

What a *committee* changes isn't always what *becomes* law

One mechanism of federal lawmaking, examined in depth — how committee-stage edits differ from the version that actually reaches a floor vote.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to the mechanics of federal lawmaking — the parliamentary process most people never see explained. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with the heavier sourcing a legal or procedural claim actually requires: official records, primary-source rules, and peer-reviewed or nonpartisan scholarship, listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS – HOW FEDERAL LAWS ACTUALLY GET CREATED

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Markup vs. Floor Vote Confusion

Emendatio Occulta

Governing precedent / case Ongoing **Status** Standard step for nearly every bill

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

STANDARD COMMITTEE MARKUP PROCESS, U.S. HOUSE AND SENATE

*Before nearly any bill reaches the floor, the committee of jurisdiction holds a **markup** session — members formally debate, amend, and vote on the bill's text section by section. A bill can enter markup one way and leave it substantially rewritten, or die there entirely without ever reaching the floor. News coverage of a markup ("Committee advances bill on X") is frequently, and incorrectly, read as if the bill had already passed Congress.*

THE HOOK

“Committee passes bill” and “Congress passes bill” use nearly identical language for two very different, non-final steps in the process.

THE MECHANISM

A markup produces a committee's recommended version, not a law. That version still needs a floor vote in the same chamber, then usually needs the other chamber to act, before it can reach the President's desk.

Field mark: when a headline says a bill “advanced” or “passed committee,” check how many more votes — in how many chambers — still stand between that moment and it becoming law.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

PRIMARY SOURCE · OFFICIAL EXPLAINER

U.S. House of Representatives, "The Legislative Process": Committee Consideration.

<https://www.house.gov/the-house-explained/the-legislative-process>

Official House.gov walkthrough of markup and committee referral.

PRIMARY SOURCE · OFFICIAL EXPLAINER

U.S. Senate, "Committees" reference page.

https://www.senate.gov/committees/committees_home.htm

Official Senate.gov overview of committee structure and markup procedure.

REFERENCE SOURCE

Congress.gov, "Legislative Process" educational resources.

<https://www.congress.gov/legislative-process>

Official Library of Congress explainer, including committee-stage diagrams.

Reading This Mechanism: A Gut Check

four questions before a headline changes what you think happened in Congress

1 Locate the stage

Committee markup, floor vote, or conference — each is a separate, non-final step.

2 Check both chambers

A bill needs to pass the House and the Senate in identical form before it can become law.

3 Watch the verbs

“Advances,” “clears committee,” and “passes” mean different things — read past the headline verb.

4 Track the text version

The version that leaves committee is often not the version that reaches the floor.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 7 of Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens on federal lawmaking is listed on the cover, and four further Civics subprojects — local government, elections, official data reporting, and institutional communications — are planned beyond this one. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.

Civics Field Edition · Specimen No. 7

All specimens independently sourced