



## Conflict in the Wisconsin Legislature

Elected officials spend a lot of time arguing, and the members of the Wisconsin Legislature are no exception. The most divisive and heated debates tend to generate the most media coverage and discussion. A common criticism of all politicians is that they too often get bogged down in disagreements and fail to address the big issues of the day. But, taking a broader view, it becomes clear that conflict in the legislature is not necessarily an anomaly or a problem to fix. Rather, some of the basic functions of the legislature are to gather opposing viewpoints, debate them, and attempt to forge consensus.

Conflict is often a useful tool to stimulate debate, achieve the common good, and prevent any one entity from becoming too powerful. Indeed, our system of representative democracy includes many examples of built-in conflict. The system of checks and balances put in place by the founding fathers essentially places the three branches of government in constant conflict with each other, preventing any one from dominating. Courtroom trials in the United States are another example of conflict being built into the system: two sides are pitted against each other, each making its own case and attacking the opponent's. This type of conflict is considered effective at achieving fair outcomes.

Legislative bodies can be thought of as temples of conflict; they exist

in part to confront disagreements and eventually mold them into bills and laws that reflect the common will. To this end, the constitution, the statutes, and legislative rules all shape the legislature's structure and process in ways that channel societal conflict into good public policy.

### WHAT CREATES CONFLICT?

Imagine a legislator standing among her colleagues, speaking passionately about a piece of pending legislation. "This bill is wrong for the state of Wisconsin," she says. "It goes against our most basic values. It will harm the people of Wisconsin, and it must not pass." Now one of her colleagues takes the floor. "We must pass this bill," he argues. "Its benefits are clear and numerous. Not passing this bill would be a failure of the legislature to do what's best for the state of Wisconsin."

The example above is fictional, but it illustrates the types of debates often heard in legislatures across the country. Debates like this can lead to legislators being criticized for "bickering," "gridlock," or "playing politics." But are disagreements symptoms of a problem or signs that the system is working?

Legislative conflict is constant, and it is important to consider the roots

of the conflict. To put it simply, conflict comes from us, the people of Wisconsin.

The 99 representatives and 33 senators of the Wisconsin Legislature represent the state's 5 million-plus residents. Wisconsin is by no

### To put it simply, conflict comes from us, the people of Wisconsin.

means a homogeneous state, and its residents hold a wide variety of opinions on a wide variety of issues. Differences in demographics, philosophy, and politics are among the factors that can lead to conflict among Wisconsin's residents and the legislature.

Demographics are, broadly, characteristics of a population, such as age, race, income, gender, and education. One example of demographics contributing to conflict is the differing interests of people living in urban versus rural areas. Urban residents likely have an interest in seeing state government address issues that affect them, such as traffic, urban planning, and overcrowded schools. Rural residents likely have a different set of priorities based on issues that affect them, such as agricultural policies, tourism, and environmental issues. Even if the differing interests of rural and urban populations do not directly contradict each other, they

may have to compete for the state's limited resources.

Basic differences in philosophy are also grounds for conflict among Wisconsin's residents and in the legislature. Philosophical differences could include disagreements on the proper relationship between state government and the public or the general priorities that state government should have. Basic philosophical disagreements can often mirror political conflict, but the two are not synonymous.

Political ideology may be the most obvious source of conflict to Wisconsin residents and their representatives in the legislature. The two dominant parties in Wisconsin, Democrats and Republicans, have broadly different philosophies on many major issues. Each party has an agenda it seeks to enact through popular support. Because each party believes its agenda is likely to be more beneficial than the opposition's, conflict is inevitable.

Aside from demographics, philosophy, and politics, there are many other factors that can lead to political conflict. These include economic interests, religion, and life experiences.

Conflict may arise in the legislature because legislative action can have immediate and direct consequences on Wisconsin residents. In general, the legislature sets the rules by which everyone must play. The legislature decides what actions will be legal or illegal, how much residents will pay in taxes, and how to spend that tax revenue. Actions taken at the state level can directly impact issues that people care strongly about, for example, smok-

ing in public places or carrying concealed weapons. Local politics can more directly affect people's lives than national politics, even though the latter receives the bulk of the attention.

There are many sources of conflict among Wisconsin residents, and state legislators must weigh competing interests, wrestle with different philosophies, and work within the party system to make public policy for the whole state.

### GETTING THINGS DONE

The rules and traditions of the Wisconsin Legislature seek to redirect the inevitable differences in opinion and priorities of legislators into compromise and public policy. Parliamentary law also helps many legislative bodies handle conflict. According to *Robert's Rules of Order*, parliamentary procedure is the best method for legislatures, "with due regard for every member's opinion, to arrive at the general will on the maximum number of questions...in a minimum amount of time and under all kinds of internal climate."

The legislature does, in fact, pass many bills each session relatively quickly and without contentious debate. Bills of narrow scope, limited applicability, or widespread popularity can often gain broad bipartisan support. In the 2007–09 session, 242 bills became law, many without major conflict. For example, Assembly Bill 539, which lowered the minimum age from 17 to 16 for a person donating blood, passed through both the assembly and senate on voice votes (often a sign of an uncontroversial bill).

Bills of far-reaching implications or related to hot-button issues, such as

the state budget bill, tend to generate the most visible and heated conflict in the legislature.

The debate over the 2007–09 state budget was a highly publicized conflict. Legislative leaders from both parties could not agree on a compromise, and the budget bill was passed months beyond its deadline. The media, the public, and even some members of the legislature expressed frustration over the extended negotiations.

The Wisconsin Legislature often makes its debate and conflict open and accessible to the public. When a bill is introduced, anybody can view it online and publicize an opinion. Similarly, committee hearings, which are notable as a venue for conflict resolution, are a public forum where legislators and members of the public can testify on a bill's pros and cons.

The legislative process culminates in floor debate and voting. During floor debate legislators can voice their opinions, and their speeches are televised on a public affairs network and posted on the Internet. A final vote may be the legislature's most decisive method of conflict resolution. Every legislator expresses his or her opinion in the form of an up or down vote. The votes are tallied and the bill has either passed or failed to pass.

Conflict is natural in democratic society, and a key virtue of the legislature is to channel conflict into good public policy.

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*Governing Wisconsin: "Conflict in the Wisconsin Legislature"*

*Study Questions*

1	What are some of the causes of conflict in society?	
2	How can demographic differences increase conflict in society?	
3	What mechanisms of the legislature help it moderate or manage conflict and protect the rights of minorities?	
4	Why would argument be a good thing in a legislative body?	
5	How can a legislature merge competing ideas into a new and better public policy?	
6	Does the legislative process provide an effective and efficient way to resolve conflict in a society?	

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## Study Questions in the Cognitive Domain

1	What are some of the causes of conflict in society?	Differences in demographics, philosophy, religion, political ideology, or economic interests can create political conflict.	Cognition
2	How can demographic differences increase conflict in society?	People with demographic differences such as age, race, wealth, or religion are more likely to have differing interests, which can lead to conflict.	Comprehension
3	What mechanisms of the legislature help it moderate or manage conflict and protect the rights of minorities?	Each member of the legislature can introduce bills, speak on bills, and offer amendments to bills. Committee hearings bring all sides of a question to the table. Legislative rules are designed to channel conflict into agreement and policy making.	Application
4	Why would argument be a good thing in a legislative body?	Conflict is normal in society and is not always bad. Legislative debate can better define the points for and against a proposed change in the law.	Analysis
5	How can a legislature merge competing ideas into a new and better public policy?	Proposed legislation usually has pros and cons that affect each member and his or her district differently, so the members actually have interests at stake. Committee hearings and floor debate can modify a proposal to optimize the benefits of a bill and decrease costs.	Synthesis
6	Does the legislative process provide an effective and efficient way to resolve conflict in a society?	Yes, a legislature represents all of the people of the state, so it can encompass the conflict in society. A legislature provides an effective and efficient method for peacefully resolving societal issues.	Evaluation