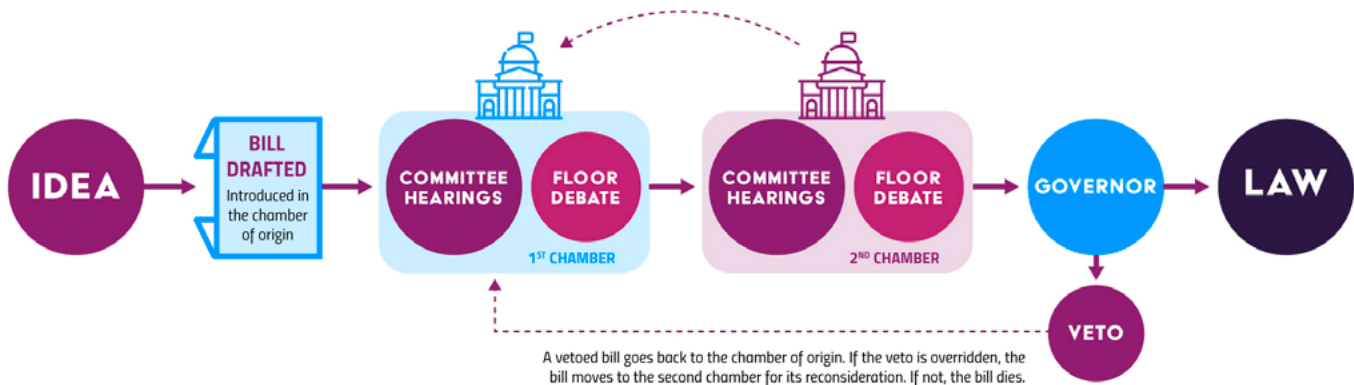


# How Government Works:

## A Guide to Getting Involved at the State Level



*“There is only one generalization about the legislative process in the 50 states that requires no disclaimer—every state does things differently than every other state.”*

### GENERAL BILL PROCESS:

1. A bill is introduced;
2. The bill is assigned to a committee;
3. Following hearings, the committee votes to kill the bill or send it to the full house or senate for debate;
4. Legislators debate the bill’s merits and vote it up or down;
5. If it is approved, the bill then goes to the other chamber, where the process is repeated;
6. If the bill is amended during consideration by the second chamber, it goes to a conference committee to resolve the differences between the two chambers;
7. The governor signs the bill and it becomes law, or
8. The governor vetoes the bill. If a bill is vetoed,
9. The legislature may sustain the governor’s veto or override it.

Those are the basic steps—with variations—that are followed in every state except Nebraska, where there is one chamber rather than the customary two. (source: [NCSL](#))

### KEY PLAYERS:

- **Speaker of the House and President of the Senate:** The presiding officers in each chamber are the most powerful members. Their authority varies from state to state, but they are in charge—they call the plays in their respective chambers.
- **Majority leader:** In concert with the chamber’s presiding officer, the majority leader controls the day-to-day calendar of bills to be considered by the full membership, orchestrates the flow of debate on bills and plays an influential role—as the party’s second in command in all other legislative activities.
- **Minority leader:** Directs the activities of the minority party. Acts as the voice of the opposition.

- **Majority and minority whips:** They are assistants to their legislative caucus leaders, with primary responsibility for determining how caucus members intend to vote on pending legislation, especially if the legislation is controversial.
- **Committee chairs:** They control the flow of legislation assigned to their committee. Generally, committee chairs decide when bills will be “put on the table” for consideration by the full committee. In some states, the committee chair has the power to determine whether a bill will even be scheduled for committee action. In a few, all bills assigned to a committee must be brought up for a vote.
- **Caucus chairs:** During legislative sessions, party members may meet to discuss partisan questions before the legislature and to take party positions on specific issues. Working with the leadership of their party, caucus chairs call for meetings of party members and preside at the caucus discussions.
- **Legislative Staff:** State legislatures—whether full-time or part-time—could not operate without staff. And, although they are not elected and have no vote on proposed measures, legislative staff play significant roles in the process and may influence the outcome of the legislature’s decisions.
- **Other key players:**
  - » **The Governor:** Although the governor has no vote during the legislature’s consideration of bills, a state’s chief executive is still a major player. First is their veto power – if the governor vetoes a bill enacted by the legislature, it can still become law despite the governor’s objections if the legislature overrides the veto. They also have the power to articulate an agenda for the state government and propose legislation to implement it. Technically, governors cannot introduce legislation, only members can. Sometimes Governors can ask the presiding officers to introduce bills on their behalf, or they push their agenda through other tools of political pressure.
  - » **State Agencies:** These agencies administer state programs and carry out essential functions, relying on state legislatures for funding and certain directives. They are often the experts on their programs and frequently maintain a lobbying presence in the capitol to advocate for their programs. In many cases, the leadership of these state agencies are appointed by the governor.
  - » **Lobbyists:** Individuals or firms that leverage relationships, experience/expertise, and connections to deliver legislative outcomes on behalf of clients.
  - » **Advocates:** These could be individuals or organizations who can be or have been influential.

## RULES

Each state legislative chamber adopts its own rules that govern how business is conducted. Rules are adopted at the beginning of a new legislative cycle, coinciding with the length of the members’ terms, but there are provisions for amending the rules at other times. Legislatures also adopt rules that apply when the Senate and House conduct business jointly. And in some states, there may be statutory and constitutional rules that apply to legislative procedures. A legislative chamber may opt to designate an official “backup” parliamentary manual. A “backup” parliamentary manual helps cover issues not addressed by the body’s own rules and serves as an additional guide for decision-making. [Mason’s Manual of Legislative Procedure](#) is the most widely used—by 77 of the country’s 99 state legislative chambers. Jefferson’s Manual, the U.S. House Rules and Robert’s Rules of Order also are frequently-used alternatives.

*Source: This guide has been adapted from the NCSL resource [Learning the Game](#), a narrative overview of how the legislative process works, the key players, the “rules of the game”, and an overall reflection on the institution of the legislature and the role of representative democracy.*

## Resources for your own legislative research:

- [Directory of State Legislatures, State Laws, and State Regulations](#), Law Librarians Society of Washington D.C.
- Use this to locate your state legislature's website and find more information on your state's legislative process. Rules and processes vary widely between states, so it's important to get familiar with your state legislature's website, resources, and the rules in your state.
- [Legislatures at a Glance](#), NCSL: This tool provides a snapshot of each state legislature's partisan composition, gender and racial composition, and leadership. It also contains general state information. (last updated 4/2023)
- [Legiscan](#): A resource with free and paid options for tracking state and federal legislation. The free option includes a personal monitoring list with saved searches from the national legislative search engine and private RSS feeds to stay informed. Free users can also receive monitored email alerts, and create simple dynamic reports sharable with friends and colleagues.
- [VoteSmart Government 101](#): General background on essential government functions, beyond the legislative processes included in this document.

## RESOURCES ON CITIZEN-INITIATED LEGISLATION BY BALLOT MEASURE

- [NCSL Initiative and Referendum States + Resources](#): overview of states with a citizen's initiative or referendum process, including basic information on requirements
- [Ballot Initiative Strategy Center Resource Library](#): houses ballot-measure information ranging from past campaign materials to campaign debriefs, to memos highlighting best practices. Account required, email [Partnerportal@ballot.org](mailto:Partnerportal@ballot.org) to request access.

