

Legislative Help Document
for Midwinter Training



Prepared by Morris Sadicario, December 2025.

What is the Legislature?

Branches

The legislative branch is one of three branches of government, along with the executive branch (the governor and state departments and agencies, like the Department of Natural Resources), and the judicial branch (the courts). The legislature passes laws, while the executive branch puts them into action, and the judicial branch makes sure that laws are constitutional and punishes people who break the law.

Houses

The Wisconsin state legislature is made up of two houses: the Wisconsin State Assembly, and the Wisconsin State Senate. Every citizen of Wisconsin is represented by two legislators, elected by the people in their area: one in the Assembly, and one in the Senate. You can use this site to find out who your legislators are.

Districts

Wisconsin is divided into 33 Senate districts, each of which is represented by one senator. Each Senate district is divided into three Assembly districts, for a total of 99 Assembly districts, each represented by one representative. Each district must contain about the same number of people, which means that urban districts are usually much smaller than rural ones.

Elections

Elections for the legislature are held every other year, in November of each even-numbered year. Representatives serve two-year terms, and senators serve four-year terms. This means that at each election, every representative and half of the senators are elected. The other half of the senators are elected in the next election, two years later. To see who's on the ballot in your district, see the Wisconsin Election Commission's site

Laws

Legislators pass three main kinds of law:

The Wisconsin Constitution describes what Wisconsin's government should look like. For instance, it describes the borders of the state, the houses of the legislature, and the governor's ability to veto laws. The constitution is the basis for all other laws in Wisconsin. If a law contradicts the constitution, it's considered 'unconstitutional', and can't take effect.

Wisconsin statutes are ordinary state laws that affect everyone.

The Wisconsin administrative code governs state departments and agencies, such as the Department of Natural Resources.

To learn more about the way the legislature passes laws, see our page about following the process.

Service Agencies

The legislative branch also includes service agencies which help the legislature in its mission.

The Legislative Council provides legal, scientific, and other research to legislators, to help them vote in a more informed manner.

The Legislative Audit Bureau audits state agencies and programs to make sure that their finances are handled properly and legally, and to make sure they're run in an efficient and ethical manner.

The Legislative Fiscal Bureau analyzes the cost of proposed bills and programs, especially the state budget, to help legislators vote in a more informed manner.

The Legislative Reference Bureau drafts and publishes legislative documents. It also stores and publishes archival information, such as lists of historical legislators, and provides research information to the public. You can contact them for help with research or general questions.

The Legislative Technology Services Bureau builds and maintains software and technical resources, such as computers and servers, for the legislature and the other service

agencies. It also helps to maintain this website. If you have questions or comments about the website, contact us at site.feedback@legis.wisconsin.gov.

About the Legislature – Follow the process

The Legislative Process

Drafting an Idea

When a legislator gets an idea or is prompted by their constituency to make a change, they have a drafting lawyer prepare a draft of a bill to see what laws will need to change.

Introduction

Once it's ready, a new bill is read before the Assembly or Senate; this is called an 'introduction', or its 'first reading'. Often, bills are referred to by number at this point: for instance, 2013 Assembly Bill 20, or 'AB20'. If they support a bill, legislators from the same house can sign on as co-authors, while members of the opposite house sign on as co-sponsors.

In Committee

The legislature usually sends a bill to a relevant committee. For instance, a bill about schools would probably be referred to the Assembly or Senate Committee on Education. Committees are groups of legislators who focus on a particular topic, like education or housing. This specialization helps the legislature to give each bill the attention it needs.

While a bill is 'in committee', legislative service agencies research the bill to determine its impact: for instance, the Legislative Council might find that a bill contradicts federal law, or that scientific studies have found similar measures to be ineffective.

Committees also generally hold public hearings, where they hear from experts and from the general public. If you're interested in attending or participating in a public hearing for a bill, see hearings.

All bills which involve spending state money or raising taxes are also sent to the Joint Committee on Finance, which is attended both by representatives and senators. They specifically discuss the cost and financial impact of the bill.

In response to research and hearings, a committee may offer amendments to a bill. Then, it sends its analysis back to the legislature, usually with a recommendation: Should the legislature pass this bill?

Back to the Floor

When a bill is read again before the legislature, this is called the ‘second reading’. Legislators vote on individual amendments, and may offer more amendments.

Then, the bill is read a third time, and legislators vote on the completed bill with any amended changes. If it passes, it’s sent to the other house: for instance, 2013 Assembly Bill 20 became 2013 Senate Bill 39 in the Senate. Then, it undergoes the same process. If amendments are made in the second house, the bill is sent back to the first house, to make sure that they agree.

To the Governor

When a bill has passed both houses, it’s sent to the governor, who may sign it or veto it. If it’s an ‘appropriations bill’, a bill for which state money is set aside, like the state budget, the governor may veto parts of the bill, and pass the rest. The legislature may override a veto, if two-thirds of both houses vote in favor of the bill. When the bill is passed, it becomes an act, and its changes are added into the statutes as law.

Acts and Law

Once a bill has been signed into law, it usually takes effect a few days later. Sometimes, the ‘effective date’ will be delayed, for instance, to give those effected time to prepare. Now that the act is in the statutes, it can be amended further, and the process starts again.

What You Can Do

- You can follow a particular bill’s progress through the legislature by finding its ‘bill history’ page. Search on our front page, under Law and Legislation, in the box where

it says 'Find a proposal'. You can search either by subject ('mining'), or by the bill's number if you know it ('AB20').

- Near the top of the page is the bill's subject and current status. Next are documents related to that bill. You can see more specifics on a bill's history at the bottom of this page.
- You can also subscribe to our RSS feeds or use our email notification service, to receive notifications about proposals and committees that matter to you.
- If you'd like to suggest a bill to the legislature, find your legislators here.
- Members of the general public are welcome to attend Assembly and Senate sessions and committee hearings. In public committee hearings, you can speak before the committee on a particular bill: see this page on how to testify for more details.

If you have more questions about the legislative process, please contact the Legislative Reference Bureau.

About the Legislature – Testify at a Hearing

Committees are groups of representatives or senators who focus on a particular field, such as education or finance. They review legislation, state programs, and appointments by the Governor which are relevant to that field, and then report back to the Assembly or Senate.

There are two kinds of committee meetings, both of which are open to the general public:

- In public hearings, committees hear from legislators and legislative agencies, experts in the field, and the general public. This helps them to make an informed decision about the bills before them.
- In executive sessions, committees debate bills amongst themselves, and take votes. They return a report to the Assembly or Senate with their recommendations: Should the proposal be passed? Which amendments should be adopted?

You can see the hearing schedule for a committee by going to its page: Either search for the committee on our [search page](#), or search for its name in the search bar at the top of this page. You can also use the ‘Committees’ tab in the top menu to browse committees. Hearing notices are listed near the top of the page, immediately below the list of members.

Testifying at a hearing

Members of the general public usually testify to express support or opposition to a bill, to suggest amendments, or to explain how it would affect them or others.

When you arrive, fill out a hearing slip and wait to be called by the committee. If you can’t stay for the entire hearing, notify the messenger or ‘page’, near the door, and ask to be called early.

Please keep your testimony to five minutes or less, and bring a copy of your testimony for each committee member. In particularly long hearings, the length of testimony may be limited, usually to about three minutes.

Other ways to participate

You can express your support or opposition to a bill without testifying. When you arrive, check the box on your hearing slip indicating that you support or oppose the bill but do not want to testify. This will be noted in the committee’s report to the Senate or Assembly.

You can also attend without filling out a hearing notice. Please refrain from cheering, booing, or waving signs, to avoid intimidating those who provide testimony.

If you can't attend a hearing in person, the WisconsinEye network broadcasts many hearings live on television and the internet, and records others for later broadcast.

You can also express your support or opposition to a bill by contacting your legislators; use [the form on our home page](#) to find their contact information.

Resources

A Citizen's Guide to Participation in the Wisconsin State Legislature

(https://legis.wisconsin.gov/lc/media/dnbbmy4u/citizen_intro.pdf)

The American Legion National Legislative Advocacy

(<https://www.legion.org/advocacy/legislative>)

- About the National Legislative Division
(<https://www.legion.org/advocacy/legislative/about-the-national-legislative-division>)
- Legislative and Point Papers
(<https://www.legion.org/advocacy/legislative/legislative-agenda-point-papers>)
- Legislative Testimony
<https://www.legion.org/advocacy/legislative/legislative-testimony>
- Advocacy Resources and Toolkit
<https://www.legion.org/advocacy/legislative/advocacy-toolkit>
- Grassroots Action Center
<https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/home>
- Congressional Contact Report Form
<https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/Surveys/7747/Respond>
- Wisconsin State Legislature Notification System
<https://notify.legis.wisconsin.gov/Subject/Manage>