THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

Introduce students to the legislative branch in one class period with this easy lesson plan. First, kick students off with our optional sponge activity while you’re taking care of business, then show our video on the Legislative Branch. Using our printable resources, have the class read a short passage that reinforces and builds on the video, then guide students as they use what they’ve learned to complete a graphic organizer and worksheet. With the last few minutes of class, take them right up to the bell with a no-materials-required, active-participation assessment activity.

Objectives/Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be able to describe the structure of the Legislative Branch.
- Students will be able to explain the role of Congress.
- Students will be able to describe how a bill becomes law.
- Students will be able to define key terms associated with the Legislative Branch.

Materials:

- Legislative Branch video on www.OurCourts.org (optional)
- Legislative Branch reading page
- Legislative Branch worksheet
- Legislative Branch graphic organizer worksheet (optional)
- Legislative Branch “active participation” teacher page

Sponge Activity/Bell Work:

This is designed to be an open-ended, ungraded brainstorming-type activity that students begin the moment they sit down and that gets them thinking about the topic. You can provide scratch paper or they can provide their own. On the board, write the following question for which students will brainstorm answers:

List as many different laws as you can think of.

Procedure:

1. Show the Legislative Branch video found on OurCourts.org. The video is also broken down into individual “chapters” so you have the option to review certain topics afterward. (If you can’t show the video, start with the reading page.)
2. Give students a copy of the Legislative Branch reading page. Read the passage as a class.
3. Have students complete the Legislative Branch graphic organizer. You may want to read through this page with the class to be sure they understand the task.
4. Assess students with the Legislative Branch worksheet.
5. Stop students a few minutes early and do an informal assessment the group using either the true/false or A/B active participation assessment activities.

Accommodations:

- Chorally read the passage.
- Repeat and reinforce bolded words.
- Read worksheet to the class or as a chorus.
Making Laws is a Big Job, But...

Yes, that’s right: Somebody has to do it. In the United States, that somebody is Congress.

**Congress Who?**

If you read the Constitution of the United States, you’ll see that “all legislative powers” were given to “a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.” Sound complicated? It’s not. All the Constitution does is create one group of lawmakers (Congress) that is divided into two smaller groups (the Senate and the House of Representatives). Can you imagine what would happen if everyone in the country had to spend their time making laws? That’s why the citizens of each state elect a certain number of Senators and Representatives to represent them in the lawmaking process.

**I’ve Got It!**

So how does Congress decide what laws to pass? Most often, the President or a member of Congress get an idea for a new law. Usually the ideas start with some kind of problem that Congress hopes a law can solve. For example, Congress might want to do a better job of controlling the flow of immigrants across the country’s borders, while also providing a good way for immigrants to apply for citizenship. Or maybe Congress wants to help create jobs by passing tax cuts for employers and spending money on construction projects. No matter who thinks up an idea for a new law, the idea must be written down and either a Senator or Representative must introduce the idea to Congress.

**The Fun Part**

When an idea for a law is written down, it is called a **bill**. A bill is like a rough draft of a law. Just like the rough draft of a paper you write for school, a bill gets marked up and re-written over and over. The bill starts in a committee that studies the bill and decides whether the idea is even worth becoming a law in the first place. Some bills “die” in the committee and never get any farther. If a bill survives (whew!), it’s still not out of danger. The members of Congress will debate and even argue about other changes they think should be made. A bill’s life is no picnic!

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**To-Do List**

1. Write down idea for a law
2. Get Senate to pass it
3. Get House of Representatives to pass it
4. Get President to sign it
5. Celebrate!

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**Congress: The Basics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senate</th>
<th>House of Representatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members are called Senators</td>
<td>Members are called Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each state gets to elect 2 Senators</td>
<td>Each state gets to elect a different number of Representatives depending on the state’s population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right now there are 100 Senators</td>
<td>Right now there are 435 Representatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Let’s Make it Official**

A bill can’t become a law unless the members of Congress vote in favor of it. If a bill is introduced in the Senate, the Senators will vote first. If they approve the bill, it goes to the House of Representatives (or vice versa if the House votes first). But if you think the trouble is over, think again: If the other group wants to make changes, then the fun part starts over. There will be more mark-ups, more debates, and more re-writes. A bill can’t become law until both the Senate and the House agree on a bill that says exactly the same thing. But wait! That’s not all. Even if Congress votes in favor of the bill, it still can’t become law until the President approves it. The President can either sign the bill to approve it or **veto** the bill to reject it.

**Veto This!**

You mean after all that, the President can just reject the bill? Yep! But that doesn’t mean the end of the line for the bill. Congress can **override** the President’s veto by voting again. If two-thirds of the members of Congress vote for the bill, then it will become law even if the President doesn’t like it. It’s really hard to get that many people to agree, so after a veto members of Congress usually discuss the bill again and try to work out a compromise that the President will approve. That means going back to... You guessed it! The fun part.

**All Done**

Once the bill is passed and signed by the President, it becomes a **statute** number and joins our **code**, or set of by topic, so the with other laws on

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**Did Somebody Say “Statute?”**

Don’t miss that extra “t” in the word “statute.” We’re not talking about a big sculpture! A statute just means a written law.
A. Finish each sentence.

Congress was created by the: ________________________________________________

A bill is: ________________________________________________

The President will veto a bill if: ________________________________________________

A statute is: ________________________________________________

If the Senate passes a bill but the House doesn’t like it the way it is, then: ________________________________________________

Congress can successfully override a veto if: ________________________________________________

Usually Congress cannot override a veto because: ________________________________________________

“Legislative” means: ________________________________________________

The reason for thinking up ideas for new laws is: ________________________________________________

A bill might die in a: ________________________________________________

B. Numbers, numbers!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Answer</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of parts Congress is divided into</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Senators each state gets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of Senators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Representatives each state gets (careful!)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of Representatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraction of Congress needed to override a veto</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge: Number of Senators needed to override a veto (It’s math, but you can do it!)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge: Number of Representatives needed to override a veto</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giveaway: Number of Presidents needed to sign a bill</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trick Question: Number of times a bill might get re-written</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. Where should the statute go? In the United States Code, statutes are organized by “title.” Each subject gets its own title. Next to each law, write the number of the title where it would be found in the code.

Title 10. Armed Forces
Title 20. Education
Title 21. Food and drugs
Title 23. Highways
Title 29. Labor
Title 38. Veterans Benefits
Title 43. Public Lands
Title 45. Railroads
Title 47. Telephones
Title 49. Transportation

_____ A law allowing telecommunications companies to use satellite technology

_____ A law controlling air traffic at airports

_____ A law requiring eggs to be refrigerated

_____ A law giving medical care to soldiers returning from war

_____ A law creating a “safe schools” program

_____ A law creating the Air Force

_____ A law setting a national minimum wage
A. Finish each sentence.

Congress was created by the:
__________________________

U.S. Constitution

A bill is:
__________________________
a rough draft of a law.

The President will veto a bill if:
__________________________
he wants to reject it.

A statute is:
__________________________
a written law.

If the Senate passes a bill but the House doesn’t like it the way it is, then:
__________________________
the House will make changes to the bill and the House and Senate will vote again.

Congress can successfully override a veto if:
__________________________
two-thirds votes in favor of the bill.

Usually Congress cannot override a veto because:
__________________________
it is too hard to get two-thirds of Congress to agree.

“Legislative” means:
__________________________
able to pass laws.

The reason for thinking up ideas for new laws is:
__________________________
to find a way to help solve problems.

A bill might die in a:
__________________________
committee.

B. Numbers, numbers!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Answer</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Number of parts Congress is divided into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Number of Senators each state gets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>Total number of Senators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Representatives each state gets (careful!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>435</td>
<td>Total number of Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>Fraction of Congress needed to override a veto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Challenge: Number of Senators needed to override a veto (It’s math, but you can do it!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>290</td>
<td>Challenge: Number of Representatives needed to override a veto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Giveaway: Number of Presidents needed to sign a bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lots</td>
<td>Trick Question: Number of times a bill might get re-written</td>
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47 A law allowing telecommunications companies to use satellite technology
49 A law controlling air traffic at airports
21 A law requiring eggs to be refrigerated
38 A law giving medical care to soldiers returning from war
20 A law creating a “safe schools” program
10 A law creating the Air Force
29 A law setting a national minimum wage
Did you know the United States Code contains a statute that creates a Popcorn Board? It’s true! The job of the Popcorn Board is to help the popcorn industry. Imagine that Congress thinks the board would do a better job if at least one of its members was a kid, and Senator Kernel is ready to introduce the following bill: “One of the members of the Popcorn Board shall be under age 18.” Senator Kernel just got elected, and now she is learning how laws are made. Create a chart that will show the Senator what’s going to happen to her bill as it becomes a law!
Did you know the United States Code contains a statute that creates a Popcorn Board? It’s true! The job of the Popcorn Board is to help the popcorn industry. Imagine that Congress thinks the board would do a better job if at least one of its members was a kid, and Senator Kernel is ready to introduce the following bill: “One of the members of the Popcorn Board shall be under age 18.” Senator Kernel just got elected, and now she is learning how laws are made. Create a chart that will show the Senator what’s going to happen to her bill as it becomes a law!

**CONGRESS**

The **Senate**
Number of Members: **100**

Senator Kernel introduces her bill

The bill gets marked up and re-written

Members of the Senate discuss and debate the bill

The Senate votes to approve the bill

The President gets the bill

**Note:** These are suggested answers. You may prefer slightly different answers depending on class discussion.

**Hint:**

The House gets the bill, marks it up and re-writes it

Members of the House discuss and debate the bill

The House votes to approve the bill

(Uh-oh! What happens now? Draw an arrow leading back.)

**THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH**

Name **Teacher’s Key** Date ________
**ACTIVE PARTICIPATION INFORMAL ASSESSMENT #1**

**TRUE/FALSE**

**Procedure**

Tell students you are going to read a series of true/false questions. Tell them that when you have finished reading each statement (sometimes you may need to repeat the statement), you will ask them to tell you whether the statement is true or false. There are several ways you can have students respond:

- Ask them to give you a “thumbs up” if the answer is true and a “thumbs down” if it’s false.
- Have students call out “true” or “false” in a chorus.
- Make a quick set of T/F cards using index cards. On each card, write a large T on one side and F on the other. Give each student a card and ask them to answer by showing you the T side or the F side. Either way, ask students to wait until you have finished reading the statement to respond.

**Example**

Teacher: There are 50 members in the Senate. True or false?
Class: (showing thumbs down)
Teacher: Great! Everyone is showing me that’s wrong. Why is it not 50? (This is a good opportunity to verbally reinforce the material with students)

1. A bill can be passed into law without ever being written down. (F)
2. If the House and Senate pass a bill, it automatically becomes law. (F)
3. Ideas for laws usually start as problems Congress hopes to solve. (T)
4. There are 100 Representatives. (F)
5. Congress can override a veto with a vote of two-thirds in favor. (T)
6. After one part of Congress passes a bill, the other part will always like the bill exactly the way it is and not make any changes. (F)
7. When the President rejects a bill, that’s called a veto. (T)
8. “Legislative” means “to sign a bill.” (F)
9. Congress gets its powers from the U.S. Constitution. (T)
10. The House of Representatives has more members than the Senate. (T)
11. The rough draft of a law is called a statute. (F)
12. If the President doesn’t like a bill, that’s too bad. (F)
13. Anyone can introduce a bill to Congress. (F)
14. The number of Representatives a state gets is based on its population. (T)
15. If the President vetoes a bill, it can never become law. (F)
ACTIVE PARTICIPATION INFORMAL ASSESSMENT #2

A/B

Procedure

Tell students you are going to read a series of statements that are not complete. Tell them that when you have finished reading each statement (sometimes you may need to repeat the statement), you will give them two possible answers—an “A” answer and a “B” answer. There are several ways you can have students respond:

- Ask them to give you a “thumbs up” if the answer is A and a “thumbs down” if the answer is B.
- Have students call out “A” or “B” in a chorus.
- Make a quick set of A/B cards using index cards. On each card, write a large A on one side and B on the other. Give each student a card and ask them to answer by showing you the A side or the B side.

In addition to reading the answer options, you can also make an overhead with an A column and a B column so the students can see the answers as you go along. Either way, ask students to wait until you have finished reading the statement to answer.

Example

Teacher: There are 100 members in the _____ Is it A: House of Representatives, or B: Senate?
Class: (saying or showing B)
Teacher: Great! Everyone is saying it’s the Senate. How many people does the House of Representatives have? (This is a good opportunity to verbally reinforce the material with students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A law that has been signed by the President becomes</td>
<td>a bill</td>
<td>a statute✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the President doesn’t like a bill, he can</td>
<td>veto it✓</td>
<td>override it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new law can be introduced if it is</td>
<td>written down✓</td>
<td>just talked about out loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before it becomes a law, a bill will never be changed</td>
<td></td>
<td>will probably be changed✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a bill survives a committee, it still might not become a law</td>
<td></td>
<td>will definitely become a law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The code is</td>
<td>a set of bills</td>
<td>a set of statutes✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The part of Congress with the fewest members is</td>
<td>the House</td>
<td>the Senate✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of Senators each state gets is</td>
<td>based on population</td>
<td>2✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress can override a veto with a vote of</td>
<td>two-thirds✓</td>
<td>three-fourths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the President vetoes a bill, Congress will probably try to work out a compromise</td>
<td>give up on that bill</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting a vote of two-thirds in favor of a bill is</td>
<td>easy</td>
<td>difficult✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right now, there are 435 Representatives</td>
<td>435 Representatives✓</td>
<td>435 Senators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the Senate, a bill can be introduced by either aSenator or a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a bill is introduced in the House of Representatives, then the Senate will vote on it first</td>
<td></td>
<td>the House will vote on it first✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the code, statutes are organized in alphabetical order</td>
<td></td>
<td>by subject✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>