

How Dr. King's Birthday Became A National Holiday

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does a bill become a law in the United States of America?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students identify how a bill becomes a law in the United States by analyzing the Constitution and exploring how an organized public campaign applied pressure on elected representatives to enact the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. federal holiday.



The constitutional process for a bill to become law in the United States is a fundamental exercise of the nation's democratic system of government. Enacting laws features the distinct roles and vested powers of two of its three institutions, the Legislative and Executive branches. A bill can originate in either chamber of the Legislative Branch, the House of Representatives or the Senate. It must move successfully through debate in various committees before finally securing a majority of votes in both legislative chambers of Congress. The bill then proceeds to the Executive Branch, where the president can take a variety of actions.

Typically, a president will choose one of two courses of action: either sign the legislation into law or decline to sign and return the unsigned bill to Congress (known as a veto). While Congress does have the additional power to override a presidential veto with a two-thirds majority vote in both chambers, this is a rarely used legislative measure to enact laws. Presidents may also choose to take no action on a bill that is presented for signature. If Congress remains in session for ten days after the bill has been presented to the president and it has not been signed or vetoed, the bill becomes law. However, if Congress goes out of session within ten days of the bill being presented to the president and no action has been taken to either sign or veto, the bill does not pass. This is known as a "pocket veto."

An important variable in creating new laws is direct democracy - the involvement of the public. Public pressure on elected representatives to act on a particular issue can play a substantial role in a bill becoming a law. Furthermore, history has shown that when an issue gains support from a leading public figure who can garner coverage by the media, favorable public awareness toward the issue can be raised even further, resulting in government leaders being more inclined to respond with legislative solutions. Such was the case for a bill marking the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a yearslong organized public awareness campaign coordinated with the support of a celebrity finally led to the bill being signed into law. But the journey to



that triumph had taken over fifteen years, and the first steps were taken just days after the tragedy of Dr. King's murder.

In the immediate aftermath of Dr. King's assassination on April 4th 1968, U.S. Congressman John Conyers of Michigan introduced the Conyers King Holiday Bill in the House of Representatives. Submitted four days after King's death, the legislation sought to establish a federal holiday to honor the slain civil rights champion; however, Representative Conyers' bill languished in congressional committees for years even though he dutifully submitted his legislation at the beginning of every new congressional session. Contributing to the delay was the fact that King was not viewed favorably at that time by many members of Congress, nor among a substantial portion of the American public.

Finally, in 1979, the Conyers' bill was voted on in Congress but fell five votes shy of passage. Undaunted, the King Center in Atlanta, led by Dr. King's widow Coretta Scott King, continued to lobby for a national holiday. They were soon joined by a powerful ally, musician and songwriter Stevie Wonder. In 1980, Wonder channeled his discontent with opposition to the holiday into "Happy Birthday," a song that completely reimagined the traditional song and featured lyrics celebrating Dr. King's peaceful mission. "Happy Birthday" became an international hit in 1981 and an anthem for the campaign.

The popularity of the song substantially increased awareness of the campaign, resulting in increased public support of enacting the new law. By the end of 1982, the King Center had gathered six million signatures on their petition in support of federal legislation to establish a Dr. King federal holiday. Mrs. King and Mr. Wonder presented the signed petition to Massachusetts Congressman Tip O'Neill, Speaker of the House of Representatives.

A new bill, House Resolution (H.R.) 3706, authored and sponsored by Representative Katie Hall of Indiana, was submitted to the 98th Congress on July 29, 1983. Although it was met with opposition in both the House and Senate, a bill "to make the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a legal public holiday" passed both chambers of Congress. H.R. 3706 was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan on November 2, 1983 at a White House ceremony with members of the Dr. King's family present.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How the United States Constitution established the federal system of government
- The powers and roles of the Legislative and Executive branches in the process to enact laws in the United States
- The history to enact the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday
- About the origins of Stevie Wonders' song "Happy Birthday."

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to explain how laws are enacted in the United States by examining the campaign to establish the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Play **Clip 1, President Reagan signing legislation authorizing Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday.** Ask students:

- What was happening in this video?
- Where did this ceremony take place and why do you think it was held there?
- Who was in attendance at the ceremony? Why do you think that these people were invited to be there?
- Why do you think the reporter described the event as an "impressive" ceremony?
- Why do you think President Reagan signed the bill into law even though he "so strongly opposed" it?
- Why did the guests of the ceremony sing "We Shall Overcome" at the end of the ceremony? (*You may need to explain to students that "We Shall Overcome" was an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s that Dr. King led.*)

PROCEDURE:

1. Share that today students will be learning how important ideas can become laws, and that they will learn about how Dr. King's Birthday became a public holiday. Pass out **Handout 1 - Learning Vocabulary Activity** with students. After completing the

handout, have students share their answers.

2. Display **Image 1, The Constitution of the United States of America.** Ask students:

- Have you seen this document before? Do you know why it is important? (*Encourage*

students to recognize the preamble, "We the People...")

- What is the purpose of the Constitution in the United States of America? (*Explain to students that the document established and organized the current U.S. system of government.*)
3. Display **Image 2, 3 Branches of U.S. Government.** (*Tell students that United State Constitution established three "branches" of government.*) Ask students:
 - What is one word that appears with every branch of the U.S. Government? (*Encourage students to recognize that "laws" appears with every branch of the United States system of government.*)
 - Have students discuss the role of each branch of government with a partner or small group.
 4. Explain to students that they will be learning how important ideas can become laws as they watch the following video. Ask them to think about the three branches of government as they watch this video. Share the Schoolhouse Rock Video "I'm Just A Bill" (*Note: this link will open to the official song outside TeachRock, we suggest loading the video before class to avoid showing advertising during class.*) Display Image 2 once again as a reference and ask students:
 - What is the first step that is taken if people have an important idea that they think should become a law?
 - How is a Bill introduced to Congress?
 - If Congress passes the bill, where does it go next? What are the president's options when a bill is presented for signing?
 5. Tell students that they are going to learn about Dr. Martin Luther King. Show **Clip 2, The Merv Griffin Show**, until the 2:45 time mark. Tell students they will be watching a clip of Dr. Martin Luther King being interviewed. Ask students:
 - What about the support of a bill from someone who is famous and their access to TV, News, and Social Media? Could that be a factor in passing legislation and creating laws?
 - What is one thing you learned about Dr. Martin Luther King from this video?
 - What was Dr. Martin Luther King's job?
 - Where was Dr. King born? Where did he live?
 6. Tell students that they will now be listening to one of Dr. King's most famous speeches. Play **Clip 3, "I Have a Dream."** Ask students:
 - Do you know the song Dr. King is referring to in this speech?
 - What might Dr. King be thinking about when he says "freedom"?
 - What might Dr. King mean by "all of God's children." Do you think at the time of Dr. King's speech everyone had the same amount of freedom?
 7. Tell students that because of his fight for equality, many people felt that Dr. King's birthday should be celebrated, and that a bill making Dr. King's birthday a national holiday was proposed just four days after he died. Share that Dr King's birthday did not become a national holiday until over 15 years after the died, and that a famous musician helped the idea of celebrating Dr King's Birthday gain support and become a law.

8. Play **Clip 4, Happy Birthday**. Ask Students:

- Why was it important that Stevie Wonder, who was a popular celebrity, helped bring media attention to the campaign to establish a national holiday in honor of the civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? (*If needed, students can familiarize themselves with Stevie Wonder by reading TeachRock's bio on Mr. Wonder.*)
- What were some of the actions that Stevie Wonder took to advocate for a National Holiday?
- Why do you think Stevie Wonder chose "Happy Birthday" as the title to his song?
- How is Stevie Wonder's song similar or different than the traditional version of the "Happy Birthday" song?
- Do you think the song's title helped it become popular, and helped the campaign for the MLK holiday?

9. Display **Image 3, MLK Holiday Legislation**

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Considering all the clips that were viewed and the history of the legislative process and lobbying effort to establish the MLK holiday, ask students:

- Why do you think the bill to create a National Holiday for Dr. King's Birthday passed even if some members of Congress and the president did not support it?
- What happened outside of the government for the MLK Holiday bill to get passed?
- Are you surprised that it took so long for a celebrated person like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to get a national holiday?

timeline and discuss as a class. Ask students:

- In what year did Dr. King die?
- How long did Congressman Conyers' legislation wait in Congress before it was voted on in the House of Representatives? Did it pass?
- What actions did organizations and individuals take after Rep. Conyers' bill was defeated in Congress?
- What do you notice about what happened after Stevie Wonder became involved?
- How did Stevie Wonder help Dr. King's Birthday to become a National Holiday? Do you think Dr. King's Birthday would be celebrated today if Stevie Wonder did not get so involved?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to think about a time they advocated for something that they thought was important. This could mean helping a friend, talking in front of a group about an important topic, or talking with an adult about a serious idea. Write about what happened, how you felt, and what the outcome was.
2. **Writing activity:** Write a Friendly Letter to Stevie Wonder and let him know what you have learned about his role in making Dr. King's Birthday a National Holiday. If you would like to send student letters to Stevie Wonder, write a cover letter and be sure to read student letters before sending. (Note to teacher: Information on writing a Friendly Letter can be found here: <https://www.letterwritingguide.com/friendlyletterformat.htm>). Fan Mail for Stevie Wonder can be sent to:

Stevie Wonder
Black Bull Music
4616 W Magnolia Blvd.
Burbank, CA 91505-2731

3. **Illustrated Song Lyrics:** Invite students to illustrate lyrics from Stevie Wonder's song "Happy Birthday". Encourage students to use imagery that is meaningful to them and make their illustrations especially colorful.
4. **Cartoon Storyboard:** Create an MLK Day Cartoon Storyboard depicting Stevie Wonder's support for a National Holiday in honor of Dr. King using one of the following resources (*Note to teacher: for information to include in the Cartoon Storyboard, refer the following article: <https://www.iheart.com/content/2018-02-07-how-stevie-wonder-was-key-in-the-creation-of-mlk-day/>.*)
 - Storyboard That! (<https://www.storyboardthat.com/storyboard-creator>)
 - Make Beliefs (<https://www.makebeliefscomix.com/Comix/>)
 - Google Docs Template (<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1BAajjX7ak64ddUpLZxp19DhA7p9WB0twBP7Y62JuM90/edit#slide=id.p>)
5. Display **Image 4, MLK Day of Service**. Read aloud as a class the quote from Mrs. Coretta Scott King about the MLK Holiday as a Day of Service. Ask students to write a response explaining how they would spend their King Day of Service.



COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12) (Extension Activities Only)

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Text Types and Purposes 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.



Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.



Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding of evidence and rhetoric.



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- President Reagan signing legislation authorizing Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday
- The Merv Griffin Show
- "I Have a Dream"
- Soundtracks - Happy Birthday

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Learning Vocabulary Activity