



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

*Prepared by the Wisconsin Legislative Council Staff, 2023*

## Glossary of Common Legislative Terms

Many terms are unique to the Legislature or have legislative meanings that are different from their standard meanings. Below are terms that are commonly used in the Legislature.

**Act:** A bill that has been passed by the Legislature and become law. A bill passed by the Legislature does not become law unless the Governor signs it, the Legislature overrides the Governor's veto of it, or the Governor fails to take action on it within six days of receiving it from the Legislature.

**Amendment:** A suggested change to a bill or other proposal that has been introduced into the legislative process. An amendment may propose the addition, deletion, or substitution of language in a proposal. See also, "Simple amendment" and "Substitute amendment."

**Appropriation:** A legislative authorization for the expenditure of funds.

**Assembly:** One of the two houses of the Wisconsin Legislature. The 99 members elected to the Assembly are referred to as State Representatives.

**Assembly Committee on Rules:** The Assembly Committee on Rules (often referred to as the "Assembly Rules Committee" or "Assembly Rules") sets the calendar for the Assembly.

**Assembly Organization, Committee on:** The Committee on Assembly Organization (or "Assembly Org") performs various functions such as directing the enrolling or engrossing of proposals by the Assembly Chief Clerk; human resources management; addressing grammatical, structural, or other errors in legislative proposals; managing Assembly publications; reviewing legislative citations; and other tasks.

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**Author:** The legislator or legislative committee that introduces a bill or resolution. Members of the same house who “sign on” to the proposal are referred to as “co-authors.” Members of the other house who sign on are called “co-sponsors.”

**Biennial:** Lasting for two years. The Wisconsin Legislature uses a biennial session system.

**Blue Book:** Published since 1853, the Blue Book is an “almanac” of Wisconsin state government and includes comprehensive information about the organization and functions of Wisconsin state government and about elected and appointed officials.

**Budget:** A bill first proposed by the Governor and then introduced in the Legislature that outlines the expected state revenues and proposed expenditures for the upcoming fiscal biennium.

**Caucus:** A meeting of members of the same political party in a particular house of the Legislature. A caucus can be closed or open to the public.

**Chief clerk:** The officer elected by a house of the Legislature to perform and direct the clerical and personnel functions of that house.

**Committee clerk:** A member of a committee chair’s staff who performs the clerical duties for a legislative committee.

**Concurrence:** An action in the second house to approve of (concur in) an action of the first house. See also, “Passage.”

**Conference Committee or Committee of Conference:** A committee consisting of members from both houses of the Legislature that can be formed to resolve differences between different versions of the same proposal passed in the Senate and Assembly.

**Engross:** To incorporate all amendments and corrections to the original proposal in the house of origin before consideration by the second house.

**Enroll:** To incorporate all amendments and corrections to a proposal that were passed, adopted, and concurred in by both houses.

**Executive session or “exec”:** A legislative committee meeting during which the committee votes, or takes “executive action,” on a bill or other proposal. The public is generally not allowed to testify at an executive session. The word “exec” is also used to mean holding a committee vote on a proposal during an executive session.

**Extraordinary session:** The convening of the Legislature to accomplish specific business identified in the action calling the session. Extraordinary sessions can be called by the Assembly and Senate Committees on Organization, by petition, or by joint resolution of the Legislature.

**First reading:** The formal recognition by a legislative body that a bill or other proposal has been introduced.

**Fiscal Estimate:** An estimate of the effect of a bill on the revenues and expenses of state and local governments.

**Floorperiod:** Periods of time identified in the legislative session calendar as available for consideration of proposals by the full Assembly and Senate.

**General fund:** A fund that is not segregated for a particular purpose from which the state makes general expenditures for various programs.

**Germaneness:** The relevance or appropriateness of an amendment to the subject of a bill. Non-germane amendments are not permitted.

**Hearing:** A legislative committee meeting during which the committee gathers information about proposals under consideration by the committee or other topics related to the committee's assigned issue areas. Public testimony is generally accepted at hearings.

**Interim:** A period of time during which the Legislature is not in session.

**Introduction:** The formal offering of a legislative proposal, for consideration by the house in which it is introduced, by a legislator or a legislative committee. Once introduced, a legislative proposal is assigned a number, for example 2011 Senate Bill 1.

**Jefferson's Manual:** A manual of parliamentary procedure authored by Thomas Jefferson.

**JCLO:** The Joint Committee on Legislative Organization. JCLO consists of the Assembly speaker, the Senate president, the majority and minority leaders of each house, and the assistant majority and minority leaders of each house. Among other tasks, JCLO is responsible for adopting the compensation and classification plan for legislative employees.

**JCRAR:** The Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules. Prior to promulgation, all proposed administrative rules are referred to JCRAR following standing committee review. Additionally, JCRAR has the authority to temporarily suspend existing administrative rules.

**JFC or Joint Finance Committee:** The Joint Committee on Finance, a joint committee that is charged with review of all state appropriations and revenues and, in particular, the biennial budget recommendations of the Governor.

**Joint Legislative Council:** A joint committee comprised of 11 Senators and 11 Representatives that, among other actions, establishes study committees to examine major issues and problems identified by the Legislature and provides symposiums on topics of interest in the legislative branch.

**Journal:** The official records of legislative proceedings prepared by each house of the Legislature. The preparation of legislative journals is required under the Wisconsin Constitution.

**Law:** There are four types of law:

- The state and federal **Constitutions** organize the structure and principles of government and establish certain fundamental principles of law, such as the individual rights established in the Bill of Rights.
- **Statutes** are the compiled general laws of the state created by legislation. Individual enactments, which have been passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor, are referred to as “session laws.”
- **Administrative rules** are regulations, standards, or policies promulgated by executive branch agencies to implement statutes and administer agency programs. Administrative rules are compiled in the Wisconsin Administrative Code.
- **Case law or common law** is the law established by decisions of the courts.

**Leadership:** Officers of the Legislature responsible for its operation and management of each political caucus. Examples of legislative leadership positions include the Senate president, the Senate president *pro tempore*, the Assembly speaker, the Assembly speaker *pro tempore*, the majority and minority leaders of each house, the assistant majority and minority leaders of each house, and the chairperson for each caucus.

**Legislation:** A proposed or enacted law or change to a law.

**Legislative service agencies:** The nonpartisan agencies that provide legal, analytical, and technical support to the Legislature. They are the Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB), Legislative Council Staff (LC), Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB), Legislative Human Resources Office (LHRO), Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB), and Legislative Technology Services Bureau (LTSB).

**Lobby:** To attempt to influence an elected official, state agency official, or legislative employee on an issue. Lobbying is strictly regulated in Wisconsin and lobbying laws are administered by the Wisconsin Ethics Commission.

**Motion:** A formal request made for a specific action to be taken in legislative committee executive sessions or during floor debate. Appropriate motions are determined by the applicable rules of procedure.

**Nonpartisan:** Not based on, biased towards, influenced by, affiliated with, or supporting the interests or policies of a political party.

**Nonstatutory law or “nonstat”:** A provision in a bill or act that has a temporary application that is not continuing, and therefore is not included in statutory revisions.

**Notice:** A formal notification under the state’s Open Meetings Law of when and where a public meeting will occur and what issues will be addressed, provided in advance of the meeting.

**Open meetings law:** A state law requiring that public meetings generally be open and made accessible to the public and that public notice be provided in advance of meetings.

**Open records law:** A state law requiring that governmental records generally be open and made available upon request.

**Passage:** A motion seeking approval of a legislative proposal that originated in the house considering the motion. See also, "Concurrence."

**Point of order:** A request that the presiding officer rule on some matter of parliamentary procedure.

**Presiding officer:** The person presiding over the Senate or Assembly in a legislative session.

**Privileged motions:** Motions and requests related to the meetings, organization, rules, rights, and duties of the Senate or Assembly and its members. Privileged motions or requests take precedence over other questions before the body.

**Public hearing:** See "Hearing."

**Quorum:** The minimum number of members of a committee or legislative body that must be present for business to be conducted.

**Recess:** A time when a legislative body is not in session.

**Reconsideration:** A motion to revisit an action of a committee or legislative body.

**Referral:** Assignment of a proposal to a legislative committee for its review.

**Rejection:** A motion seeking disapproval of an amendment to a proposal.

**Relating clause:** The part of a proposal that identifies the general subject matter of the proposal.

**Resolution:** A formal statement of opinion or intention passed by a legislative body. Resolutions in the Wisconsin Legislature can be proposed to both houses through a joint resolution. Proposals to amend the Constitution, to create, amend, or repeal a legislative rule, and to set the Legislature's session calendar are also made by resolution.

**Second reading:** The stage of consideration of a proposal during a floor session during which amendments to the proposal may be considered.

**Senate:** One of the two houses of the Wisconsin Legislature. The 33 members elected to the Senate are referred to as State Senators.

**Senate Organization, Committee on:** The Committee on Senate Organization, or "Senate Org," has broad authority over the operations of the Senate. Senate Org generally consists of the majority leader, president, assistant majority leader, minority leader, and the assistant

minority leader. As compared to Assembly Org, Senate Org plays a broader role in the supervision and management of the Senate.

**Sergeant-at-Arms:** The officer elected by the members of one house of the Legislature to perform and direct the police and custodial functions of that house.

**Simple amendment:** An amendment that makes changes in the underlying proposal if adopted. See also, “Amendment” and “Substitute amendment.”

***Sine die adjournment:*** The final adjournment of a legislative session.

**Special order of business:** A proposal ordered by the Senate or Assembly to be given consideration at a specified time and taking precedence over the regular orders of business at that time.

**Special session:** A session of the Legislature convened by the Governor to accomplish a special purpose.

**Study committee or special committee:** A committee appointed by the Joint Legislative Council to examine major issues and problems identified by the Legislature. Study committees are made up of legislators and citizens who are interested in or knowledgeable about the study topic and usually do most of their work when the Legislature is in recess.

**Substitute amendment or “sub”:** An amendment that replaces the underlying proposal if adopted. See also, “Amendment” and “Simple amendment.”

**Suspension of the rules:** A motion to take a temporary action otherwise prohibited by rule that requires the support of two-thirds of the members present.

**Table:** A motion to temporarily set aside a proposal and move to other business.

**Third reading:** The stage of consideration of a proposal during a floor session during which bills and other proposals come up for final discussion and possible passage. No amendments may be considered at this point.

**Unanimous consent:** A motion asking for unanimous approval of a question without a roll call vote. If an objection is not heard, it is assumed that the request has the consent of all members present.

**Veto:** The action by which all or a part of a bill is rejected by the Governor.

**Veto override:** A vote of both houses of the Legislature to overturn a gubernatorial veto. To be successful, such a vote must receive a two-thirds vote in both houses.

**Voice vote:** A vote taken by asking members in favor to say “aye” simultaneously and then asking those opposed to say “no” or “nay” simultaneously, with the presiding officer deciding which side prevails.