**What Happens After Congress Passes a Law?**

Most laws passed by Congress don’t enforce themselves. Instead, Congress delegates the details to **federal agencies**—like the EPA, Department of Education, or FDA—which are responsible for turning broad laws into **specific rules, actions, and programs**. This relationship between Congress and the executive branch is a core part of how modern government works.

Federal agencies are given **both instructions and discretion**. That means some actions are required (“shall”), while others are left to the agency’s judgment (“may,” “as appropriate,” or unstated). Congress may also authorize funding to carry out the law—or leave the costs up to future appropriations.

To better understand how this works, you will examine a real public law using [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov), identify the responsible agency, and interpret both mandatory and discretionary parts of the statute.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

| **Term** | **Definition** |
| --- | --- |
| Public Law | A law passed by Congress that applies to the public and is assigned a number (e.g., Public Law 118-143). |
| Delegation | The act of Congress giving authority to federal agencies to carry out laws. |
| Administrative Agency | A federal department or office responsible for implementing and enforcing specific laws. |
| Discretionary Authority | Powers that agencies may choose to use or interpret as needed under a law. |
| Mandatory Language ("shall") | Legal language indicating actions that an agency is required to take. |
| Congressional Appropriation | Funds that Congress authorizes to be spent by the federal government. |

**Orienting Question**

**How does Congress delegate authority to agencies, and what decisions are agencies allowed to make on their own?**

**Active Learning Assignment: Investigating Public Law 118-143**

**Instructions:**

1. **Go to** [**Congress.gov**](https://www.congress.gov)
2. To the left of the search bar, select **“All Congresses.”**
3. In the search bar, enter:  
   **Public Law 118-143**
4. Click the link to view the full text of the law.
5. Read the law carefully (including the PDF text, if needed) and answer the following questions in your own words.

**Questions:**

1. **Agency Identification**
   * What federal agency (or agencies) is responsible for carrying out this law?
2. **Congressional Requirements**
   * Find and list **four specific actions** the law requires the agency to do.
   * Look for sentences using the word **“shall.”**
   * Provide the section or page number where you found each requirement.
3. **Agency Discretion**
   * Identify **three examples** of decisions or actions that the agency has **discretion to decide.**
   * These may include vague tasks, planning flexibility, or delegated choices.
   * Look for language such as “may,” “as appropriate,” or general descriptions with no strict directive.
4. **Cost to the Government**
   * How much money will carrying out this law cost the U.S. government?
   * Explain where in the law this information appears. Be specific—include the **section or paragraph number**, or the **page of the PDF**, if relevant.

**Optional Extension:**

**Reflection Prompt:**  
In a short paragraph (5–7 sentences), explain why Congress might choose to give agencies flexibility instead of spelling out every detail. What are the benefits and risks of that approach?

**Review Questions**

1. Why does Congress rely on agencies to implement laws?
2. How can you tell which parts of a law are mandatory and which are discretionary?
3. Why is it important to know how much a law will cost before it is passed?
4. How can the wording of a law influence how an agency behaves?
5. What role does Congress play after a law is passed and assigned to an agency?