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# The State of Wisconsin

## LEGISLATIVE REFERENCE BUREAU

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### LEGISLATIVE VOTING RECORDS

The Legislative Reference Bureau is frequently asked to provide the voting record of members of the Wisconsin Legislature. Although no officially prepared compilation exists, the information can be compiled from printed sources by anyone who has the time, energy and patience to attempt such a tabulation.

Because over 1,700 bills are introduced in a session, any one of which may receive several roll call votes, it is not possible for us to provide service outside of the limitations indicated below. If we can help you on this basis, please let us know.

#### Limitations of Legislative Reference Bureau Services

1) We will provide anyone with the voting record of a single member, or all the members, on a specific proposal. Unless otherwise requested, the vote reported will be the roll call on final consideration in each house; that is, the vote on passage and concurrence.

2) We do not attempt to provide voting records on "all important measures", "all proposals relating to schools" and similar blanket requests which require that we exercise judgment in selection.

3) We do not presume to know whether or not a vote was "in the public interest". The information which we can provide for a specific roll call will reflect the official record, which states the motion and the outcome. Thus, we can only state that the member voted "aye", voted "no", abstained from voting, or was absent.

4) We cannot furnish the staff time required to provide the voting record of all members on a variety of proposals, or of a particular member on all proposals. If this is the information you seek, then read the rest of this memorandum which is designed to explain how that information can be extracted from the official records; i.e. the daily SENATE JOURNAL or ASSEMBLY JOURNAL.

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### **Where Is the Record?**

How members voted is a matter of public record. The official record is contained in the daily Journals of the Senate and Assembly. Each individual roll call is noted in the Journal as it occurs in the course of legislative action. The votes are therefore scattered throughout the Journals. The date and page number in the Journal where a specific roll call is recorded is found by consulting *The Bulletin of the Proceedings of the Wisconsin Legislature*. An index to all legislation is compiled as part of the Bulletin and is issued as a separate volume when the final edition of the Bulletin is published at the end of session.

Copies of the daily Journals and the Bulletin are distributed to each member of the legislature and other officials and agencies; in fact, to everyone subscribing to the state legislative service. These sources may be available to you locally at the public library, or perhaps in some office of state, county or city government. In Madison, anyone is welcome to utilize the facilities of the Legislative Reference Bureau (100 N. Hamilton Street).

### **How To Check a Roll Call**

The official Bulletin of Proceedings is the guide for locating where the daily Journals record how members voted on a particular proposal. The Bulletin is generally issued weekly during session and is cumulative. It lists all of the legislation of each house in numerical order and provides the procedural 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 was taken if the entry in the record of legislative action in the Bulletin concludes with a numeric statement of the "aye" and "no" votes cast.

The number listed to the extreme right of this item is the page reference in the daily Journal where a detailed breakdown of this vote is recorded. The number in the far left column is the date on which the action occurred. Be sure to note the house and date accurately so that you check the proper Journal.

When no numerical tally of the "ayes" and "noes" appears following the action in the Bulletin, the action was taken by voice vote and no roll call is recorded.

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### Difficulties and Pitfalls

1) A roll call vote is not taken on every step in the legislative process of each proposal. 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. A seemingly minor issue over a procedural move or an amendment may provide the crucial vote, and the vote on final passage might not reflect a member's attitude at all.

3) The vote on any particular question may be deceiving. Because of the intricacies of parliamentary procedure, for instance, a member may vote with the majority in opposition to personal convictions so that if the need arises the member will be able to make a motion to have the vote reconsidered.

4) Do not be confused by the nature of the question on which the vote is being taken. Sometimes the wording of the question requires a negative vote if the member wishes to be recorded in favor of the proposal. This occurs, for example, if the motion is on indefinite postponement, rejection of an amendment or nonconcurrence. On some procedural motions it is virtually impossible to determine whether a vote is for or against a proposal. A vote on a motion that would delay consideration may be supported by a member who favors a proposal because the member senses that at that point in time it is not possible to secure approval of the proposal.

5) Failure to vote does not necessarily mean that a member was absent from the session. A member may have been temporarily away from his or her seat in chambers.

6) "Pair" voting is an arrangement between 2 members by which they agree to be recorded on opposite sides of an issue being voted upon if one or both are absent when the vote is taken. The "pairs" are not part of the actual vote count, but serve to make the member's position 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. While this request may be granted, it has no effect on the numerical tally of the original vote.

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### **Unofficial Compilations**

Various private agencies compile the voting records of members on selected proposals in which such organizations have a special interest. The validity of these compilations is sometimes criticized because the selection of specific legislation and the interpretation applied to a member's vote as being "right", "wrong" or "in the public interest" reflect the bias of the compiler.

The library of the Legislative Reference Bureau includes examples of some of these unofficial compilations. They are cataloged under the subject heading "Legislation — Voting Records" (328.01).