

Washington State Legislature

How it operates



The Washington State Legislature is a bicameral body with 49 members in the [Senate](#) and 98 members in the [House of Representatives](#). Each district is served by one Senator and two House members. The 2012 makeup of the Legislature included 56 Democrats and 42 Republicans in the House and 27 Democrats and 22 Republicans in the Senate.

The citizen Legislature meets annually on the second Monday in January in the Capitol building in Olympia. In odd-numbered years -- the budget year -- the Legislature meets for 105 days, and in even-numbered years for 60 days. If necessary, the Governor can call legislators in for a special session for a 30-day period. Legislators can call themselves into special session with a two-thirds vote of the two bodies.

Members of the Senate are elected to four-year terms, and House members are elected to two-year terms. If members leave their positions for any reason, a replacement is appointed by county commissioners in the district with the vacant seat. The appointee serves the remainder of the year and must run for re-election that November to complete the term vacated.

Committees

The majority leadership appoints committee chairs, and determines the assignment of bills to committees and bills to be heard by the committee.

The standing committees are created for the purpose of public hearing, amending, and passing bills to the floor for action by the body. Each committee has a chair and vice-chair from the majority party, and a ranking and assistant ranking member from the minority party. There are a pre-determined number of members from each of the parties.

The Senate and House Rules Committee are chaired by the Lieutenant Governor and Speaker, respectively, and determine which of the bills that have passed out of the standing committees will be considered on the floor.

Bill Action

Members can introduce as many bills as they would like, and often have other members sign on to a bill as co-sponsors. Sometimes several members will work on a piece of legislation together, but only one prime sponsor is allowed on each bill. On the day the bill is introduced, it is referred to a committee by the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader in their respective chambers.

Once referred, the bill awaits to be scheduled for a public hearing by the chair of the committee. Committee hearings often last two hours, and can include one to dozens of bill hearings or action.

Public Hearings

Because a committee hearing often includes more than one bill, a hearing on one bill may be as

short as five minutes or as long as two hours. The public is notified of public hearings on bills through e-mail notifications that citizens can [sign up](#) to receive.

If a person wishes to testify before a committee, they must sign in on the day of the hearing before the committee starts in the hearing room. The chair calls them up to the testifying desk, and they have usually less than three minutes to speak in favor, against, or with concerns about a bill. They must state their name and who they are representing, if applicable, for the record. It's recommended that those testifying bring up different points than others before them, understand the bill in detail, and thank the committee for hearing them.

Committee Action

After a public hearing has been held, the chair determines whether it will be scheduled for executive session on a different date (rarely a bill is heard and voted out in the same hearing). Generally, hearings occur before executive session in the course of a committee meeting. During executive session, the Democrats and Republicans may caucus over the bill, to count votes or discuss changes to the bill. After caucus, members may go over amendments introduced to the bill. After all the proposed amendments have passed, failed or been withdrawn, members debate the bill's merits. A single oral vote of all the members is taken on passing the bill out of committee, unless a roll call has been requested. In this case, each member must orally approve or reject the bill, putting their vote on the record. After a bill passes out of committee, it may move to an appropriations committee or Ways and Means if it has a financial impact on the state's budget. If a bill makes it past all the appropriate committees, it goes to Rules.

Rules

The Rules Committees in each chamber determine which bills are "pulled" to the floor calendar for floor action. The Speaker of the House and President of the Senate respectively chair their Rules Committees. The minority leaders are always members of the Rules Committee with other members from the two parties.

Floor Action

Even if a bill is on the 2nd reading calendar, it is not guaranteed a vote on the floor. The Speaker of the House and Senate Majority Leader decide what and when measures are brought up for debate.

On the floor of the Senate, the Lt. Governor (President of the Senate) is the presiding officer. In the absence of the Lt. Governor, the President Pro Tempore, or Vice President Pro Tempore, both Senators elected by the body from the majority party, assume that role.

On the floor of the House, the Speaker of the House is the presiding officer. In the absence of the Speaker, the Speaker Pro Tempore, or Deputy Speaker Pro Tempore, both Representatives elected by the body from the majority party, assume that role.

Caucuses

Each of the political parties has an organization of its own which provides leadership and direction to its members. There are four caucuses in the Washington Legislature: [Senate Democrats](#), [Senate Republicans](#), [House Democrats](#) and [House Republicans](#). Between floor action, the caucuses meet in their respective caucus rooms to review legislation and discuss floor debate. Caucus chairs preside at caucus meetings. Other majority and minority officers, such as floor leaders and whips, have responsibility for procedural functions while the Senate or House is in session.