

The General Assembly Legislative Process

The Maryland General Assembly meets in session for 90 consecutive days from January to early April of each year. There are 47 senators and 141 delegates elected from 47 districts for a term of four years. The legislators are not term-limited. Each district elects one senator and 3 delegates. The House of Delegates currently has 99 Democrats and 42 Republicans; the Senate has 32 Democrats and 15 Republicans.

The legislative process is divided into distinct stages:

1. Drafting and filing bills:

The State constitution mandates that bills be limited to one subject clearly described by the title of the bill. Bills on most subjects may be introduced in either chamber during the first 55 days of a session. Many bills are pre-filed; i.e., filed before the General Assembly is officially in session so that they can be introduced early in the session. The Department of Legislative Services prepares a fiscal analysis for each bill.

2. First reading = introduction:

During the First Reading, a bill is introduced for the first time, and the bill number, name of the bill's sponsor, and the title of the bill are read on the floor of the chamber, and assigned to a standing committee.

3. Committee hearing:

The Senate President and the Speaker of the House of Delegates assign members to the standing committees and appoint the committee chairs and vice-chairs. During the committee hearings, the bill sponsor and their panel of witnesses present the bill to the committee. The public may provide testimony in support or opposition to the bill. The committee chair schedules periodic voting sessions on the bills that have been heard to decide whether to give each a favorable or unfavorable report, send the former to the full chamber with any amendments, or take no action.

4. Second reading = committee report to chamber:

A bill that's given a favorable report by the committee it's assigned to is forwarded to the full chamber for consideration, debate and possible amendment.

5. Third reading = floor vote:

During the third reading, the full chamber votes on the bill. An ordinary bill needs a majority vote to pass. A roll call vote must be taken.

6. Crossover:

If a bill passes in the original chamber, it is sent to the other chamber for consideration, where further amendments may be considered and approved by that chamber.

7. Resolution of differences:

If the two chambers differ, then a conference committee with members from each chamber may meet to come up with compromise language, or members of the two houses may confer informally to resolve differences. In any event, an identical bill must be approved by both chambers before midnight on the final day of session (Sine Die) to become law.

8. Governor's action:

All passed bills, except the budget bill and constitutional amendments, are presented to the Governor following adjournment of the legislative session. The governor can sign a bill, veto it, or let it become law without his signature. The Governor has thirty days to exercise his veto authority.

9. Veto overrides:

If the governor vetoes a bill, the legislature can override his veto with a three-fifths vote of each chamber. If a bill is vetoed during a regular session, the legislature can consider a vote to override immediately. If the bill is vetoed after the session has been adjourned, the General Assembly may take a vote to override when it reconvenes for the next session.

10. Effective date:

If a passed bill is not vetoed or a veto is overridden, it becomes law and takes effect on the date specified in the bill.