

HOW TO SPEAK WASHINGTONIAN

POPVOX users are either frustrated or fascinated by the “wonky” language used in Washington.

Our co-founders, having lived and worked in Washington – one as a lobbyist, and the other as a Congressional staffer – are guilty of using this nerd-slang not only in POPVOX team meetings, but outside of the Nation’s capital. As our intern asked, “do we want to talk like lawmen — or laymen?”

We pulled this list of commonly used wonk terms as a cheat sheet for POPVOX users keeping track of the wacky world of Washington. ***Share your voice on POPVOX, and once in a while drop some “Washingtonian” in a conversation with your friends!*** (Learn how [POPVOX works](#).)

How Are Laws Made?

Remember School House Rock? “I’m just a bill on Capitol Hill...”

Laws begin as ideas written down in the form of a bill. For example, take a House bill. (A similar process applies for bills that begin in the Senate.) First, a Representative sponsors a bill. The bill is then assigned to a committee for consideration. If the bill is voted on and passed by the committee, the bill is put on a calendar to be voted on, debated or amended by the entire House.

If the bill passes by majority (218 of 435 Representatives vote for it), the bill moves to the Senate. In the Senate, the bill is assigned to another committee, debated and voted on. Again, a simple majority (51 of 100 Senators) passes the bill (after a cloture vote).

Finally, a **conference committee** made of House and Senate members works out any differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The resulting bill returns to the House and Senate for final approval. The Government Printing Office prints the revised bill in a process called enrolling. The President has 10 days to sign or veto the enrolled bill. (Source: [The House](#))

Amendment: Simply a change to the proposed bill language. Usually takes three basic forms: adding words; striking out words; or substituting words. A **Substitute Amendment** replaces existing language of a bill or another amendment with its own.

“And for other purposes”: This phrase occurs in the “long title” section, or summary, of a lot of bills. But it’s actually standard language when lawmakers are trying to keep the summary short. According to the *House Legislative Counsel’s Manual on Drafting Style*, “if the bill covers multiple items, ‘and other purposes’ may be used at the end of the title instead of describing each item.” ([Learn more](#).)

Appropriations: Gives legal approval to spend US Treasury money. There are 13 annual appropriations bills that fund the entire federal government. These bills must be passed by Congress and signed by the President every year. Without it, Congress must pass a short-term funding bill to keep the government open — or the government is forced to shut down. (*Remember the [shutdown of August 2013](#)?*)

Bills: The form used for most legislation. A bill originating in the House is designated by the letters “H.R.”, signifying “House of Representatives”, followed by a number that it retains throughout all its parliamentary stages. Bills are presented to the President for action when approved in identical form by both the House and the Senate.

Bills vs. Resolutions: A bill — if passed — always becomes a law. That’s not the case for most resolutions (except joint resolutions).

Cloture: A vote to end the debate of a bill on the Senate floor and overcome a filibuster, normally 60 votes. The bill itself can then be voted on. In 1917, Senators adopted the cloture rule (Rule 22), at the urging of President Woodrow Wilson – whose 1884 doctoral [dissertation was about Congress](#).

Concurrent Resolutions: Resolutions affecting both the House and Senate, and designated as “H.Con.Res.” or “S.Con.Res.” On approval by both the House and Senate, they are signed by the Clerk of the House and the Secretary of the Senate. They are not presented to the President for action.

Conference Committees: Set up when the House and Senate have passed two different versions of a bill. Article 1, Section 7 of the Constitution requires that the House and Senate pass the exact same language before a bill can go to the President for his signature and become law. ([Learn more](#).)

Constituents: That’s all of us – the people represented politically by a designated officeholder. For Senators, a constituent is anyone that lives in the state; for Members of the House, a constituent is anyone that lives in the Congressional district. ([Learn more](#).)

(Tip: Members of Congress only want to hear from their constituents.)

Cosponsor: A Representative or Senator who formally adds his/her name as a supporter to another lawmaker’s bill. A way for Members of Congress to officially show support for a bill before it gets a vote.

(Tip: The more cosponsors – and the more bipartisan cosponsors – the more likely it is to get passed.)

Discharge petition: The one way that a bill can be brought for a floor vote – even if it doesn’t get voted out of a committee and is not selected by the House leadership for a vote. If at least half of the Members of the House (218) sign onto the petition to “discharge” a bill, it is immediately brought to the House floor for a vote.

(The discharge petition is the POPVOX team’s favorite legislative maneuver, and it played a role in the movie, Legally Blonde 2.) ([Learn more](#).)

Filibuster: A strategy of blocking or delaying Senate action on a bill or other matter by debating it at length, by offering numerous procedural motions, or by any other delaying or obstructive actions. The term comes from a Dutch word meaning “pirate” – first became popular in the 1850s, when both the Senate and House could filibuster. (Subsequently, the House began limiting floor debate.)

The longest filibuster in Senate history?

Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina spoke for 24 hours and 18 minutes against the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Sen. Rand Paul, whose March 2013 filibuster of President Obama’s nominee for director of the Central Intelligence Agency, John Brennan, lasted 13 hours. (Read Sen. Paul’s [filibuster transcript](#).)

The most famous Hollywood filibuster?

Jimmy Stewart playing Senator Jefferson Smith in Frank Capra’s film, [Mr. Smith Goes to Washington](#).

Joint Resolutions: While there is little difference between a joint resolution and a bill – joint resolutions are generally used to pose constitutional amendments, fix technical errors or appropriate funds and become law if adopted by both the House and Senate.

A joint resolution proposing an amendment to the Constitution must be approved by two-thirds of both the House and Senate and is sent directly to the Administrator of General Services for submission to the individual states for ratification. It is not presented to the President for approval. A joint resolution originating in the House is designated “H.J.Res.” (and “S.J.Res” for Senate proposals) followed by its individual number.

K Street: It’s a downtown Washington, DC avenue where many lobbyists and lawyers have offices, but it’s used to define the lobbying industry, just as people identify Wall Street with the financial industry.

“Payfor” or “pay for”: Washingtonian speak makes the term, “to pay for” into a noun, “payfor.” In this [real quote](#), “Rep. Paul Ryan this morning incorrectly asserted... that Democrats never offered a payfor for an extension” means that the Democrats never offered a way to pay for an extension.

Pro forma session: From the Latin, meaning “as a matter of form,” a pro forma session is a brief meeting of the Senate (sometimes only a few minutes in duration). Under the Constitution “neither chamber can adjourn for more than three days without the consent of the other.”

Pro forma sessions are held so a chamber doesn’t have to ask consent of the other. These sessions are also held to prevent the President from making recess appointments. (However, in 2012, President Obama made four appointments during a [pro forma session](#).)

Recess: *(Does this really need explanation?)* Breaks in the Senate or House schedule, also known as “District work periods.” A lot of POPVOX users complain that Congress seems to be “always on recess.” However, Article I, Section 4, in the Constitution says that Congress had to only “meet at least once a year.” The House met for [159 legislative days](#) in 2013.

Recess appointments: When a President “hires” someone for a senior level position while the Senate is in recess. The Constitution requires senior federal officials to be “approved,” or confirmed, by the Senate, but the President can act without Senate approval if the chamber is in recess. However, the official must get confirmed by the end of the next calendar year.

Reintroduction of a bill: Bills are often re-introduced in a new Congress if the bill is not signed into law. Bills that aren’t given a vote in committee or on the House or Senate floor are considered to have “died.” A re-introduction in a future Congress gives the bill a second (or third, or fourth, etc.) chance to become a law.

(Tip: It often takes years for a bill to pass, so keep voicing your support each time it’s introduced.)

Resolutions: Unlike bills, resolutions are proposals that don’t become laws. Rather, they concern the operation of either the House or Senate. A resolution affecting the House is designated “H.Res.” (and in the Senate, it’s “S.Res”) followed by its number. Resolutions are not presented to the President for action.

Sequestration: Immediate, across-the-board cuts to federal spending. Think of it as a “buzz cut” to federal government spending. ([Learn more](#).)

Sponsor: The lawmaker who introduces a bill and is its leading advocate.

Suspension: “Suspension of the Rules” is a special procedure in the House used to speed up the voting process. Bills brought up under this process are debated for 40 minutes, may not be amended and require a 2/3 vote to pass.

(Tip: Bills voted “on suspension” are commonly considered non-controversial legislation, usually have bipartisan support – and cost less than \$100 million.)

Got a term you’d like added to this How to Speak Washingtonian guide? Email us at info@popvox.com

Sources: The US Senate’s [Glossary](#); C-SPAN’s [Glossary](#); The House’s [Legislative Process guide](#).