



SOUNDTRACKS

SONGS THAT DEFINED HISTORY

How a Bill Becomes a Law: Legislating the Martin Luther King, Jr. 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 and its related institutions
- 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 the ceremony in this video?
- Where did the ceremony take place and why might it have been held at that particular location?
- Who was in attendance at the ceremony? Why might particular attendees have been invited to the ceremony? Do you recognize any of the attendees?
- Why might the reporter have described the event as an "impressive" ceremony?
- Why might the president have signed the bill into law if he "so strongly opposed" it?
- Why did the guests of the ceremony sing "We Shall Overcome"? (*Explain to students that "We Shall Overcome" was an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s that Dr. King led.*)
- How does the process for a bill to become a law begin?

PROCEDURE:

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

- Does this document look familiar? (*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.*)
- How does the document organize the government?

2. Display **Image 2: Articles 1-3 of U.S. Constitution**. Ask students:

- Is there a separate article for each government institution?
- In what order were the “legislative Powers” established in the Constitution and what did it create? (*Encourage students to recognize and remember that legislative powers were established in Article 1 of the Constitution, before the executive and judicial powers, and the article created the United States Congress.*)
- What do these articles provide or “vest in each institution of the government? (*Encourage students to recognize that the word “vested” found in each article is assigning particular authority to each part of the government.*)

3. Display **Image 3: 3 Branches of U.S. Government**. (*Tell students that each institution is also known as a “branch” 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.*)
 - (*Ask students the following question again.*) In what order was the Legislative branch established in the Constitution and what institution did it create? (*Encourage students to remember that the Legislative branch was established in Article 1 of the Constitution, before the Executive and Judicial branches, and it established the United States Congress.*)
 - Do you think the order of the articles in the Constitution relates directly to how laws are created in the United States? Why?
 - How might the Legislative branch “make” laws and might any other branches be involved in this process?
4. Pass out **Handout 1: How a Bill Becomes a Law** to each student. Have students read the handout so they can participate in a large group discussion. Once students have completed the reading, bring the class back together as a large group. Ask students:
- What is legislation called before it becomes a law?
 - What branch of government do bills originate in? Can they originate in any chamber of Congress?
 - What kind of formal congressional groups do bills go to after they are introduced? What happens to a bill in a committee? Does a bill go through the same committee process in both chambers of Congress?

- What do members of the House and Senate do with a bill after it successfully passes through the committees of each chamber? After debating and amending the bill, do both chambers have to vote on the same version of the bill?
 - If majorities in both chambers pass the bill, where does it go next?
 - What are the president's options when a bill is presented for signing?
 - According to the rules and process of a bill becoming a law, are there instances where a bill can become a law without the president's signature? What are they?
 - Do bills always have to be ideas conceived by members of Congress? Can the ideas for new laws come from the public? Do you think the public might play an important role in a bill becoming a law? If so, what might their role(s) be?
 - What about the support of legislation from a popular public figure and their access to the media? Might that be a factor in passing legislation and creating laws?
5. Play **Clip 2, Campaign for a MLK Holiday**. Ask students:
- What might be the significance of an artist like Stevie Wonder lending his popular celebrity and ability to garner 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 Wonder.*)
 - According to writer Jeff Chang, why did there need to be a national holiday to recognize Dr. King? Why might a holiday recognizing Dr. King's birthday "memorialize the breakthroughs that the Civil Rights Movement had achieved"?
 - What historic moment in the civil rights movement might Stevie Wonder be referring to in Washington, D.C. when he said, "It's fitting that we should gather here because it was here that Martin Luther King inspired the whole nation."?
 - Can you think of other national holidays that are "monuments" to individuals, groups, and events in the nation's history?
 - Do you think the process to establish a national holiday for Dr. King happened quickly or took a long time?
6. Display **Image 4, MLK Holiday Timeline** and discuss as a class. Ask students:
- When was Dr. King assassinated? When was legislation submitted to Congress to establish a MLK national holiday?
 - How long was Congressman Conyers' legislation 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 the pace of the legislative process and lobbying efforts for the MLK Holiday legislation once the King Center and Stevie Wonder became involved?
 - Why might the legislation have moved at a quicker pace? What might Stevie Wonder have been able to uniquely

contribute to the lobbying and legislative campaign?

Wonders' song do "political work" without listeners thinking about it?

7. Play **Clip 3, Happy Birthday**. Ask students:
 - What does Stevie Wonder say his purpose is as an artist? How might his song "Happy Birthday" have contributed to that purpose in regard to the successful establishment of the MLK national holiday?
 - Considering Dr. Daphne Brooks' comments about the song, how might

- Why do you think Wonder chose "Happy Birthday" as the title to his song?
- In what ways is Stevie Wonder's song similar or different than the traditional version of the "Happy Birthday" song?

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:
 - What two branches of government were involved in the MLK Holiday bill becoming a law?
 - What chamber of the Legislative Branch did the bill originate in? What two chambers of Congress did it have to move through before being sent to the Executive Branch?
 - Was there opposition to the legislation by both branches?
 - Why might the legislation have passed even if it was opposed by some members of Congress and the president?
 - What had to happen 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?
 - Since the MLK Holiday bill was controversial when it was legislated and passed, can you think of any controversial holidays that are celebrated in America?
 - Considering the public involvement in getting the bill passed, what opportunities do you have as a public citizen to make change (like new laws) happen in this country?
2. Display **Image 5 - Writing Prompt: Message Music**. Ask students to react to the following quote from Dr. Daphne Brooks regarding Stevie Wonder's song, "Happy Birthday." Consider the quote as a starting point for students to write about a song that they feel contains a political message without perhaps most listeners realizing it.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 6 - 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 one-page response explaining how they would spend their King Day of Service.

2. “Classroom Congress” activity:

- Call “Congress” into session.
 - Choose a “clerk” to oversee the activity.
- Display a list of topics that congressional committees are covering in the current session. Options for topics can be chosen from current sessions via these links:
 - House of Representatives (<https://docs.house.gov/floor/>)
 - Senate (https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/floor_activity/floor_activity.htm)
- Organize students into small groups (“Committees”) and assign a topic to each group.
 - Choose an issue from the topic provided
 - Name your bill
- Reconvene as a class
- Each small group presents its bill to the class
- Lead a discussion on which bills will be sent to the Executive Branch for signing. (*The educator may act as the executive branch to inform the discussion of whether the submitted bill would be signed or vetoed.*)



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.

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
- Soundtracks - Campaign for a MLK Holiday
- Soundtracks - Happy Birthday

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - How a Bill Becomes a Law