
Chapter 4

Organizing the General Assembly



Image courtesy of Zach Gleim, LSC

House Chamber

Convening the General Assembly

Newly elected legislators formally take office when the General Assembly convenes on the first Monday in January in each odd-numbered year (or on the next day if the first Monday is a legal holiday). Each General Assembly meets during a two-year period or biennium that is divided into two annual regular sessions. Bills introduced in the first session year are carried over to the second year. Bills not enacted by the end of the second session die and are not carried over to the next biennium.

Since 1803, each General Assembly has been referred to by number. Under the state's first constitution, a new General Assembly met every year. Under the present constitution, which took effect in 1852, a new General Assembly has convened every other year. The 135th General Assembly convened in January 2023.

Either the Governor, or the presiding officers of the General Assembly, acting jointly, may convene the General Assembly in special session by issuing a proclamation. Special sessions called by the Governor are for specified purposes, and, except for providing for session expenses and related matters, no other business may be transacted by the General Assembly during such a session. The General Assembly's presiding officers may limit the purpose of a special session they call but are not required to do so.

The Oath of Office for the General Assembly

I, _____, do solemnly swear to support the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution of the State of Ohio, and faithfully to discharge and perform all of the duties incumbent upon me as a member of the Ohio Senate (House of Representatives) according to the best of my ability and understanding; and this I do as I shall answer unto God.

As required by the Ohio Constitution, the General Assembly prescribes each house's mode of organization by law, and each house chooses its own officers and generally determines its own rules of procedure. A majority of all the members elected to each house constitutes a quorum to conduct business. If a quorum of members is not present, members of that house who are present may direct the Sergeant-at-Arms to compel the attendance of absent members. If the members present decline to excuse an absent member, the absent member is not entitled to compensation during the absence and is liable for all expenses incurred in producing the member's attendance.

Convening the Senate

At 1:30 p.m. on the first session day of a new General Assembly, the Senate President from the preceding biennium calls the Senate to order. Traditionally, the Senate opens each session with an invocation by a member of the clergy. The President calls the roll of all senatorial districts in numerical order. As they are called, the Senators-elect present their certificates of election and take the oath of office. The next few weeks are usually devoted to electing officers and other Senate officials, adopting rules, and making committee appointments.

Convening the House of Representatives

At 2:00 p.m. on the first session day of a new General Assembly, the Speaker of the House from the preceding biennium calls the Representatives-elect to order and appoints one of them Clerk Pro Tempore. By tradition, the House opens the session with an invocation by a member of the clergy. The Speaker calls the roll of the districts in numerical order and, as they are called, the Representatives-elect present their certificates of election and take the oath of office. As in the Senate, the next few weeks are largely devoted to electing officers and other House officials, adopting rules, and organizing committees.

Legislative Leadership

In both the Senate and the House, the members of the majority and minority parties elect several of their members as leaders. While the entire membership of each house actually votes on the election of leaders, selections generally have been made by the members of each party prior to the date of this formal election. These leaders have primary responsibility for developing their parties' positions on legislative proposals.

The Senate President is the presiding officer of the Senate and the Speaker of the House is the presiding officer of the House. The Ohio Constitution requires the presiding officers to sign all bills and joint resolutions enacted by the General Assembly to certify that the procedural requirements for passage have been met.

In addition to the Senate President, the members of the Senate elect other leaders. The Senate typically elects a President Pro Tempore, a Majority Floor Leader, a Majority Whip, a Minority Leader, an Assistant Minority Leader, a Minority Whip, and an Assistant Minority Whip.

In addition to the Speaker of the House, other House leaders generally include a Speaker Pro Tempore, a Majority Floor Leader, an Assistant Majority Floor Leader, a Majority Whip, an Assistant Majority Whip, a Minority Leader, an Assistant Minority Leader, a Minority Whip, and an Assistant Minority Whip.

One device the leaders of both parties use to establish party positions is the party caucus. A party caucus is a meeting of the members of the same political party within a particular house. It is held at the call of the party leadership and occurs frequently throughout the session. Party caucuses may or may not be open to the public.

Other Senate and House Officials

Both houses elect and appoint clerks and other administrative staff to assist them in carrying out the work of the General Assembly. The Senate and House each elect a Clerk who appoints various assistant clerks. The Clerk keeps a record of all bills and resolutions introduced and provides for the preparation and distribution of bills, resolutions, reports, and all other legislative documents. The House hires a Chief Administrative Officer, who performs various administrative duties and supervises administrative staff other than those assigned to the Clerk.

The House and Senate hire a Sergeant-at-Arms. These officials are responsible for maintaining order in the chambers, halls, galleries, corridors, and committee rooms in the Statehouse. The House Sergeant-at-Arms also is responsible for maintaining order in the corridors, committee rooms, offices, and other areas under the exclusive use and control of the House in the Vern Riffe Center in which members' offices are located. The Sergeants-at-Arms also enforce the rules, serve subpoenas and warrants, and, upon call of the membership, bring absent members to the chambers.

The House and Senate Clerks serve two-year terms. The Clerks, Sergeants-at-Arms, and Chief Administrative Officer of the House must assist in the organization of the next session of the General Assembly. Typically, the elected officers hold office on the first day of the new General Assembly until new officers are sworn in. For additional information on staff services, see [Chapter 9](#).

Adopting Rules

At the beginning of the session, both the Senate and the House adopt rules of procedure, which are printed in the *Journal*. Although the House of Representatives and the Senate may use slightly different terminology, rules typically cover the following topics: time of convening, order of business, duties of elected officers, committees, duties of committee chairpersons, committee meetings and procedure, committee records and reports, duties and decorum of members, debate and voting procedures, and privileges. The rules are available at the Publications link on the General Assembly website: legislature.ohio.gov.

In addition to the rules that are adopted by each house, joint rules may be adopted by both houses. Joint rules apply when members from both houses are officially acting together (for

example, during committees of conference or when the houses have jointly convened to hear the Governor's State of the State message early in each calendar year). In the past, joint rules also covered such inter-house matters as the membership and procedures of conference committees and joint select committees, procedures for reconsidering legislation vetoed by the Governor, and the drafting and form of bills. If the General Assembly does not adopt joint rules, it refers to parliamentary guides to resolve matters concerning both houses.

Chambers and Committee Hearing Rooms

The House of Representatives and the Senate meet in separate chambers in the Statehouse. At the beginning of the session, the House and Senate assign committee rooms and schedule the time at which committees are to hold regular meetings. Most Senate committee meetings are held in the Senate Building; House committee meetings are held in the Statehouse.

Seating Assignments

The clerks within each house coordinate the seating arrangements for members within their respective chambers. Traditionally, members of the Republican Party have been seated to the presiding officer's right in each house while members of the Democratic Party have been seated to the presiding officer's left. It also is the tradition of both houses to allow leadership and senior members to select their own seats. Each house provides some seating on the chamber floor for members of the news media.

Adjourning the General Assembly

Once a General Assembly has convened, neither house may adjourn for more than five days, excluding Sunday, without the consent of the other house. However, either house may adjourn from day to day. In the case of disagreement between the two houses over the time of adjournment, the Governor has the power to adjourn the General Assembly, but not beyond its next regular meeting time specified in the Ohio Constitution.

The Committee System

One of the most important parts of the organizational structure of the House and the Senate is the committee system, which allows the General Assembly to manage the significant volume of legislation introduced in each house. To determine the number of bills introduced in past legislative sessions, refer to the [Status Reports](#) at the Legislation link on the General Assembly website: legislature.ohio.gov. The committee system enables the General Assembly to consider legislation more thoroughly by dividing the task of scrutinizing and amending legislation among committees. There are several types of committees on which legislators might serve.

Committee Assignments

The Senate President names the standing committees of the Senate and appoints their members, ranking minority members, and chairpersons at the beginning of session. The Minority Leader of the Senate may recommend minority party members and the ranking minority member for each committee. The chairpersons of House committees are appointed by the Speaker, who also determines the number of members who will serve on each committee and subcommittee, except for the Rules and Reference Committee, which must have 12 members, four of whom are

appointed by the Minority Leader. For all committees and subcommittees, the Speaker appoints the majority party members and the Minority Leader appoints minority party members. The number of minority members on standing committees of the Senate is governed by custom and usually reflects the proportion that the minority bears to the total membership. The minority membership of a standing committee in the House must be proportional to the partisan composition of the House and must be adjusted upward as needed. Exceptions to this rule are the Finance Committee and the Rules and Reference Committee, for which House Rules specify that the chairperson and vice-chairperson are not included when calculating the committee's partisan composition. Committee assignments for members generally are based on an individual member's seniority, interests, or subject matter expertise. The Minority Leader of the House may designate a ranking minority member on each committee.

Much of the substantive work of the General Assembly is conducted in its standing committees.

The House and Senate Rules also specify that certain members of leadership may serve on or are members of committees in addition to the ones to which they have been designated as regular members. The Speaker, Minority Leader, and Speaker Pro Tempore of the House are ex officio, nonvoting members of all House committees except those where they are regular committee members. The House Minority Leader may designate the Assistant Minority Leader to be a nonvoting member of a committee in the Minority Leader's absence except those where the Assistant Minority Leader is a regular committee member. The Senate President may be substituted as a voting member of any committee. The Senate Minority Leader is an ex officio, nonvoting member of each committee but may be substituted as a voting member of any committee by request.

The Role of the Chairperson

A chairperson and vice-chairperson of a committee are named from the majority party members appointed to that committee. For each House committee, the chairperson selects the committee secretary (a legislator, not to be confused with the staff member who assists the committee) from the members of the minority party.

A chairperson exercises a great deal of authority concerning the operating procedures of the committee. For example, the chairperson determines when the committee meets, which of the bills referred to the committee will be given a public hearing at each meeting, the duration of testimony, when amendments may be offered, and other matters pertaining to the manner in which the committee considers legislation. Rules relating to absences, committee duties and functions, committee reports, expenses, meetings, quorums, votes, and other matters are prescribed by the rules of each house.

The chairperson of a committee generally may subpoena witnesses to appear before the committee and require those witnesses to present books, papers, and records. The House Rules require that a majority of the committee membership approve the subpoena of witnesses; the Senate Rules require the President's authorization.

Standing Committees

The most active type of committee in the General Assembly is the standing committee. While the number and titles of standing committees may vary from General Assembly to General Assembly, each house has separate standing committees to deal with broad subject matter areas.

Committees on Rules and Reference

A rules and reference committee, while considered to be a standing committee, has functions different from those of the other standing committees. The work of this committee may seem routine to the casual observer, but its actions are critical to the progress of any legislation toward enactment.

The House and the Senate Rules and Reference Committees assign bills and joint resolutions to standing committees. Members of these committees screen bills and assign them to the appropriate committees of the House and Senate.

Introduction does not always guarantee referral to committee. A bill that is not referred to a committee does not progress further in the enactment process. However, the rules of the House of Representatives require that all bills and resolutions introduced on or before May 15 of the even-numbered year of a biennium be referred to a standing, select, or special committee or standing subcommittee and be scheduled by the chairperson of the committee to which it is referred for at least one public hearing. The Senate Rules specify that all bills and resolutions referred by the Rules and Reference committee on or before April 1 of the even-numbered year of a biennium must be scheduled for a minimum of one public hearing.

Another responsibility of the Rules and Reference Committees is to schedule bills for a floor vote by the full House or Senate. The Senate Committee prescribes the order of Senate business, channels all appointments of the Governor to the appropriate standing committee before they are submitted to the full Senate for confirmation, and arranges the daily legislative Senate *Calendar*. The Senate Rules specify that the *Calendar* must be posted one calendar day in advance. In addition, the Rules permit the Chairperson of the Senate Committee to call a special meeting to add a bill to the *Calendar* upon a majority vote, and bills may be placed conditionally on the *Calendar* subject to favorable action by a committee.

The House Committee decides which bills and resolutions are on the House *Calendar*. House Rules specify that the *Calendar* may not be set later than 24 hours before the session is scheduled to begin, unless a majority of House members orders otherwise.

Subcommittees

Subcommittees allow a small number of members of a standing committee to review and consider legislation. There are two subcommittee types: the standing subcommittee and the ad hoc subcommittee. Standing subcommittees are attached to a standing committee and may hear many bills during a General Assembly. Current House Rules allow a standing subcommittee (except a subcommittee of the House Finance Committee) to consider bills and report directly to the House. Senate standing subcommittees must report recommendations to the standing committee for consideration by the full committee. Currently, the Senate has no standing subcommittees. The House has seven standing finance subcommittees.

An ad hoc subcommittee is created by a standing committee chairperson during deliberations on a specific bill. This type of subcommittee reports back to the standing committee with recommendations on the bill. The standing committee need not adopt the subcommittee's recommendations. Once an ad hoc subcommittee completes its work, the subcommittee ceases to exist.

Committees of Conference

If legislation does not pass both houses in the same form and the two houses cannot agree on one of the two versions, the General Assembly may appoint a committee of conference consisting of members from each house to resolve the differences. [Chapter 5](#) discusses, in detail, the role of conference committees in the enactment process.

Select Committees

A select committee, sometimes called a special committee, is a committee created by a bill or resolution or pursuant to the rules to undertake a particular task. The Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate name the members of select committees created under the rules. The members of a select committee created by a bill or resolution are appointed in accordance with the bill or resolution.

A joint select committee may be created by a bill or a concurrent resolution. Alternatively, the Speaker of the House or the President of the Senate may initiate the process to create a joint select committee by reading a message creating the committee before that house. If both houses vote to approve the message, the committee is created as specified in the message, and the President and the Speaker appoint the members from their respective houses. A joint select committee may consider and conduct hearings on one or more bills or joint or concurrent resolutions and may amend or substitute any of them.

Joint Committees

Any committee that serves both houses of the General Assembly is technically a joint committee. The term, however, usually refers to comparable standing committees of both houses meeting together in joint session. The objective of such meetings is to allow committees of both houses to hear testimony simultaneously and thereby expedite the progress of a bill. Although termed "joint committees," these bodies simply consist of the membership of both a Senate committee and a House committee. Neither committee surrenders any authority or ability to act separately on the legislation before it. After the joint committee concludes its deliberations, either committee may call additional witnesses or recall the same witnesses heard at the joint hearing. Joint committees of this type are not created often. On rare occasions, an ad hoc joint committee may be formed to consider and make recommendations concerning a particular proposal or issue.

Study Committees

A study committee is a committee created to study a specific problem or issue. Such committees are usually one of three types. One type of study committee is created upon appointment by the Speaker of the House or the President of the Senate. This type of committee may consist of members of only the House or only the Senate or it may consist of members of

both houses. In the course of its work, the committee, with the permission of the Legislative Service Commission (LSC) chairperson and vice-chairperson, may utilize LSC staff. In other instances, it may retain private consultants. In most other respects, it functions in the same way as any other committee.

A second type of study committee is created by a resolution or act of the General Assembly. The committee may consist of legislators alone or of legislators and others, such as appointees of the Governor or representatives of various political subdivisions or interest groups. Usually, the resolution or act requires the committee to issue a report and to include recommendations. The resolution or act may authorize the committee to retain private consultants or to call upon LSC or a state agency for staff assistance. The LSC Director must provide staff assistance even in the absence of such language when requested by the chairperson and the vice-chairperson of LSC.

A third type is a study committee created by LSC to undertake a study of a given topic designated by the members of LSC. A study committee may originate from a resolution introduced in either house or on motion of an LSC member. If the request for a study committee is approved by LSC, members of both houses and both parties are appointed to the study committee by the LSC chairperson. LSC staff assists the committee. The committee may hold hearings, direct and supervise staff work, or provide general direction to the staff. The end product of the committee may be a committee report, an LSC staff report, or a bill. In some cases, there are separate committee and staff reports but, in others, the same report suffices for both committee and staff purposes.

Statutory Committees and Entities

Legislators also may serve on other entities that have been created by statute. Many of them have their own operating appropriations, have permanent staffs, and perform administrative functions. Some of these entities such as the Joint Committee on Agency Rule Review, the Correctional Institution Inspection Committee, the Joint Legislative Ethics Committee, and LSC include only legislative members. Others include both legislators and nonlegislators among their voting members. Some examples of these are the Capitol Square Review and Advisory Board, the Controlling Board, and the Ohio Retirement Study Council. Finally, some entities have both legislators and nonlegislators as members, but for these entities, the legislators serving on them do not have voting privileges. The Ohio Arts Council and the Ohio Expositions Commission are examples of this type. As members of this last group of statutory entities, legislators perform an oversight function while becoming better acquainted with issues and situations that may have legislative ramifications.

Standing Committees and Subcommittees of the 135th General Assembly

Senate

- Agriculture and Natural Resources
- Community Revitalization
- Education
- Energy and Public Utilities
- Finance
- Financial Institutions and Technology
- General Government
- Government Oversight
- Health
- Insurance
- Judiciary
- Local Government
- Medicaid
- Rules and Reference
- Small Business and Economic Opportunity
- Transportation
- Veterans and Public Safety
- Ways and Means
- Workforce and Higher Education

House of Representatives

- Agriculture
- Armed Services and Veterans Affairs
- Aviation and Aerospace
- Behavioral Health
- Civil Justice
- Commerce and Labor
- Constitutional Resolutions
- Criminal Justice
- Economic and Workforce Development
- Energy and Natural Resources
- Families and Aging
- Finance
 - Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources
 - Health and Human Services
 - Higher Education
 - Infrastructure and American Rescue Plan
 - Primary and Secondary Education
- Public Safety
- Transportation Financial Institutions
- Government Oversight
- Health Provider Services
- Higher Education
- Homeland Security
- Infrastructure
- Insurance
- Pensions
- Primary and Secondary Education
- Public Health Policy
- Public Utilities
- Rules and Reference
- State and Local Government
- Technology and Innovation
- Transportation
- Ways and Means

General Assembly Open Meetings Law and Public Records Law

While guiding legislation through the committee process, legislators need to be familiar with laws that directly affect the legislative process. In particular, the General Assembly Open Meetings Law addresses issues concerning access to and advance notification of certain meetings. The Public Records Law and the associated legislative confidentiality statute specify which records are considered public records available for public inspection and copying.

The General Assembly Open Meetings Law requires all meetings of any committee, other than the Joint Legislative Ethics Committee, to be public meetings.

General Assembly Open Meetings Law

The Ohio Constitution requires that the proceedings of each house of the General Assembly itself be open to the public unless $\frac{2}{3}$ of those present decide that secrecy is required. The General Assembly Open Meetings Law applies to committee meetings of the General Assembly. The Law generally requires all meetings of any committee to be open to the public at all times. “Committee” includes any committee of either house of the General Assembly, a joint committee of both houses, including a conference committee, or a subcommittee of any committee or joint committee. A “meeting” is any prearranged discussion of the public business of a committee by a majority of its members. However, the Law does not apply to certain meetings of the Joint Legislative Ethics Committee or to meetings of a caucus. (In this context, a “caucus” is defined as all of the members of either house of the General Assembly who are members of the same political party.)

Any formal action of a committee, including action relating to a bill or resolution, is invalid if it is taken in a meeting not open to the public or if it is taken in an open meeting but results from deliberations that took place in a meeting not open to the public.

The Law requires that minutes be prepared for each committee meeting and that each committee make the minutes of its meetings available for public inspection. Each committee also must establish a reasonable method of notifying the public of the time and place of all regularly scheduled meetings and of the time, place, and purpose of all special meetings. The method must provide that, upon request and payment of a reasonable fee, any person may receive reasonable advance notification of all meetings at which a specific type of public business will be discussed. No committee may hold a regular or special meeting without giving at least 24 hours’ advance notice to the news media that request notification.

The Law provides an exclusive remedy for violations of its provisions. Any person may bring an action in a court of common pleas for an injunction to enforce the Law, but the action must be brought within two years after the date of the alleged or threatened violation. If the court issues an injunction, it must order the committee that it enjoins to pay court costs and a \$500 civil forfeiture to the party that sought the injunction and, under certain conditions, may award to that party reasonable attorney’s fees.

A member of a committee who knowingly violates an injunction may be removed from office in an action brought in the court of common pleas for that purpose by the Franklin County Prosecuting Attorney or by the Attorney General.

Unless specifically excepted under the law, all records kept by a public office are open to public inspection and copying.

Public Records Law

The Public Records Law generally requires that all public records be promptly prepared and made available for inspection upon request by any person at all reasonable times during regular business hours. Subject to certain limitations, a public office or person responsible for public records must make copies available at cost within a reasonable period of time. The Law broadly defines a “public record” as any record kept by any public office, including, but not limited to, state, county, city, village, township, school district units, and any record pertaining to the delivery of educational services by an alternative school. However, the Law and other Revised Code provisions exempt specified types of records and information from the Law’s inspection and copying requirements. A “record” is a public record subject to those requirements only if it is a document, device, or item, regardless of physical form or characteristic, including an electronic record, that is created or received by or comes under the jurisdiction of a public office and that serves to document the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities of the office.

The Law authorizes a person allegedly aggrieved by the failure of a public office to comply with the Law to either file a complaint with the clerk of the Court of Claims or a clerk of the court of common pleas, or file a mandamus action to obtain a judgment that orders compliance. The mandamus action may be commenced in the appropriate court of common pleas or court of appeals, or in the Supreme Court of Ohio. Under certain conditions, the court may award court costs, reasonable attorney’s fees, and specified damages to the person who filed the action.

The General Assembly and its legislative agencies are public offices subject to the Law’s provisions, and their records must be available for public inspection and copying unless they fall under one of the specified exceptions to the Law. Certain documents specific to the work of General Assembly members are confidential. They include documents provided by members to LSC staff and other legislative agencies in the LSC budget group, and documents prepared for members by LSC staff and those other legislative agencies. Confidentiality of information is discussed in more detail in [Chapter 9](#).