Virtual Snapshot Series

How a Bill Becomes a Law
The Three Branches

Laws are a set of rules of conduct created and enforced by the government. Laws provide safety, order, fairness, and community improvements.

In New Jersey, there are three branches of government:

- Legislative Branch MAKES the laws.
  Senators and General Assembly Members
- Executive Branch ENFORCES the laws
  Governor and Cabinet Members
- Judicial Branch INTERPRETS the laws
  Judges and Court Administrators

Having three branches of government, instead of one, ensures that one branch is not stronger than another. We call this a system of checks and balances.
The Upper House

There are two houses in New Jersey’s legislative branch of government, the Senate and the General Assembly.

The upper house is called the Senate. There are 40 Senators. Senators typically stay in office for four years.

To be a New Jersey Senator you must be:
- 30 years old
- United States citizen
- Resident of New Jersey for four years
- Resident of the district you’d like to represent for one year prior to an election
The lower house is called the General Assembly. There are 80 General Assembly Members. General Assembly members typically stay in office for two years.

To be a New Jersey General Assembly Member you must be:
- 21 years old
- United States citizen
- Resident of New Jersey for two years
- Resident of the district you’d like to represent for one year prior to an election
Legislative Districts

New Jersey is divided into 40 legislative districts. Each district contains approximately 220,000 people. Legislative districts ensure equal representation from the members of the Legislature.

Because the districts are determined by population, some districts look large and some look small, but each includes the same number of people. The legislative map is redrawn every ten years after the United States Census, which counts every person living in the country.

The people living in each district are called constituents. The constituents elect one Senator and two General Assembly Members to represent them.
What is a Bill?

A bill is an idea for a law. Anyone can have an idea for a law:

- Constituents
- Interest Groups
- Lawmakers
- The Governor
- You!

Only a member of the Legislature can draft a bill and begin the legislative process.
The Legislative Process

The legislative process is how a bill becomes a law.

Legislators use three skills during the legislative process:

- **DEBATE**: a discussion that explores different ideas
- **NEGOTIATION**: a process aimed at reaching an agreement by considering different ideas and accepting other people’s viewpoints
- **COMPROMISE**: an agreement that is reached by people, whose views may be different
The Path of a Bill

A bill can start in either house, but it must be passed in both houses in identical form. If a bill passes each house, it is sent to the Governor for approval.

The path a bill takes through the Legislature is:
1. First Reading
2. Committee Hearing
3. Second Reading
4. Third Reading
5. Final Passage and Vote
First Reading

The legislator who directs the writing, or “drafting” of a bill, is called the sponsor.

The first reading occurs when a bill is introduced during a legislative session -- a meeting of a legislative house. The Senate Secretary or the General Assembly Clerk reads the bill number, sponsor name, and bill title.
Committee Hearing

Committees are small groups of legislators who evaluate bills, their impact, and details. Committee meetings are open to the public so that citizens have an opportunity to voice their opinion about each bill.

In New Jersey, there are 20 Senate committees and 29 General Assembly committees. Committees are organized by subject matter and include topics like health, education, and agriculture.
Second and Third Reading

If a committee votes to approve a bill, it will go back to the house it started in for a second reading.

Third readings are scheduled by the presiding officer -- the Senate President or General Assembly Speaker. The bill title is read, it is debated by the legislators, and then voted on by the entire membership of the house.

During the debate, a legislator must ask the presiding officer for permission to speak, and may only speak three times.
Final Passage and Vote

During the final passage, legislators use a set of buttons on their desks to record their votes in the Electronic Voting System. Legislators can vote yea (yes), nay (no), or they can abstain, indicating that they have decided to vote neither for nor against the bill.

The name of each legislator, their vote, and the vote totals are displayed on large digital screens.

A simple majority vote is needed to pass a bill in each house. A simple majority occurs when half of the number of legislators plus one additional legislator all vote together.

Senate Simple Majority
40 Senators ÷ 2 = 20
20 + 1 legislator = 21 votes to pass

General Assembly Simple Majority
80 Members ÷ 2 = 40
40 + 1 legislator = 41 votes to pass
The Governor’s Action

If the bill receives a simple majority vote in both houses of the Legislature, it is sent to the Governor for consideration.

The Governor can:
- Sign the bill — it’s a law!
- Take no action — a bill automatically becomes a law after 45 days.
- Conditional veto — request changes in the language of the bill.
- Line item veto — request changes to the budget or allotted amount of money tied to the bill.
- Absolute veto — refuse to sign the bill.
- Pocket veto — hold the bill during the last ten days of a two-year session so that it cannot be further discussed by the Legislature.

The Legislature can overrule the Governor’s veto with a 2/3 vote in both houses.