

Mock Congress

After reading Article I of the U. S. Constitution and studying the journey that a bill takes to become a law, many students still haven't grasped the reality of what the process entails. The reading and studying are very black and white, and your students may be able to regurgitate it for a test; however, to be active informed citizens, they need to experience it. The following mock Congress activity will help accomplish that. It would best be done with about a dozen or more students, but as with all group projects, homeschoolers will find a way to adapt.

Day One: Assign Roles

President	2 Democrat Representatives	2 Democrat Senators
Vice President	2 Republican Representatives	2 Republican Senators
	1 Third-party Representative	1 Third-party Senator

For the sake of numbers, the President and Vice President may play the part of a Congressman as well. Each player should research their role and understand the platform of their political party. What types of legislation would this person support? Will your decision best represent your constituents? How will your votes effect you in the next election? The following websites may be helpful as students get into character:

- <http://www.politics1.com/parties.htm>
- <http://democrats.org/>
- <http://www.gop.com/>
- <http://www.lp.org/>
- <http://www.gp.org/>
- <http://www.reformparty.org/>
- <http://www.constitutionparty.com/>
- <http://www.sp-usa.org/>

Day Two: Propose a Bill

A few options here:

1. Select a bill currently under consideration in the House and the Senate for each group to use. For examples of current bills proposed in either house, visit their websites, www.senate.gov and www.house.gov
2. Provide the House and the Senate groups with a fictitious bill you have written and treat the group as a committee.
3. Allow each student the opportunity to write a bill, present it to their house, and have them select which one they will use for the exercise. Depending upon the number of participants, each group could be divided into two separate committees and consider two bills. Keep in mind what types of bills may be written in each house.

A bill is a statement of proposal for some call to action, and when writing a bill you should focus on the following things: what will happen, where it will happen and when it will happen. Anyone with an idea can write or draft a bill, though only our Congressmen can introduce it to their house. For more information visit

<http://www.dummies.com/WileyCDA/DummiesArticle/id-1441.html>

A bill needs to be very specific so that it can be enforced and people will be able to live by it with few problems. Be sure to consider how the bill will effect people in various locations. For example, when writing a bill entitled An Act To Make Casmir Pulaski Day A National Holiday, you will need to take into account that currently only Illinois residents recognize this day. Many other states' representatives may debate against your bill. The final important detail to include would be a specific date.

When writing a bill you should have a single purpose and effect in mind; however, many legislators have incorporated unrelated appropriations into bills to “bring home the bacon” to their district, referred to as pork barrel legislation. For more information visit

<http://www.answers.com/topic/pork-barrel>

Day Three: The Legislative Process

This day will walk through steps two through four of the online flowchart and could take quite a bit of time depending upon the amount of discussion and the number of amendments made to each bill. Before the process begins, the leader of the activity must have discussed with the students the importance of the different committees in Congress, such as Rules Committee, Ways and Means Committee, Appropriation Committee, Armed Services Committee, Education Committee, etc. Students must also have been familiarized with the steps on how a bill becomes law.

Working in their groups, students should read each bill as if they were on the committee deciding whether or not this proposal should be reported to their entire house. Following a reading, the “Congressmen” may have up to five minutes per section to discuss individual amendments they propose to the bill. Committees do not actually change the texts of the bills they “mark up”, but vote on amendments that their members want to recommend that their house adopt when it considers the bill on the floor. They conclude a markup session not by voting on the bill as a whole, but by voting on a motion to order the bill reported to the House with whatever amendments the committee has approved. If it passes, it goes to the full house; if it fails, it dies in Committee.

If the bill does not die, it then returns to the entire house for debate and voting. This part is rather redundant for a small group setting, unless each house was divided into more than one committee and each considered different bills. In order to improve a bill under debate, students can accept the amendments approved by the committee or add amendments to it. An amendment is an

alteration proposed or affected by such process. For example, what if you have a bill to be entitled An Act Relating To Control Street Construction. This bill is stating that street construction should only be done three miles at a time. You can amend this bill by saying street construction should only take place during night hours and should do more than three miles at a time. Make sure your amendments are clear and specify what you are trying to say.

If amendments are made, votes must be taken to accept the amendments and, if they pass, another vote must be taken to accept the entire bill. If the bill passes in the house in which it originated, it is then sent to the other house for debate and vote. Following discussion, this house may also make amendments, then take a vote on any amendments and also for the full bill. If it fails, it dies. If it was amended, it must return to the house in which it originated for reconsideration. If it passed unchanged, it proceeds to the President for action.

Note on voting: If a tie vote occurs in the House of Representatives, the bill dies. If a tie vote occurs in the Senate, the President of the Senate (a.k.a. the Vice President) is allowed to vote to break the tie.

Day Four: Executive Action

The President has four options:

1. If he chooses to sign the bill, it becomes law.
2. If he chooses to do nothing for “10 days”, the bill becomes a law.
3. If he chooses to do nothing for “10 days” and during that time Congress adjourns, the bill dies.
4. If he chooses to veto the bill, he must write his objections and return it to the house in which it originated.

That house must record the President’s objections and reconsider the bill. If after reconsideration of the bill and the objections the house can override the veto with a two-thirds majority vote, the bill along with the objections are sent to the other house for reconsideration. If that house also has a two-thirds majority vote to override the veto, the bill becomes a law.

This final day of the activity should not take as much time as previous days allowing for an opportunity to review the process and discuss what the students have learned. Students should be encouraged to participate in our legislative system by sharing their concerns and ideas with their representatives; direct them to phone numbers or websites of their Congressmen. Be sure they know the names of these individuals. If the students were not introduced to the sites on day two, help them discover where they can see what bills are currently being considered in Washington.