes. Once they agree to the changes, the new version of the bill is sent back to both houses to be voted upon again, before going on to the president.

For those of you who like charts, Representative Alan Lowenthal of California (who has a name you might recognize, as he is the Democrat who co-sponsored an anti-gerrymandering resolution with PA-08's own Representative Fitzpatrick this year) hosts a spectacular infographic on his website. I recommend it highly. It includes all the steps from "I'm Just a Bill" along with these complex extra bits. <https://lowenthal.house.gov/uploadedphotos/highresolution/db7257e2-5b5a-4424-9169-4e63175843df.jpg>