



Minnesota Legislature 101

What is the structure and function of the Minnesota Legislature?

The legislative branch is responsible for the enactment and revision of laws. The United States Congress forms the laws at the national level, and the Minnesota Legislature is the lawmaking body for the State of Minnesota. Both Congress and the Minnesota Legislature consist of two bodies: a Senate and a House of Representatives. This two-body system is referred to as a bicameral system.

How many members are in the Minnesota House of Representatives and Senate?

The Minnesota Legislature has 201 members. The State of Minnesota is divided into 67 legislative districts, with about 73,425 people in each district. Voters elect one senator from their district. Each Senate district is divided into "A" and "B" sections of about 36,713 people each. Voters elect one House member, or representative, from each section, making a total of 134 representatives.

How long are terms for Minnesota Representatives and Senators?

Senators are elected for a four-year term and representatives are elected for a two-year term. However, in election years ending in 0, such as 2000 or 1990, Senators serve for a two-year term in order to provide for the redistricting process done in conjunction with the United States census.

How do I find out who my Senator and Representative are?

The easiest way to find out is through the Legislative Network (www.supporttheu.umn.edu). Use our search tool to find your elected officials. If you don't have Internet access, call or visit House Information at (651) 296-2146 or Senate Information at (651) 296-0504 to find out that information.

When does the Minnesota Legislature meet?

The Legislature convenes each odd-numbered year on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in January. In the even-numbered years, it convenes on a date set by joint agreement of both bodies. The state constitution limits the Legislature to meeting 120 legislative days during each biennium. In addition, the Legislature may not meet in regular session after the first Monday following the third Saturday in May of any year. During this time, the House or the Senate may not adjourn for more than three days without the consent of the other body.

What is a session of the Legislature?

There are three kinds of session. First is the *biennial session* that begins on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of January in an odd-numbered year and ends no later than the first Monday after the third Saturday in May of the even-numbered year.

The next definition of a session is the *yearly session*. The first year of the biennium (odd calendar years) is called the "long year," and lasts from January to mid-May. The second year (even calendar years) is called the "short year," and typically runs from February through the end of April.

Finally, a *special session* is one called by the governor at a time other than a regularly scheduled session. The legislature, though, determines the length and purpose of any such session.

What are the differences between the two years of a biennial session?

The first year of a biennial session is known as the *budget session*. The second year is known as the *bonding session* – a capital bonding bill is typically passed to fund construction projects throughout the state. Leftover items from the budget session and emergency items are also considered.

How A Bill Becomes a Law

What is a bill?

A bill is a proposal for a new law, a change or repeal of current law, or for a constitutional amendment. In the Senate, bills are called Senate Files. Bills are called House Files in the House of Representatives.

What is the process for introducing a bill?

Any member can introduce a bill. There is no limit to the number of bills a member can introduce. However, there are limits to the number of co-authors. In the House, there can be 35 authors; in the Senate, the limit is five. Once a bill is introduced, the chief author must find someone to carry the companion bill in the other body.

Once introduced, a bill must travel through the committee process. It first goes through the necessary policy committees and, if it has financial implications, a finance committee. Then it is ready to go to the floor. A bill receives three readings before members debate it and take a final vote.

Once a bill has passed one body, it must go to the other body for passage. Once the bill is approved by both bodies, it goes to the governor for his approval. If he signs the bill, it becomes law. Of the 3,500 bills introduced in the House and Senate each year, only about 15 percent actually become law.

When is a bill dead?

A bill can be taken up for a vote again during the current biennium if a member who voted against it is willing to make a motion for reconsideration and the body agrees to reconsider. In addition, many bills that don't receive a floor vote or are voted down on the floor end up as amendments to other bills.

Why is unrelated legislation permitted to be attached to bills? What is an omnibus bill?

Under the *Minnesota Constitution*, only single-subject laws may be passed by the Legislature. Theoretically, this requires that only amendments directly related, or "germane" to the measure, be attached to a bill. When a bill is being amended in committee, the committee chair rules whether an amendment is germane. On the House floor, the Speaker of the House makes those decisions. On the Senate floor, the President of the Senate decides.

In practice, many amendments are added to bills. The terms "omnibus bill" or "garbage bill" are used when a bill contains what some people feel are unrelated subjects.

What is the purpose of a committee? What actions can committees take?

It is the job of each committee to hold public hearings on bills, to put each bill into its best form, and to recommend to the full body only those bills that the committee feels merit further consideration. The committee takes testimony from the public, bill sponsors, and experts in the areas the bill affects.

Committees may amend a bill, combine two or more bills under one file number, send more detailed or complex bills to a subcommittee for further examination, recommend a bill to pass as introduced or as amended, send it to another committee with or without recommendation to pass, or kill the bill by voting it down, tabling it, delaying action, ignoring it, or returning it to its author.

What is a conference committee?

It is a committee made up of members from each body appointed to reconcile the differences between two versions of a bill that has been passed by both bodies. Each conference committee has either three or five members from both the House and the Senate.