

2026

COUNCIL OF PRESIDENTS

Washington Governing and Legislative Framework Primer

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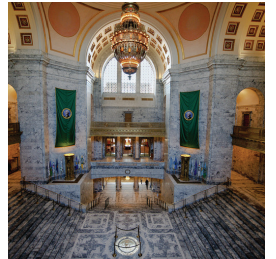
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The Council of Presidents (COP) is the association of Washington’s six public baccalaureate degree granting college and universities. Located in Olympia, Washington, COP strives to be a common voice for the public baccalaureate sector and the most respected and trusted resource for decision makers on issues affecting public higher education. COP serves a coordinating role for a number of initiatives and activities common to the public baccalaureate institutions, fostering coordination and collaboration among the public baccalaureates as well as with other educational partners, both in Washington and nationally.

This document is available on COP’s Legislative Engagement webpage: <https://councilofpresidents.org/legislative-engagement/>

Overview

The [Washington State Constitution](#) establishes the governance structure at the state level. In Washington, the Executive Branch is composed of the Governor, several other statewide elected officials, and the Governor's cabinet. The Washington State Legislature consists of the House of Representatives and the State Senate. The judiciary is composed of the Washington Supreme Court and lower courts. There is also local government, consisting of counties, municipalities, and special purpose districts.

Executive branch

In Washington, the executive branch is organized by individually elected officials. Elected officials are not elected as a ticket. Each office is elected separately, creating an outcome of independent priorities and goals that may be loosely connected along political party priorities.

Washington is led by a Governor. The [Governor](#) is the head of the executive branch and commander-in-chief of the state's military forces. The Governor has the duty to enforce state laws, the power to either approve or veto bills passed by the Washington Legislature, and line-item veto power to cancel specific provisions in spending bills. The Washington Governor may also convene the legislature on extraordinary occasions, also known as special sessions. Finally, the Governor may [proclaim a state of emergency](#) with the ability to issue an order waiving or suspending statutory and regulatory obligations or limitations.

Within the Governor's Office is the Office of the Education Ombud ([OEO](#)). The OEO resolves complaints, disputes, and problems between families and elementary and secondary public schools in all areas that affect student learning. The Office of the Education Ombuds functions independently from the public school system and provides an alternative to costly lawsuits and administrative hearings. Their services are available to students from kindergarten to 12th grade and are free and confidential.

The Governor's Executive Cabinet includes members representing the [Washington Student Achievement Council](#) and the [Department of Children, Youth and Families](#). The Governor's Small Agency Cabinet includes representation from the [Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board](#). No higher education agency or organization is a member of either cabinet.

In addition to the Governor, the state constitution identifies the following offices: Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, Secretary of State, Treasurer, Auditor, Commissioner of Public Lands, and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The offices of each of the state constitutional officers are established in the Washington Constitution, except for the Insurance Commissioner, which was created by statute. Each office is elected on a partisan ballot to concurrent four-year terms, except for the Superintendent of Public Instruction, who is officially non-partisan.

Regarding higher education, there are five major elected officials or bodies that influence higher education policy and practice in Washington. The most influential are the Governor and the Legislature.

In addition, the following offices also influence higher education policy and practices:

- ◆ [Attorney General](#): Within the Office of the Attorney General, each public four-year college or university has its own assistant attorney general. There is loose coordination among the different assistant attorneys general across the sector.

- ◆ [Secretary of State](#): The Secretary of State's office primarily engages with higher education institutions regarding access to voting drop boxes and information.
- ◆ [Lieutenant Governor](#): The Lieutenant Governor's office has recently prioritized higher education policy.
- ◆ [Superintendent of Public Instruction](#): OSPI has a vested interest in the transition from K-12 to higher education.

Finally, there are several state departments governed and managed by independent commissions, including the Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Department of Transportation. Heads of the remaining departments are appointed by the Governor, with the advice and consent of the Washington State Senate.

Legislative branch

The [Washington State Legislature](#) is the state's legislative branch. The Legislature is bicameral and composed of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The Washington Legislature is governed by laws, rules, and procedures and has four primary functions:

- ◆ Determine the level and means by which citizens will be taxed and how tax dollars will be appropriated (spending).
- ◆ Write and modify the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) to protect or restrict citizens, institute civil and criminal code, and establish standards.
- ◆ Regulate other branches of state government, as well as itself, by establishing rules and by its power of impeachment.
- ◆ Help constituents understand and work with state government.

The state is divided into 49 legislative districts of equal population, each of which elects two representatives and one senator. Representatives serve two-year terms, and senators serve four-year terms. State Senate terms are offset so that half of the senators are up for reelection every two years. There are no term limits in Washington.

Legislative sessions are defined by the biennium (two-year period) in which bills are considered. Each new biennium begins every odd-numbered year and coincides with the two-year election cycle. The Legislature assembles annually on the second Monday in January.

Each odd-numbered year, the Legislature convenes for a biennial session, also known as the regular session, which lasts 105 calendar days, including weekends and holidays. The primary focus of the regular session is to pass the state's biennial budget.

Each even-numbered year, the Legislature convenes for a supplemental session, also known as the short session, which lasts 60 calendar days. Legislation that does not pass during the regular session is retained in the chamber in which the bill originated in its current form. New legislation may be introduced during a short session. A supplemental budget is passed during the short session to adjust and add to the previously adopted two-year budget.

House of Representatives

The Speaker of the House presides over the [House of Representatives](#). A member of the majority caucus, the Speaker is elected by a vote of the entire House. As well as presiding over the body, the Speaker also holds the chief leadership position and controls the flow of legislation. In the absence of the Speaker, the Speaker Pro Tempore assumes the role of Speaker.

Within the House of Representatives, there are two caucuses: the Republican and Democratic Caucuses. The Majority Leader is elected by the majority caucus to lead the caucus and is responsible for assigning committee chairmanships and memberships. The other legislative leaders, such as caucus chairs, floor leaders, and whip, are elected by their respective party caucuses.

Senate

The Lieutenant Governor serves as the President of the [Senate](#) and presides over all floor action. As a statewide elected official, the Lieutenant Governor may belong to either party.

In the absence of the Lieutenant Governor, the President Pro Tempore presides over the Senate. The President Pro Tempore is elected by the majority party caucus, followed by confirmation of the entire Senate through a Senate Resolution. The President Pro Tempore holds the chief leadership position in the Senate. The Senate also elects a Vice President Pro Tempore to serve in the absence of the Lieutenant Governor and the President Pro Tempore.

The Majority Leader is elected by the majority caucus to lead the caucus and is responsible for assigning committee chairmanships and memberships. The other legislative leaders, such as caucus chairs, floor leaders, and whip, are elected by their respective party caucuses.

The Senate also maintains an important role in the confirmation of gubernatorial appointees to state offices, including college and university regents and trustees. Appointees continue to serve unless the Senate refuses to confirm a gubernatorial appointment.

Legislative staff

Legislative staff are a critical part of the Washington Legislature. The legislative process includes two primary types of legislative staff.

All committees have nonpartisan policy and fiscal analyst staff and counsel who have specialized knowledge of the committee subject area. In the House, the Office of Program Research ([OPR](#)) oversees committee staff, and Senate Committee Services ([SCS](#)) holds this responsibility in the Senate. Once a bill is assigned to a committee, a committee staffer is assigned to each bill to provide further research and drafting assistance to members.

In addition, each caucus in the House and Senate has full-time staff who provide members with partisan policy, communications, and administrative support¹. Caucus policy staff have similar responsibilities as committee staff, except they approach issues and legislation from a partisan perspective. Caucus communication staff members support caucus members with media and public relations efforts.

¹ Caucus Staff: Senate Republicans: <http://src.wastateleg.org/>, Senate Democrats: <http://sdc.wastateleg.org/>, House Democrats: <https://housedemocrats.wa.gov/> and House Republicans: <https://houserеспублиans.wa.gov/>

Legislative committees

Each session, generally 20 committees convene in the House and 15 in the Senate. Committee membership is determined by party leadership in both chambers. The number of committee members is determined by the majority party and is typically weighted with members of the majority party.

In both chambers, each committee is led by a Chair and Vice Chair from the majority party and a Ranking Member from the minority party. The Chair is responsible for determining committee agendas, deciding whether to bring bills up for a vote, and identifying the order of testimony.

In each chamber, there are policy committees and fiscal committees. If a bill requires a funding appropriation or raises revenue, it generally goes to a fiscal committee. Bills with a fiscal impact often go to a policy committee then a fiscal committee. Bills can be referred to multiple policy or fiscal committees.

Committees conduct their work through work sessions, public hearings, and executive sessions. Work sessions provide legislators with background information, the opportunity to ask stakeholders and experts questions, and learn about a topic in detail. Public hearings provide the public an opportunity to testify before the committee in support of or in opposition to a bill. An executive session is when legislators decide if they will pass legislation out of committee to either a fiscal committee or the Rules Committee.

In the House, the primary higher education-related committees include:

- ◆ [House Postsecondary Education & Workforce Committee](#): The House Postsecondary Education & Workforce Committee considers issues relating to postsecondary education, including governance and coordination of public and private institutions of postsecondary education and technical training; postsecondary offerings; student success; wraparound services; apprenticeships; lifelong learning; removing barriers to employment; and workforce development. The committee also considers health care occupational compacts; the modification of credentialing of existing health care providers; and the licensing of professions.
- ◆ [House Education Committee](#): The House Education Committee considers issues relating to kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) education.
- ◆ [House Appropriations Committee](#): The House Appropriations Committee considers the operating budget bill and related legislation, budget processes, and fiscal issues such as pension policy and compensation. The committee also considers bills with operating budget fiscal impacts.
- ◆ [House Capital Budget Committee](#): The House Capital Budget Committee considers the state capital budget, which approves money for the construction and repair of public buildings and for other long-term investments, such as land acquisitions and transfers. In addition, the committee considers grants and loans to local governments or nonprofit organizations for infrastructure, housing, and cultural and heritage facilities. The committee also considers bills relating to public works contracting, state buildings and land, and the authorization of state debt.

In the Senate, the primary higher education-related committees include:

- ◆ [Senate Higher Education & Workforce Development Committee](#): The Senate Higher Education & Workforce Development Committee considers issues relating to the state's public and private colleges and universities; apprenticeship and workforce programs; governance and coordination of higher education; higher education faculty, not including collective bargaining issues; financial aid; and tuition.

- ◆ [Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee](#) The Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee considers issues relating to kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) education, including K-12 related funding formulas and school district levy policy; K-12 student health and safety; K-12 teacher certification and employment issues; and early learning programs, including the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program and Working Connections Program.
- ◆ [Senate Ways & Means Committee](#) The Senate Ways & Means Committee considers the operating and capital budget bills and related legislation, including the authorization of state debt. The committee also deals with tax policy and other fiscal issues such as pension policy and compensation in addition to bills with operating budget fiscal impacts.

The Joint Higher Education Committee is made up of members from the House and Senate. The committee typically conducts work sessions outside of the legislative session. The Joint Higher Education Committee is responsible for engaging with the Washington Student Achievement Council and the higher education community to create greater communication, coordination, and alignment between the higher education system and the expectations of the Legislature. The Joint Committee is required to provide recommendations for higher education policy, including proposed legislation, to the higher education and fiscal committees of the Legislature.

Finally, the Rules Committee serves a two-step process to determine which bills will move to the chamber floor for further consideration. Presided over by the Lieutenant Governor in the Senate and the Speaker in the House, the Rules Committee meets to identify a predetermined number of bills to advance in the process. Bills are “pulled” through this process, with each step referred to as a “pull”.

How a bill becomes a law

Each session hundreds of bills are introduced. On average, approximately 2,000 bills are introduced per session, although only about 20 percent become law.

Ideas for bills are proposed by a range of sources, including but not limited to the Governor, legislators, citizens, local governments, lobbyists, and state agencies. Regardless of the source of the idea, all bills must be sponsored by a legislator. Most bills are drafted by committee staff in the House and Senate. Bills are also drafted by legislators, caucus staff, state agencies, and lobbyists. Once drafted, all bills must go to the Code Reviser’s Office to be entered into the legislative system and identify the sponsor and co-sponsors of the bill. A bill that is entered into the legislative system is referred to as being “dropped in the hopper”.

The House and Senate may prefile legislation beginning the first Monday in December. Prefiled bills are then formally introduced on the first day of a legislative session. Only after a bill is introduced in the respective chamber are the bill’s contents available to the public.

All bills must go through three formal readings in each chamber before final passage. The First Reading is the introduction of a bill for the first time to the Legislature. After a bill is introduced, the Senate Majority Floor Leader and the House Majority Leader refer bills to a legislative committee for further consideration.

The Second Reading is the first time a bill is read to the entire membership of a chamber. The Second Reading offers the only time amendments can be offered on the floor. Technically, the bill must return to Rules. However, the common practice is to “bump” the bill, which means the bill skips the Third Reading and is available for a vote on final passage.

ACTION	PROCESS
Concurs with the amendments	Bill passes the legislature.
Does not concur with amendments	Chamber of origin may ask the opposite chamber to recede from amendment; if the chamber recedes, the bill passes the legislature.
Cannot resolve differences	Request a conference committee to reach a resolution; if resolution reached both chambers must pass the bill; if no resolution then the bill dies.

The Third Reading is the discussion of a bill before final passage, or before a final vote is taken on the legislation. After a bill has passed its chamber of origin, it must repeat the same process in the opposite chamber.

If a bill is amended in the opposite chamber, the chamber of origin must decide whether to concur with those amendments.

If the chamber of origin concurs with the amendments of the opposite chamber, the bill has passed the Legislature. If the chamber of origin disagrees with the opposite chamber, then the chamber of origin may ask the opposite chamber to recede from the amendment. If the opposite chamber recedes, the bill has passed the Legislature. If the two chambers cannot resolve their differences, one may request a conference committee. The conference committee, which includes members from both chambers, is structured to seek a resolution of differences. If an agreement is reached, both chambers must adopt the bill to pass. If no agreement is reached, the bill dies.

All legislation that does not pass by the end of the biennium is considered “dead”. It is worth noting that legislation is truly never “dead”. Although it may seem like a bill has no chance of passing the legislature, a bill can never truly be “dead” until the end of the biennium. Sometimes, bills end up as provisos in the budget. Furthermore, the same proposal can always be introduced to the legislature in subsequent biennia so long as there is a sponsor. In addition, while a version of a bill may appear to be “dead” the companion bill and/or a similar bill may advance through the process. Ideas and wording from a bill that is not moving can be inserted into a new or substitute bill. Finally, it is worth noting a number of processes and exceptions exist through the process that allow for bills to “die” or advance outside of the standard process.

Bills that pass the legislature are signed by both the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House and delivered to the Governor for consideration. During session, the Governor has five days to act, excluding Sundays. If the Legislature is within five days of adjournment, the Governor has 20 days after adjournment to act on a bill. After these deadlines, all bills the Governor has not acted upon become law without the Governor’s signature.

The Governor may sign a bill, veto a section of a bill, or veto an entire piece of legislation. The Governor only has line-item veto authority as it pertains to the budget. The legislature must have a two-thirds majority vote in both chambers to override the Governor’s veto.

Once a bill is signed by the Governor or advanced without the Governor’s signature, the bill is delivered to the Secretary of State, who assigns the legislation as part of the revised code of Washington.

The [Revised Code of Washington](#) is the compilation of all of Washington's permanent laws currently in force. It is a collection of Session Laws (enacted by the Legislature, and signed by the Governor, or enacted via the initiative process), arranged by topic, with amendments added and repealed laws removed. It does not include temporary laws such as appropriations acts. The official version of the RCW is published by the Statute Law Committee and the Code Reviser.

The [Washington Administrative Code](#) (WAC) is the compilation of executive branch and state agency regulations issued by authority of statutes. Like legislation and the Constitution, regulations are a source of primary law in Washington State. The WAC codifies the regulations and arranges them by subject or agency. Each state agency and public higher education institution has its own WAC.

State budget

During a regular session, the Legislature passes three fiscal budgets: (1) Operating, (2) Capital, and (3) Transportation. This trio of [budgets](#) makes up the state's budget for the next two-year period. A supplemental budget is passed during the short session and includes the same three budgets passed during the regular session.

The operating budget is a two-year plan for funding all ongoing state activities except for construction and transportation. The budget is in effect from July 1 through June 30, two years later. The capital budget is a two-year plan for funding state and local agency building and construction projects. The capital budget operates on the same two-year period as the operating budget. The transportation budget is a separate budget because the money does not come out of the state's general fund. The transportation budget is primarily user-funded based on revenue from gas taxes, permits, licenses, and other fees.

In December preceding the regular session, the [Office of Financial Management](#), part of the Governor's Office, releases a budget based on a [forecast](#) of state revenues. The Legislature reviews the Governor's proposed budget before drafting its own proposed budget.

Each fiscal committee in the House and Senate proposes separate versions of the budget. Traditionally, the two chambers alternate years to be the first to introduce their version of the budgets. Budgets are often adopted at the end of a session to give legislators an opportunity to see what other legislation has passed, to include items to be funded, and identify revenue sources.

Legislative agencies

There are three legislative agencies: (1) Statute Law Committee, (2) Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) and (3) Legislative Evaluation and Accountability Program (LEAP).

The [Statute Law Committee](#) employs the Code Reviser and oversees the Code Reviser's Office. The primary responsibility of the Code Reviser's office is to assign bill numbers; codify, index, and publicize the Revised Code of Washington; and revise, correct, and harmonize the statutes by means of administrative or suggested legislative action as may be appropriate.

The [Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee](#) is a joint bipartisan committee which conducts performance audits, program evaluations, sunset reviews, and other oversight duties assigned by the Legislature.

The [Legislative Evaluation and Accountability Program](#) is a joint committee that serves as the Legislature's independent source of information and technology with respect to budgets and revenue.

Common legislative terms

Amendment - Any modification to a bill.

Appropriation - A legislative allocation of money for a specific purpose.

Biennium - Two-year period. The Washington State fiscal biennium is from July 1 of odd-numbered years to June 30, two years later.

Bill - A bill proposes changes to the Revised Code of Washington. Bills can create a new law, modify an existing law, or eliminate an existing law. Bill ideas may originate from many sources including constituents, state agencies, the Governor, or advocacy groups. All bills must be sponsored and introduced by a member of the Legislature. Bills require the Governor's signature. Bills that originate in the House of Representatives are abbreviated HB and are numbered starting with 1,000 at the beginning of each biennium. Bills that originate in the Senate are abbreviated SB and are numbered starting with 5,000 at the beginning of each biennium.

Bill report - Summary of background and effect of bills, prepared by committee staff.

Caucus - A group within a legislative body seeking to represent a specific interest. In Washington, the term implies partisanship.

Companion bill - Two identical versions of the same bill that are introduced in both the House and Senate. Companion bills may start out the same but may differ as the process advances and amendments are made.

Cutoff dates - Dates by which a bill must have advanced through the legislative process.

Effective date - Indicates when a bill will become law.

Emergency clause - Allows a bill to take effect earlier than the standard ninety-day period.

Engrossed bill - A bill that contains all amendments that are added in the chamber of origin.

Enrolled bill - Bill passed by both chambers and containing all amendments adopted by both chambers.

Fiscal note - An estimation of the expected fiscal impact a bill will have on state and/or local government within a specific timeframe.

Null and void clause - Language specifying that a measure is invalid unless funding is provided in the budget by a specified time.

Pro forma session - A required process intended to move legislative business forward.

Sine die - The final act of the legislature at the end of session; adjournment.

Special session - Legislative sessions called by the Governor or the Legislature and often focus on fiscal issues. There are no limits to the number of special sessions that can be called, but each special session is 30 days. The legislature may adjourn prior to the 30th day if business is complete. For the Legislature to call a special session, a two-thirds vote is required in both chambers.

Striking amendment - Removes all the wording after the enacting clause and inserts new language. Note that the new content must fit within the title of the bill.

Substitute bill - A bill that replaces an original bill with a new bill in every way excluding the title.

Title-only bill - A bill that only contains a title and a number. The intent is to have a vehicle on which to amend substance later.