

How a Bill Becomes Law in Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Legislature makes our state laws. Its official name is the General Court. It is made up of the House of Representatives (160 members) and the Senate (40 members). It meets for two-year sessions. The Legislature's website is <http://www.malegislature.gov/>.

This chart shows the basic steps for how a “bill” (a proposed law) becomes a law. It is a complicated process. A bill can die at many steps along the way. Thousands of bills are filed each session but usually only hundreds become law.

Step 1: Bill is filed	Any legislator or the governor can file a bill. If a member of the House files the bill, it will be given a number such as “H.123.” If a member of the Senate files the bill, it will be given a number such as “S.123.” You can look up bills on the legislature’s website.
Step 2: Bill goes to a committee	Most bills go to a joint committee of the legislature, which is made up of senators and representatives. There are two co-chairs - one senator and one representative.
Step 3: Committee hearing	The committee holds a public hearing on each bill. Usually many bills are scheduled for the same hearing. Anyone can attend the hearing, testify for or against a bill, or submit written comments about their views on a bill. Most hearings are now conducted in hybrid style -- taking testimony from people present in the hearing room and virtually from those not present.
Step 4: Committee decision	The committee decides what to do with each bill. • House members vote on House bills in committee; Senate members vote on Senate bills • If the committee agrees with the bill, it gives it a “favorable report.” The bill moves to the next step. • If the committee disagrees with a bill, it can give it an “unfavorable report,” which usually kills the bill. • Sometimes a bill is sent to a “study committee” for further consideration. In most cases, this ends up killing the bill. • The committee can also write its own bill by redrafting bills that were filed.

Step 5: Further committee(s) review	After a bill is favorably reported out of a joint committee, it will be reviewed by other committees. For example, bills that require public funding are sent to either the House or Senate Ways & Means Committee. Before a bill can be considered by the full House, it must be reviewed by the House Committee on Steering, Policy & Scheduling. Before a bill can be considered by the full Senate, it must be reviewed by the Senate Committee on Steering & Policy. Many bills die during the committee review process. <i>Either Step 6 or Step 7 can happen next. The order doesn't matter, as long as both the House and Senate pass the bill.</i>
Step 6: House considers bill	The House of Representatives can make changes to a bill, called "amendments." The House must approve a bill twice before it can advance. If the House passes the bill first, it moves on to the Senate. If not, the bill dies for that session.
Step 7: Senate considers bill	The Senate can also make changes to the bill. Like the House, the Senate must also approve a bill twice. If not, the bill dies.
Step 8: Conference Committee	If the House and Senate pass different versions of the bill, then three members from each body – a conference committee - meet to work out an agreed upon version. The compromise version must then be approved as is by both the House and Senate. If not, the bill dies.
Step 9: Bill sent to Governor	The governor has 10 days to approve the bill and sign it into law. If she signs it, the bill becomes law. If the governor doesn't agree with the bill, she can send it back to the legislature with amendments or she can "veto" (reject) the bill. If the governor takes no action, the bill becomes law after 10 days.
Step 10: If needed, bill goes back to legislature	The legislature can vote to approve or reject the governor's amendments and send the bill back to the governor. The governor can then sign or veto the bill. The legislature can override a governor's veto by a vote of two-thirds of the members of both the House and Senate. The bill then becomes law.