



Who Are Wisconsin Legislators?

Wisconsin's government is not a "pure democracy," that is, one where the people directly govern public affairs. When the U.S. Constitution was being debated, James Madison warned against the dangers of a pure democracy. Madison called instead for a representative republic in which the ideas of the people are refined "through the medium of a chosen body of citizens." This has been the system of government at the federal level and in every state for more than two centuries. In Wisconsin, this system is provided for in article IV, section 1, of our constitution, which requires that "the legislative power shall be vested in a senate and assembly."

The Wisconsin senate consists of 33 members elected to four-year terms. The assembly has 99 members, elected to two-year terms. These individuals, according to Madison's theory, are citizens "whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations." This is a great responsibility. It raises the question, "Who are our legislators?" Who are these people whom we choose to govern our affairs?

DISTRICTS

For legislators to best reflect the diversity of the state, each member is chosen from a separate district. The state is divided into 33 senate

districts, each of which elects one senator. Each senate district also contains three assembly districts, each of which elects one representative, for a total of 99. Every ten years, after the federal census, the districts are adjusted so that each has roughly the same population. Areas of the state with low population density have large districts, and areas with more people have smaller districts. After the 2000 census, districts were created so that each senator represents about 162,536 people and each representative represents about 54,179 people. In September of every even-numbered year, the voters of each district nominate candidates from each party to run for the legislature from the district. In November, the voters elect one of the nominated candidates to represent them in the next session of the legislature the following January.

SEX AND RACE

Of the 33 senators serving in the 2007 legislature, 25 are men and 8 are women. Two are African American. In the assembly, 77 are men and 22 are women. Six are African American and one is Hispanic. According to recent census estimates, this means that African Americans are represented roughly in proportion to their share of the population (5.7 percent), while women (50.6 percent) and Hispanics (4.5 percent) are under-

represented. Representation of these groups in the legislature is a relatively recent phenomenon. Only one African American sat in the legislature before 1945. The number has gradually increased since then. There were no Hispanics until 1999. Women were granted full

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voting rights in 1920, and the first women legislators served in the 1925 session. Nevertheless, few women served until the 1970s. (The term "assemblyman" was used for all legislators in the assembly until 1969 when the legislature enacted a change to using the term "representative.") No women served in the senate until 1975. The number of women increased rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s, peaking at 11 in the 1999 senate and 33 in the 1989 assembly. Since then the number has leveled off and decreased slightly.

AGE

Every legislator must be a qualified elector of the district he or she represents, meaning the legislator must be at least 18 years old and reside in his or her district. At the start of the 2007 session, the average age in the senate was 54; the oldest senator was 79 and the youngest 36. Two-thirds of the senators were at least 50. The assembly has traditionally been

younger. At the beginning of 2007, the average age in that house was 50; the oldest was 79 and the youngest was 28.

The oldest legislator ever, as far as can be determined, was Senator Philip Downing of Amberg, who was 84 at the end of the 1955 session. The youngest legislator ever was Representative Michael Elconin of Milwaukee, who was 19 years old when he was inaugurated in January 1973.

The average age of members has changed over the years in response to larger political and demographic trends. Legislators were generally younger during the early years of the state. In 1859, senators averaged 41 years old and assemblymen 39. By the 1870s, the average age had increased to the mid-40s. By the 1940s, it was over 50 for both houses. The average age declined sharply in the 1970s, reaching a low of 43 in the senate in 1977 and 41 in the assembly in 1975. The average age has gradually increased since then.

EDUCATION

As a group, legislators are better educated than the population of the state as a whole. While fewer than one-fourth of Wisconsinites have a college degree, 28 of 33 senators and 69 of 99 representatives do. Ten senators and 37 representatives have advanced degrees. The educational attainment of members has been gradually increasing. As recently as 1945, barely half of senators and fewer than a fifth of assemblymen had college degrees.

OCCUPATION

Traditionally, farmers and lawyers dominated the legislature. For decades, around half of all members were one or the other. In 1959, for example, 12 senators were

lawyers and 7 were farmers; 26 assemblymen were lawyers and 22 were farmers. This is less true now. In 2007, the senate had just three of each. The assembly had 11 lawyers and 5 farmers.

The more diverse economy of today is reflected in the occupations of modern legislators. Among the senators are a bricklayer, a software executive, a nurse, a farm manager, a feed and seed dealer, and a baseball team owner. The assembly includes 15 small business owners, two teachers, a realtor, a certified financial planner, a restaurant owner, and a labor union executive. Since both the length of the legislative session and the amount of compensation have increased in recent decades, many members have begun to consider themselves full-time legislators. In 2007, 12 senators and 38 representatives chose this designation.

PARTISAN COMPOSITION

The 2007 legislature was pretty evenly divided between the two major parties, with the senate having 18 Democrats and 15 Republicans, and the assembly 52 Republicans and 47 Democrats. This close partisan split has been typical in recent decades. Only rarely in the past 50 years has either party controlled two-thirds of either house of the legislature. During much of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Republican Party dominated the legislature, with the great political battles of those times often taking place within that party. During this period, the Progressive and Socialist parties sometimes shared the political battlefield with the Republicans and Democrats. No third party has been represented in the legislature since 1947, and the two major parties have competed fairly equally since 1959.

LEADERSHIP

Members elect a president to lead the senate. Prior to 1979, the lieutenant governor served as president, but usually ceded the gavel to the president pro tempore elected by the members. The highest ranking officer in the assembly is the speaker, who is elected by the membership. In examining the men—they have all been men—who have served in these two positions, a contrast between the houses is evident. The senate has tended in the last 50 years to elect older men with a great deal of experience in the senate, while the assembly has elected younger men with a moderate amount of experience. This reflects a pattern that has held quite uniformly over the past 50 years. With two exceptions, the president of the senate has been a farmer or an attorney. The average age of the president at the start of session has been 60.76 years. The average president has had 11.6 sessions of experience in the senate. The assembly, on the other hand, has elected a full-time legislator as its leader in 10 of the past 25 sessions. In seven sessions, the speaker was an attorney. The average age of the speaker has been 41.2 years at the beginning of the session, and speakers have had an average of 5.56 sessions of assembly experience. Only once in the past 50 years—the 1995 session—has the speaker of the assembly been older than the president of the senate.

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Study Questions

1	In each legislative session, how many legislators serve Wisconsin? How many people does each legislator represent?	
2	How are leaders chosen for the assembly and senate?	
3	Why would representative democracy be preferred to direct democracy?	
4	Identify demographic changes in the membership of the legislature. What is the trend?	
5	Based on trends in demographic changes, predict the effects of increasing the average age of legislators.	
6	Due to lengthened legislative sessions and increased compensation, more legislators consider themselves full-time. Is this a good or bad development?	

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Study Questions in the Cognitive Domain

1	In each legislative session, how many legislators serve Wisconsin? How many people does each legislator represent?	There are 99 members of the assembly and 33 members of the senate. Members of the assembly represent 54,179 people, and senators represent 162,536 people.	Cognition
2	How are leaders chosen for the assembly and senate?	Each house of the legislature elects its own leaders. The senate elects a president, and the assembly elects a speaker.	Comprehension
3	Why would representative democracy be preferred to direct democracy?	In a direct democracy, those who make decisions (the voters) possess exactly the average intellect, ethics, and patriotism. In a representative democracy, voters choose legislators whom they believe possess better than average intellect, ethics, and patriotism.	Application
4	Identify demographic changes in the membership of the legislature. What is the trend?	Members of the legislature are older and better educated than in the past, and the legislature has members from both sexes and from Wisconsin’s major racial groups.	Analysis
5	Based on trends in demographic changes, predict the effects of increasing the average age of legislators.	Older members will be more likely to have better education and more relevant experience to guide them in making decisions about public policy; however, they may be less in touch with newer developments in society.	Synthesis
6	Due to lengthened legislative sessions and increased compensation, more legislators consider themselves full-time. Is this a good or bad development?	The answer could be “good,” because members can devote their full attention to legislative duties, or “bad” because members bring less real-world experience to the job.	Evaluation