

Tennessee Legislative Skills Briefing

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22 Important Facts You Probably Would Not Remember Even if You Had Been Paying Attention in Civics Class

You do not have to be an expert on the legislative process to be a part of that process. And you won't be an expert after reading these reflections. But these facts and observations may help you become an effective part of the legislative process. This process could benefit greatly from the active participation of citizens and groups working for the common good.

1. Tennessee's state legislature is known as the General Assembly.
2. The General Assembly can add, repeal or modify (amend) our existing laws. Together with the executive and judicial branches, the legislative branch is our state government.
3. Currently we have elected members of 2 parties in the General Assembly, although the legislative web site lists three parties.
4. The General Assembly consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives.
5. The Senate has 33 members who serve 4-year terms. The terms are staggered with half of the seats being up for election every two years. In 2010 odd numbered seats are up for election. The Senate elects the Lieutenant Governor. The Lieutenant Governor, also correctly known as Speaker of the Senate, appoints committees and committee officers.
6. Each Senator must be a qualified voter of the district for one year immediately before election, a citizen of the United States, at least 30 years of age, and a citizen of Tennessee for at least three years.
7. The House has 99 members who serve 2-year terms. Each House member's seat is on the ballot every two years. Each Representative must be a citizen of the United States, at least 21 years of age, a citizen of Tennessee for at least three years, and a resident in the county one represents for at least one year immediately preceding the election.
8. The House elects its Speaker. The Speaker appoints committees and committee officers.
9. The legislature meets annually from mid-January to late May or June (normally), depending on circumstances of politics and agendas.
10. Legislators are part time and are given limited staff. Pay is \$19,009 annually plus expenses.
11. An important role of the General Assembly is to elect 3 "constitutional officers" so named because the offices are created by the State Constitution. Current constitutional officers are:
COMPTROLLER OF THE TREASURY Justin P. Wilson
SECRETARY OF STATE Tre Hargett
STATE TREASURY David H. Lillard, Jr.

12. Senate and House districts are population-based. Redistricting occurs after each federal census.
13. Legislators have two primary roles, leading and representing. One can argue that these roles are often in conflict. For our purposes, if public opinion in the district agrees with your position then you obviously must remind Rep. Smith that he is first and foremost a representative of the people. If public opinion is against your position, then you must remind Sen. Jones that she was elected to be a leader and must vote her convictions.
14. Here are the steps in passing a bill: INTRODUCTION, NUMBERED BY CHIEF CLERK, PASSED ON FIRST CONSIDERATION, PASSED ON SECOND CONSIDERATION, REFERRED TO COMMITTEE, REFERRED TO CALENDAR, PLACED ON CALENDAR, PASSED ON THIRD CONSIDERATION, BILL IS ENGROSSED, COMPANION BILLS, BILL IS ENROLLED, SIGNED BY SPEAKERS, SIGNED BY GOVERNOR (unless Governor vetoes or allows it to become law without signature), SENT TO SECRETARY OF STATE AND ASSIGNED PUBLIC CHAPTER NUMBER, INCORPORATED INTO THE CODE.
15. But what it all boils down to is: **Committees Rule!** (*See separate handout for details.*)
16. We have a Governor. (And you thought I'd forgotten.) The Governor must be at least 30 years of age, a citizen of the United States, and a citizen of Tennessee seven years preceding his election.
17. The Governor's term is four years. Tennessee governors can now serve for an additional four-year terms but are limited to no more than two consecutive terms. The Governor is paid a salary of \$85,000 and is furnished an official residence and expenses for its operation.
18. The General Assembly has sole power to pass bills, but the Governor must receive every bill before it can become law. The Governor has the right to approve a bill by signing it into law; veto the bill with objections in writing; or fail to return a bill with objections during the ten-day period after it is presented -- then the bill will become law without the Governor's signature.
19. In 2008, TN had the 6th lowest state government tax collections per capita.
<http://www.statehealthfacts.org/comparemaptable.jsp?ind=30&cat=1>.)
20. In 2007 TN ranked 1st in bankruptcies filed per capita.
<http://credit.about.com/od/debtmanagementsolutions/a/2007bankruptcy.htm>
21. In 2007, TN ranked 10th highest in number of persons living below the poverty level, with 15.9% of TN residents (Census Bureau)
<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/ranks/rank34.html>).
22. In 2006, TN ranked 47th in Infant Mortality rate, 733 deaths in 2006.

Tennessee Legislators, post 2008 election

There are 19 new legislators in the Tennessee General Assembly since the 2008 elections. But the change is more profound than this 14% change would indicate. Tennessee's 2008 election resulted in an upheaval that has changed the make-up and political climate of the TN legislature. There are now 19 Republicans and 14 Democrats in the Senate and the leadership and agenda of that body is firmly in the hands of Republicans. All of the Senate committees are now chaired by Republicans. Republicans have also taken control of the House and hold a 51 to 48 member majority. Until recently it was even closer, 49-48. A Representative resigned and a special election was held this fall, resulting in one more Republican. In 2009 the House speaker's position was surprisingly filled by Rep. Kent Williams, a somewhat moderate east Tennessee Republican who received unanimous Democratic support and one Republican vote (his own). He appointed House members of both parties to lead committees. There was a considerable amount

of uncertainty about what his election meant. After the 2009 session, many observers of both parties gave Speaker Williams good marks for running fair and efficient meetings and appointing committees fairly as well.

Senator Ramsey was re-elected Lt. Governor by the Senate. He has now served for 3 years. Majorities of each committee are also Republican and every chair is a Republican. This legislature is the first one since 1869 in which both Houses have been majority Republican.

A major result of this party shift is that the state's 3 constitutional officers were replaced. The Secretary of State, the Treasurer and the Comptroller of the Treasury are elected by a joint session of the House and Senate. The incumbents were Democrats. The new officers are Republicans.

For More Information

For good free information see www.legislature.state.tn.us for the increasingly useful state legislative web page. Included are brief legislative bios and photos, legislative calendars, bill search capacity by bill number and subject matter, and lots of other good stuff.

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