HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW: THE STORY OF THE MLK HOLIDAY

Est. Time: 60-90 minutes
Subjects: Civics, History, Social Studies
Age Range: Middle & High School
See the full lesson here!
How does a bill become a law in the United States and what is the story behind the MLK Holiday?

In this lesson you will:

• Identify how the United States Constitution established the federal system of government and its related institutions

• Identify the powers and roles of the Legislative and Executive branches in the process to enact laws in the United States

• Examine the history to enact the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday

• Examine the origins of Stevie Wonders’ song “Happy Birthday”

• Create your own celebratory anthem for a person that inspires you
Watch **this video** of President Ronald Reagan signing legislation authorizing the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday.
Consider or ask a friend:

• What was the ceremony in this video?

• Where did the ceremony take place and why might it have been held at that particular location?

• Why might the president have signed the bill into law if he “so strongly opposed” it?

• How does the process for a bill to become a law begin?
The Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the United States of America.

The document frames the United States’ system of government, including the Congress, President, and the Supreme Court.

The Constitution was created on September 28, 1787 and went into effect on March 4, 1789, when the United States Congress met for the first time.
Examine the first three articles of the Constitution in this picture that divides the United States federal government into three branches.

**Article I, Section I:**
All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

**Article II, Section I:**
The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.

**Article III, Section 1:**
The judicial Power of the United States, shall be vested in one supreme Court, and in such inferior Courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish. The Judges, both of the supreme and inferior Courts, shall hold their Offices during good Behaviour, and shall, at stated Times, receive for their Services, a Compensation, which shall not be diminished during their Continuance in Office.
Consider or ask a friend:

• Is there a separate article for each branch of the government?

• Which article addresses “legislative Powers” in the Constitution and what “shall consist” in the Congress?

• Which article addresses “executive Power” in the Constitution?

• Which article addresses “judicial Power” in the Constitution?

• What do these articles bestow upon or “vest” in each branch of the government?
Examine this infographic detailing the three branches of government.
Consider or ask a friend:

• What does the Constitution provide by creating three separate branches of government?

• What branch of government “makes laws” and what chambers are in that branch?

• What branch of government is the position of President located in and what does that branch do?

• What branch of government “interprets laws” and what courts are organized in that branch?
Examine the process for how a bill becomes a law in the United States with this handout.
Consider or ask a friend:

• Where does a bill start?

• Where does a bill go next after it is introduced and what procedures then take place?

• Must both houses of Congress approve the same version of a bill in order for it to go to the President?

• What types of action can the President choose when considering a bill and what happens if the President signs the bill?

• Do you know how national holidays were created?
Watch **this video** about the public campaign and legislative events to establish the MLK holiday.
Consider or ask a friend:

• What is the significance of Stevie Wonder lending his support to the campaign?

• Why did there need to be a national holiday to recognize Dr. King?

• Are there other national holidays that are “monuments” to individuals, groups, and events in U.S. history?

• Do you think the process to establish the MLK holiday happened quickly or took a long time?
Examine **this timeline** to learn the process by which MLK Day became law.
Consider or ask a friend:

• When was Dr. King assassinated?

• How long was the MLK holiday bill in Congress before it was voted on? Did it pass?

• How does the pace of the legislative process change once the King Center and Stevie Wonder became involved?

• What might Stevie Wonder have been able to uniquely contribute to the campaign?
Watch this video about Stevie Wonder’s song “Happy Birthday” and how it was an anthem for the public campaign to establish the MLK holiday.
Consider or ask a friend:

- What does Stevie Wonder say his purpose is as an artist?
- How might Wonders’ song do “political work” without listeners thinking about it?
- In what ways is Stevie Wonder’s song similar or different from the traditional version of the “Happy Birthday” song?
- Do you think the song’s title helped it become popular, and in turn, benefitted the campaign for the MLK holiday?
• The Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the United States of America

• There are three branches of the federal government: the legislative, executive, and judicial

• The process to create laws starts in Congress before moving to the President

• Musician Stevie Wonder played a pivotal role in the public campaign to establish the MLK holiday

• Congress passed a MLK holiday bill and President Reagan signed it into law in 1983
• Message Music activity! Read this quote from Dr. Daphne Brooks regarding Stevie Wonder’s song, “Happy Birthday.” Then write about a song that you feel contains a political message without perhaps most listeners realizing it.

• MLK Day of Service activity! Review this text about the MLK holiday as a day of service, including a quote from Mrs. Coretta Scott King. Then write how you would participate in a King Day of Service.
BE CURIOUS

Learn more about the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mrs. Coretta Scott King:

• Mrs. King established the **King Center** in 1968. Learn about the center’s mission [here](#).

• Read about Mrs. King [here](#).

• Read about Dr. King [here](#).

• Watch this video of Dr. King being presented the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Watch this video of his acceptance speech.
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