

Research Guide

HOW FEDERAL LAW IS PUBLISHED

There are two types of laws passed by Congress: *public laws* and *private laws*. Though both have equal status as law, researchers are rarely concerned with private laws because they pertain only to an individual or group and do not become part of the U.S. Code. When a bill is enacted into law, it is assigned a **Public Law Number** (abbreviated **P.L.**), as well as a parallel citation to the ***United States Statutes at Large*** (abbreviated **Stat.**). All public laws are numbered consecutively in order of approval, e.g., P.L. 112-8. The first number is the number of the Congress; the second number is the chronological designation of that piece of legislation. In other words, P.L. 112-8 is the eighth consecutive public law enacted by the 112th Congress. The parallel citation to the *United States Statutes at Large*, e.g. 125 Stat. 34, informs the researcher of the volume and page number where that public law can be found.

- **SLIP LAWS:** Historically, the first official publication of federal legislation has been in slip law form. Each act is issued individually as a slip of paper or pamphlet. Nowadays, fastest access to new legislation is online, of course, with the version on FDsys being the authenticated version. Sources for locating the text of Public Laws include:

- **OFFICIAL**

- **Online:**

- **Federal Digital System (FDsys):** <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>
- **Library of Congress (Thomas):** <http://thomas.loc.gov>

- **Print:**

- ***United States Statutes at Large:*** LRC Reading Room KF 50 .U52 (following the bound volumes)

- **UNOFFICIAL**

- **Online:**

- **ProQuest Congressional Publications:** <http://www.sandiego.edu/law/lrc/> > Legal Research Databases
- **Congress.org:** <http://www.congress.org>
- **Westlaw:** *United States Public Laws*
- **Lexis:** *USCS – United States Code Services: Code, Const, Rules, Conventions & Public Laws*

- **SESSION LAWS:** In the printed format, Slip Laws are eventually bound in chronological order in volumes called Session Laws. Online, this distinction is extinct: Public Laws are retrievable by their numerical designation from their enactment into law and retain that designation forever.

- **OFFICIAL**

- **Online:**

- **Federal Digital System (FDsys):** <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>
- **Library of Congress (Thomas):** <http://thomas.loc.gov>

- **Print:**

- ***United States Statutes at Large:*** LRC Reading Room KF 50 .U52. Legislation is arranged in chronological order by public or private law number. Although volumes are supposed to be issued at the close of a congressional session, publication is actually years behind. Consequently, researchers frequently prefer using an online version or an unofficial printed compilation, which is published more quickly.

- **UNOFFICIAL**

- **Online:**

- **ProQuest Congressional Publications:** <http://www.sandiego.edu/law/lrc/> > Legal Research Databases
- **Westlaw:** *United States Public Laws*
- **Lexis:** *USCS – United States Code Services: Code, Const, Rules, Conventions & Public Laws*

▪ **Print:**

- **USCCAN:** LRC Reading Room KF 48 .W45. The *United States Code Congressional and Administrative News* (USCCAN) is a publication of West Publishing Company. This set reprints the public laws issued during each session of Congress. Recent legislation can be found in advance sheet pamphlets, which are printed prior to publication of the bound volumes. USCCAN also includes selected congressional materials (such as committee reports) useful for determining legislative intent. Each year's volumes are roughly divided into two parts; the first volumes of the year contain the public laws, while the later volumes contain legislative histories of selected public laws. The public laws are reprinted using the same page numbers at which they will appear in the *Statutes at Large*. Subject indexes and tables of *U.S. Code* sections affected are included in each pamphlet and in the bound volumes.
- **USCS (United States Code Service):** LRC Reading Room KF 62 .U55. Session Laws are contained in the paperback volumes at the end of the set.
- **USCA (United States Code Annotated):** LRC Reading Room KF 62 .U53. Session Laws are contained in the paperback volumes at the end of the set.

- **CODES:** Since it would be difficult to determine the current status of the law through chronologically published session laws, laws are therefore published in subject arrangements called codes. Codes include statutes in effect at the time of publication. These compilations are updated in a variety of ways, often via pocket part supplements.

○ **OFFICIAL: United States Code (USC)**

▪ **Online:**

- **Federal Digital System (FDsys):** <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>

▪ **Print:**

- **United States Code:** LRC Reading Room KF 62 .A2. The USC is the official compilation of laws of the United States, and is published by the federal government. It is revised every six years and contains only the legislation in effect at the time of publication. Bound supplement volumes are issued each year to update the set. The USC does not contain annotations to cases that interpret the statutes. Statutes on particular topics can be found by using the subject index, or one of the tables that indicate where particular public laws are located in the *Code*.

○ **UNOFFICIAL:**

▪ **Online:**

- **Library of Congress (Thomas):** <http://thomas.loc.gov>
- **Lexis:** *United States Code Service (USCS)*
- **Westlaw:** *United States Code Annotated (USCA)*
- **FindLaw:** <http://lp.findlaw.com>

▪ **Print:**

- **USCA (United States Code Annotated):** LRC Reading Room KF 62 .U53. The USCA is easier to use than the USC because it is annually updated by pocket parts and pamphlets containing recent changes in the law. It also contains comprehensive annotations for further research, including references to cases interpreting the sections. Topic and key number references are included to aid research in other West materials. A subject index, various cross-reference tables, and a listing of legislation by popular name are provided.
- **USCS (United States Code Service):** LRC Reading Room KF 62 .U55. Like the USCA, it is more frequently updated than the official *USC*. This annotated set does not contain as many references to cases as the USCA, since the editors believe that most researchers seek only a selected number of major cases rather than comprehensive coverage. It does include references to many other sets published by LexisNexis, as well as to relevant *Code of Federal Regulations* citations. A subject index, various cross-reference tables, and a table of acts by popular name are included.

Please contact a Reference Librarian for further assistance: lrcrefer@sandiego.edu / 619-260-4612

Note: Websites with the suffix .gov, .org or .com are accessible to anyone anywhere.

Anyone physically present on campus may access ProQuest Congressional Publications.

Only currently enrolled USD Law Faculty and Students may access Lexis and Westlaw for educational purposes.