Watching your Legislature at work

Floor sessions of the Assembly and Senate and meetings of legislative committees are all open to the public. Visitor galleries for the Assembly and Senate are located on the third floor of the Capitol.

The Assembly

The California Assembly has 80 Members, each serving two-year terms. The Assembly is presided over by the Speaker or a designated Member. Voting is conducted by electronic push buttons on each Legislator's desk, with tally boards at the front of the chamber.

The Senate

The Senate is comprised of 40 Members serving staggered four-year terms. The President Pro Tempore is the chief officer of the Senate. Voting is conducted by voice roll call.

Committees

To give adequate consideration to the more than 6,000 bills introduced each two-year session, the Legislature does most of its work in committees. Each committee has responsibility for a specific area of policy (education, health, etc.).

A typical committee hearing will involve the presentation of a bill by its author and testimony by interested groups and citizens.

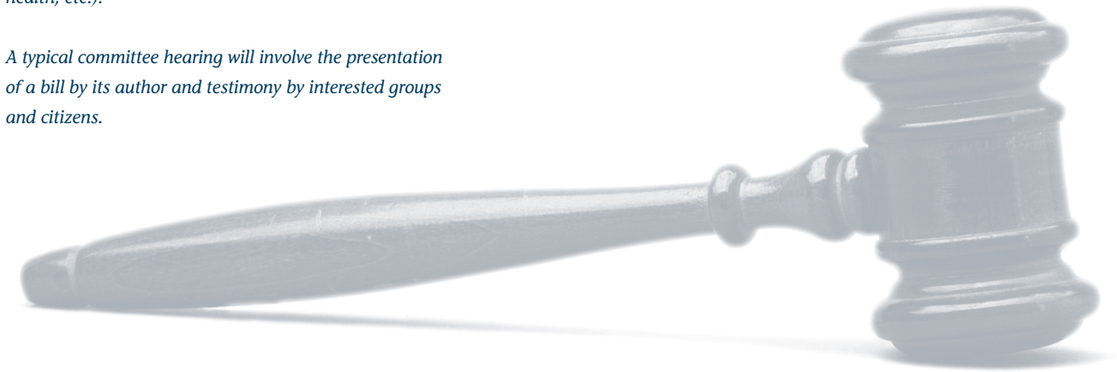
Joint Committees

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee is a bi-partisan committee with fourteen members, seven from each house. This committee has the authority to direct the state auditor to conduct audits of any publicly created entity in the state. The committee is the legislature's "watch dog" for protecting taxpayer dollars from inefficiency in government.

Finding out what is happening when you are at the Capitol

Assembly and Senate Daily Files

The Daily File provides a listing of agendas for floor sessions and all committees. Files are available in the Legislative Bill Room in the basement of the Capitol. Floor session times are listed on the front cover and the bills of the agenda are listed under "third reading file." Committee agendas list the bill number, author and subject matter.



Path of a Bill through the California State Legislature

Author

A Legislator sends the idea and the language for the bill to the Legislative Counsel where it is drafted into the actual bill. The drafted bill is returned to the Legislator for introduction. If the author is a Senator, the bill is introduced at the Senate Desk; if an Assemblymember, at the Assembly Desk. The house in which the bill is introduced is known as the "parent house."

All legislation begins as an idea, which can come from anyone. The process starts when either an individual or a group persuades a Senator or Assemblymember to author a proposed new law, commonly called a "bill".

First Reading Introduction

A bill's first reading is when the Clerk reads the bill number, the name of the author, and the descriptive title of the bill before the Members of the house. The bill is then sent to the Office of State Printing. No bill may be acted upon until it has been in print for 30 days.

Committee Hearings

The bill then goes to the Senate or Assembly Rules Committee where it is assigned to the appropriate committee for its first hearing. Bills are assigned according to the nature of the issue they address. After passing all policy committees, bills that have an effect on the State Budget ("fiscal bills") must also be heard by a fiscal committee. Senate bills are heard in the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee and Assembly bills are heard in the Appropriations Committee. You can speak "for" or "against" a bill at all committee hearings. Your letters of support or opposition are important and should be mailed to committee members before the bill is scheduled to be heard in committee. It takes a majority vote of the full committee membership for a bill to be approved and "passed out" of the committee.

Second and Third Reading

Bills passed by committees are read a second time in the parent house and then placed on file for third reading. When a bill is read the third time, it is explained to the full house by its author, discussed by the Members during floor debate, and voted on by a roll call vote. Bills that require an expenditure of state funds or are urgency bills (take effect immediately) require 27 votes in the Senate and 54 votes in the Assembly for passage. All other bills need 21 votes in the Senate and 41 votes in the Assembly to be passed. If a bill is defeated, the Member may seek reconsideration and another vote.

Repeat Process In Other House

Once the bill has been approved by the parent house, it proceeds through the second house where the same hearing and review procedure occurs. Citizen participation is repeated as the bill moves through the second house. If the bill is passed without amendments, it proceeds directly to the Governor for approval.

Resolution of Differences

If a bill is amended in the second house, it is returned to the parent house to get agreement on the amendments (concurrence). If agreement cannot be reached, the bill moves to a two-house conference committee (three Members of the Assembly and three Members of the Senate) to resolve the differences. Conference committee hearings are open to the public and provide another opportunity for citizens to express their views, which can help Legislators arrive at a decision. If approved by the conference committee and both houses, the bill then goes to the Governor.

Governor

The Governor has three choices when a bill reaches his desk. He can sign it into law, allow it to become law without his signature, or veto it. Urgency measures take effect immediately after they are signed. Other bills usually become effective the following January 1st. A final and very important time for citizen participation in the bill process is when the bill reaches the Governor's desk. Letters and phone calls received by the Governor's office are taken into consideration when the Governor decides whether to sign or veto a bill. If the bill is vetoed, it is returned to the parent house where the author may ask for a vote to override the veto. It requires a two-thirds vote of both houses to override the Governor's veto.

Questions and Answers

How can I get more information on a bill?

Your Assemblymember, Senator or the office of the bill's author should be able to provide you with an analysis or fact sheet that summarizes the proposed new law. The Legislative Bill Room also provides printed copies of all legislation introduced during the current legislative session. Legislation from previous years is also available but must be ordered in advance. The phone number is (916) 445-2323.

Can I visit my Assemblymember?

YES. Each Member has an office in the Capitol. It is best to call in advance for an appointment. Your Legislator also has staff assistants who can help you if the Member is not available.

How do legislative assistants help?

Staff members perform many important tasks. Some work directly for individual Legislators; draft bills and assist constituents. Others work specifically for committees, providing analyses of pending legislation.

Can I testify before a committee?

YES. Any person has the right to testify before a committee of the Legislature. Contact the bill's author or your own Legislator to find out how to make your voice most effectively heard.

Where are Legislators when they are not in the Capitol?

When not at the Capitol, Legislators are often in the district meeting with constituents. During recesses, policy committees often hold hearings throughout the State to gather testimony from those unable to come to Sacramento during regular session.

Assembly Standing Committees

Aging and Long Term Care
319-3990

Agriculture
319-2084

Appropriations
319-2081

Banking and Finance
319-3081

Budget
319-2099

Business and Professions
319-3301

Education
319-2087

Elections, Reapportionment and Constitutional Amendments
319-2094

Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials
319-3965

Governmental Organization
319-2531

Health
319-2097

Higher Education
319-3960

Housing and Community Development
319-2085

Human Services
319-2247

Insurance
319-2086

Jobs, Economic Development and the Economy
319-2090

Judiciary
319-2334

Labor and Employment
319-2091

Local Government
319-3958

Natural Resources
319-2092

Public Employees, Retirement and Social Security
319-3957

Public Safety
319-3744

Revenue and Taxation
319-2098

Rules
319-2800

Transportation
319-2093

Utilities and Commerce
319-2083

Water, Parks and Wildlife
319-2096

Senate Standing Committees

Agriculture and Water Resources
445-2206

Appropriations
445-3284

Banking, Commerce and International Trade
445-6306

Budget and Fiscal Review
445-5202

Business and Professions
445-3435

Constitutional Amendments
445-2802

Education
445-2522

Elections and Reapportionment
445-2601

Energy, Utilities and Communications
445-9764

Environmental Quality
324-0894

Governmental Organization
445-1193

Health and Human Services
445-5965

Housing and Community Development
445-8740

Insurance
445-0825

Judiciary
445-5957

Labor and Industrial Relations
445-1237

Legislative Ethics
324-6929

Local Government
445-9748

Natural Resources and Wildlife
445-5441

Privacy
323-2067

Public Employment and Retirement
445-8958

Public Safety
322-1305

Revenue and Taxation
445-3808

Rules
445-4311

Transportation
445-3182

Veterans Affairs
445-5798

Joint Committees

Legislative Audit
319-3300

Legislative Budget
445-6767

Legislative Sunset Review
324-2506

Prison Construction and Operations
324-6175

Rules
319-2804

Note: All phone numbers are (916) Area Code.

Compliments of

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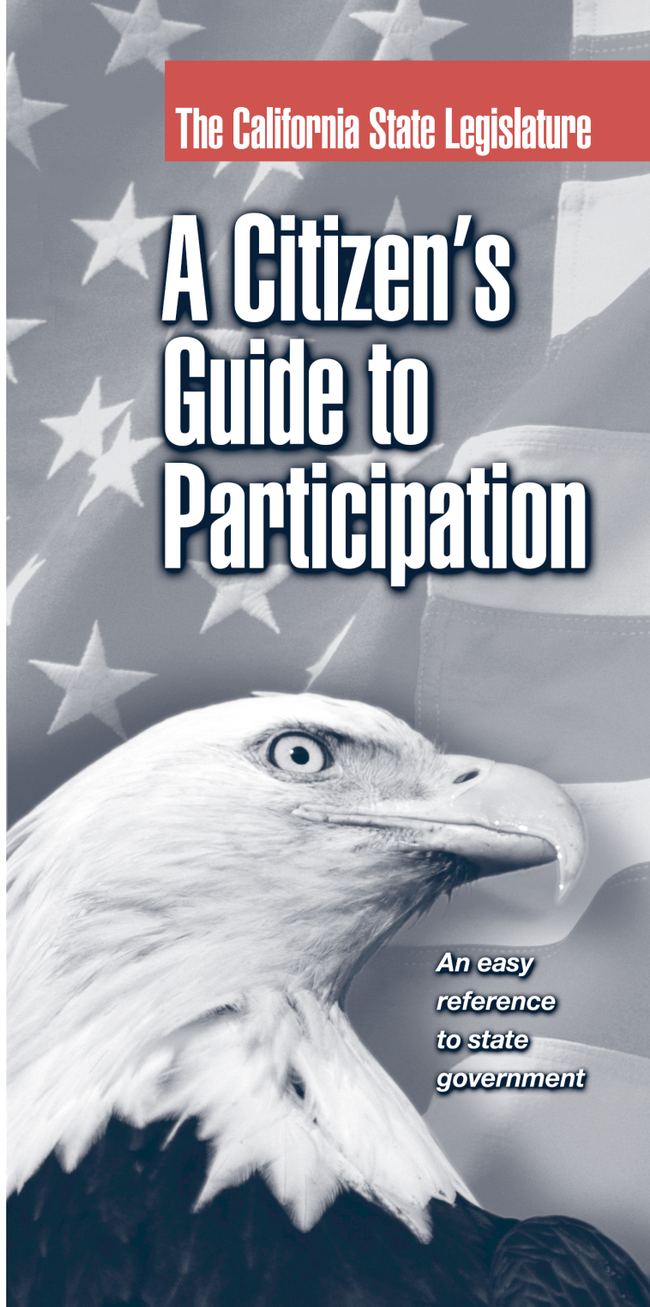

The California State Legislature

A Citizen's Guide to Participation

An easy reference to state government