

LRB
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State of Wisconsin

LEGISLATIVE REFERENCE BUREAU

100 NORTH HAMILTON STREET
P. O. BOX 2037
MADISON, WI 53701-2037

ATTY. PETER J. DYKMAN
ACTING CHIEF

LAWRENCE S. BARISH
DIRECTOR OF REFERENCE AND LIBRARY

LEGAL SECTION: (608) 266-3561
LEGAL FAX: (608) 264-8522

REFERENCE SECTION: (608) 266-0341
REFERENCE FAX: (608) 266-5648

Informational Memorandum 97-1

April 22, 1997

Legislative Voting Records

The Legislative Reference Bureau is frequently asked to provide the voting records of various members of the Wisconsin Legislature. Over 1,700 bills are introduced in a typical session, and any one of these may receive several roll call votes. LRB research staff time is limited to the basic services described below, but we will provide assistance to those wishing to do more research themselves.

LRB Services Related to Legislative Voting Records

- 1) In the case of a specific proposal, the LRB will provide the voting record(s) of one or all members. Unless otherwise requested, the report will cover the roll call vote on final consideration in each house, i.e., the vote on passage or concurrence.
- 2) The LRB does not attempt to provide voting records on "all important measures", "all proposals relating to [subject]" or similar blanket requests that require a subjective judgment about which votes to report or not report.
- 3) The information provided for a specific roll call is based on the official record. It will report only that the member voted "aye" or "no", abstained from voting or was absent. The LRB will not speculate on the legislator's reasons for voting.
- 4) The LRB staff cannot provide the voting record of all members on a variety of proposals or of a particular member on all proposals.

Where is the Record?

How members voted is a matter of public record. The official record of a vote is contained in the daily Senate Journal and Assembly Journal. Each roll call is noted as it occurs in the course of legislative action, so the votes are scattered throughout the journal pages. The date and page number in the journal for a particular roll call can be found by consulting the Index to the weekly *Bulletin of the Proceedings of the Wisconsin Legislature*.

Copies of the daily journals and the weekly *Bulletin* are available by subscription and can usually be found at the public library; certain state, county or city government offices; or the Legislative Reference Bureau, located at 100 North Hamilton Street, Madison. The current *Bulletin* is available at: <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/billtrack.html>.

How to Check a Roll Call

The official *Bulletin of Proceedings* is the guide for locating voting records in the daily journal. Issued weekly during session, it is cumulative and lists all of the legislation introduced in each house

in numerical order. It also provides the legislative history of each measure. This history is a chronological record of every step taken in the legislative process of considering a given proposal.

A roll call vote is indicated by a numeric statement of the "aye" and "no" votes cast. The listing gives the date of the vote and the page in the daily journal where a detailed breakdown of the vote is recorded. When no numerical tally of "ayes" and "noes" appears in the *Bulletin*, the action was taken by voice vote and there was no roll call.

Difficulties and Pitfalls

1) A roll call vote is not taken on every step in the legislative process. There may be many roll calls on a particular measure – or none at all. A roll call is taken only if it is requested by 1/6 of the members or if it is required by the constitution, statutes or legislative rules.

2) All roll calls are not equally significant. Some votes may be on nonsubstantive procedural matters. Others are on amendments. Usually the vote on final passage or concurrence is the one on which most reliance is placed, but this is not necessarily a valid assumption. The crucial vote may be over a procedural move or an amendment. The vote on final passage might not reflect a member's attitude at all.

3) The vote on any particular question may be deceiving. For instance, to move for reconsideration of a measure, the member must have voted with the majority. A member will sometimes vote with the majority in opposition to his or her convictions so that, if the need arises, it will be possible to make a motion for reconsideration.

4) Check the question on which the vote is being taken. Sometimes the question requires a negative vote if the member wishes to be recorded in favor of the proposal. For example, if the motion has a negative effect, such as indefinite postponement, rejection of an amendment or nonconcurrence, the member may vote "no" to support the measure. On some procedural motions it is virtually impossible to determine whether a vote is for or against the proposal itself.

5) Failure to vote does not necessarily mean that members were absent from the session. They may have been temporarily away from their seats.

6) "Pair" voting is an arrangement between two members by which they agree in advance to be automatically recorded on opposite sides of an issue. This might happen if one or both will be absent when the vote is taken. "Pairs" are not part of the actual vote count, but they do serve to make the members' positions known.

7) Occasionally the mechanical processes go awry and the vote is recorded erroneously. The error will be corrected by an entry in the journal subsequent to the roll call in question. Similarly, a member may later ask to have his or her vote changed. This request may be granted, but it has no affect on the numerical tally of the original vote.

Unofficial Compilations

Various private groups compile the voting records of members on selected proposals of special interest to the group. The validity of these compilations is sometimes criticized as biased because of the selection of specific legislation and the interpretation applied to a member's vote as being "right", "wrong" or "in the public interest". They should be used with caution.