

## Learning about Legislation #46 - Types of Legislation, Meaning of Abbreviations

With all of the different types of legislation of display this week (regular bills, House resolutions, Senate Joint resolutions...), it feels like a good time to review what the prefixes in front of bill numbers actually mean and why you need to know the difference between them. Let's turn to [Govtrack](#), as they provide the best explanation.

There are four types of legislation that move through Congress: bills and three types of resolutions. Generally, bills are legislative proposals that, if enacted, carry the force of law, whereas resolutions do not. Though, this is not always true.

Bills are what we most commonly think of when we think of Congress drafting and voting on things. A Bill starts either in the House of Representatives or in the Senate. Bills that start in the House are designated "H.R." plus a number. (Note: that that stands for House of Representatives, not House Resolution as is often thought.) These are bills proposed by congressmen/women and considered first by the House and later by the Senate. Bills can also start in the Senate, when they are proposed by Senators — they get considered by the Senate first and the House after. Those are designated "S." plus a number. The numbering is done independently, so there is both a H.R. 1 and an S. 1.

The difference between "H.R." and "S." is entirely procedural. It has no bearing on law. (Except that the Constitution requires that appropriations bills, that is, those that direct spending, originate in the House. So, all appropriations bills are "H.R." bills. When the Senate wants to originate an appropriations bill, sometimes they do some creative procedural actions to take a failed House bill and replace its text with the appropriations they want. Thus technically the bill originated in the House, even though the text of the bill really came from the Senate. They did this with the stimulus bill a year ago.)

By and large, resolutions are not used to enact law. There are three types of resolutions: simple resolutions, joint resolutions, and concurrent resolutions. Simple resolutions are usually used for each chamber to set their own rules, like how much time is used for debate, things like that, or to express the sentiment of a chamber, like congratulating a football team or denouncing violence. They are voted on only in their originating chamber only and don't have the force of law.

Concurrent resolutions are similar, but are used for rules that affect both chambers of Congress, such as when Congress will adjourn at the end of their two-year sessions, or to express the sentiments of both chambers. Concurrent resolutions are voted on by both chambers, but are not signed by the President and do not carry the force of law.

Joint resolutions are more interesting. They have two uses, and why they have these uses is a matter of history. First, joint resolutions can be used to enact law in exactly the same manner as a bill. This is rare. Even more rare is their second use. Joint resolutions are how Congress begins the process of a constitutional amendment. These types of joint resolutions must be passed by both chambers and then ratified by 3/4ths of the states, but, as the Constitution says, they need not be approved by the President, in order to amend the Constitution.

Each type of resolution comes in a House form and a Senate form: H.Res and S.Res for House and Senate simple resolutions, H.J.Res and S.J.Res for House and Senate joint resolutions, and H.Con.Res and S.Con.Res for House and Senate concurrent resolutions. As with bills, whether it is a House or Senate resolution is just a matter of congressional procedure and doesn't affect its legal status.