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Bills and Resolutions: Examples of How Each Kind is Used

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When Congress seeks to pass a law, it uses a bill or joint resolution, which must be passed by both houses in identical form, then presented to the President for his approval or disapproval. To regulate its own internal affairs, or for other purposes where authority of law is not necessary, Congress uses a concurrent resolution (requiring adoption by both houses) or a simple resolution (requiring action only in the house of origin).

Each of the four forms of measures may be used for a variety of congressional actions. The most prevalent uses of each, together with a brief explanation or common term for the action involved, are identified below.

Bills (H.R. or S.)

- Authorization or reauthorization of federal policies, programs, and activities
- Amendment of existing law (sometimes also by joint resolution)
- Establishment of federal departments and agencies, or alteration of their structure
- Revenue (tax) legislation (originates in House only)
- Regular annual general appropriations
- Supplemental appropriations (sometimes also by joint resolution)
- Reconciliation bill (alters spending authority pursuant to instructions in a congressional budget resolution)
- Private bill (provides specified benefits to named individuals)

Joint Resolutions (S.J.Res. or H.J.Res.)

- "Incidental, inferior, or unusual purposes of legislation" (*House Manual*, 105th Congress, §397)
- Declaration of war
- Continuing resolution (extends appropriations for specified purposes until regular appropriations are enacted)
- Transfer of appropriations
- Adjustment of debt limit
- Establishing date for convening of Congress



- Resolution of disapproval or approval (of specified executive action pursuant to a statute making a contingent delegation of authority)
- Extending expiration or reporting dates under existing law (*e.g.*, date for President to submit budget)
- Abrogation of treaty
- Congratulations, condolences, welcomes, thanks, etc. (sometimes also by simple resolution of either chamber)
- Proposed constitutional amendment (requires two-thirds vote in each house, but resolution not presented to President as a measure to make law would be)

Concurrent Resolutions (S.Con.Res. or H.Con.Res.)

- Congressional budget resolution
- Sense of Congress resolution (expresses “fact, principles, opinions, or purposes of the two houses,” *House Manual*, 105th Congress, §396. Provisions expressing the sense of Congress sometimes also appear in lawmaking measures)
- Adjournment *sine die*, or recess of either house of more than three days
- Correction of conference reports or enrolled bills
- Request for return of measures presented to the President
- Creation of a joint committee
- Providing for a joint session of Congress

Simple Resolutions (H.Res. or S.Res.)

- Adoption or amendment of chamber rules
- Special rule (for considering a measure) or “order of business resolution” (House)
- Establishment of a standing order (principally Senate)
- Privileges of the House resolution (principally House; to secure a chamber’s rights, safety, dignity, or integrity of proceedings, House Rule IX); a “blue slip resolution” returns a Senate tax measure as violating House privilege to originate such measures; a resolution may also address privilege of individual Member
- Election of committee members or chamber officers
- Expulsion (requires 2/3 vote), censure, or other discipline of a Member
- Disposition of contest to a Member’s election
- Making expenditures from chamber’s contingent fund, including committee funding resolution and printing resolution (for House and Senate documents; sometimes also concurrent resolution)
- Creation of a special or select committee (*e.g.*, investigating committee)
- Resolution of ratification (advise and consent to treaty; Senate)
- Resolution of inquiry (request factual information from executive branch; principally House)
- Providing notifications to other house, President, etc.
- Request for other house to return a measure (for technical corrections)
- Sense of the Senate or sense of the House resolution (expresses fact, principles, opinions, or purposes of one house, *House Manual*, 105th Congress, §395; such provisions sometimes also appear in lawmaking measures)
- Commemorations (now Senate only; formerly by joint resolution)
- Citation for contempt of Congress
- Authorizing response to subpoena by Members or employees