

Idaho's Legislature

at a Glance

Who Represents You?

Just like our national Congress, Idaho's legislature is bicameral, consisting of the lower **House of Representatives** and the upper **Senate**. Idaho is divided into 35 legislative districts, each with one senator and two representatives, creating a 70-member House and 35-member Senate.

Districts are based on population, and as of the last census, are required to have roughly 45,000 residents. This means that some urban districts may represent just part of a city, while other rural districts represent multiple counties and vast areas larger than some U.S. states. Idaho's state constitution limits us to a maximum of 35 districts, so as Idaho's population grows, so will the population of each district. Districts are revisited after every national census to ensure they represent similar amounts of people. They are also designed to keep communities whole--in other words, where possible, districts should keep communities together, keeping in mind things like roads, county lines, and geographic barriers. Idaho has a bipartisan Redistricting Committee that draws the districts every ten years, and is currently ranked highly for its integrity.

Representatives and senators are elected every two years on national election days for two year terms and have no term limits.

To run for a position in our state legislature, you need to be a U.S. citizen and have lived in your district for at least a year. While legislators are compensated for their work, the roughly \$17,000 salary leads most to have other employment.

How The Session Works

Legislative sessions convene yearly at the State Capitol in Boise from January through March, though may run longer. The 2021 legislative session is now the longest session in history, with no declaration of *sine die* or official end for both chambers and a constitutionally murky recess for the House. Interim Committees, workgroups, or other convenings outside of the "regular session" may occur, allowing legislators the chance to work on complicated issues in committees or workgroups year round.

Inside the Capitol

The formal proceedings of the legislature happen in a few distinct processes. At one point or another, everything must be brought before the "floor" -- the entirety of either the House or Senate. A bill starts here, with its first of at least three readings being presented to the entire body. From there, the bill is off to a committee.

Both representatives and senators participate in a few standing committees that divvy up the most important topics in Idaho. Committees are led by a Chair and Vice Chair who set the direction of the committee and lead the committee's activities through the session. Each committee's membership is bipartisan, with a ratio of members from each party that aims to mirror that of the legislature as a whole. Bills are taken up first by the most relevant committees. For example, of particular interest to CVI are the House Resources and Conservation committee and the Senate Resources and Environment committee.

Committees are workshops for bills where they are presented, debated, and commented on by the public and lobbyists wishing to testify. The committee ultimately decides the fate of the bill by either sending it forward to the "floor" of the relevant body, or choosing another path for the bill that may jeopardize its chances for success, including holding (killing) the bill, sending it to be amended, or sending it to another committee.

If the committee decides to move the bill forward, it will be presented, or "read," for the second time on the floor, ensuring that all legislators of that body know the bill has made it through the committee process. Usually, after its second reading the bill automatically moves to the third reading the next legislative day, when legislators debate the bill on the floor. The debate concludes with a vote, and if the bill passes by a simple majority, it will be sent to the other body to follow a similar process.

This can be a major hurdle for bills, and many do not make it through or are sent back to step one for amendments. Those

that are approved by both bodies receive the signature of the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate (the leaders of each), and are then sent to the Governor. At that point the Governor can sign the bill into law, allow five days to pass without signing (in which case the bill still becomes law), or of course veto the bill. (The legislature can override vetoes with a two thirds majority vote.) If it clears the Governor, the bill becomes law on July 1.

Citizen Advocacy

The most direct way for the public to get involved is to testify in support or opposition of a bill during its committee hearing. Hearings have sign-in sheets that allow the public the chance to document their attendance, their stance on the bill in question, and to check a box if they are interested in testifying. It can be complicated to know when certain bills will be heard in committee, so we recommend you stay in close touch with an advocacy group that shares your values.

Beyond committee hearings, there is no limit to the creativity we have seen passionate folks use in advocating for important causes. In 2019, for example, sportsmen and women crowded the public observation deck above the floor of the House. Though not allowed to speak or bring in posters, the group wore mostly camouflage, making their point clear: we hunt, we fish, and we vote. We're watching. Skilled advocates also contact their representatives, write letters to the editor, sign petitions, and attend rallies. Once again, advocacy groups are the best resource to stay engaged, gain confidence, and learn how to most effectively use your voice.

