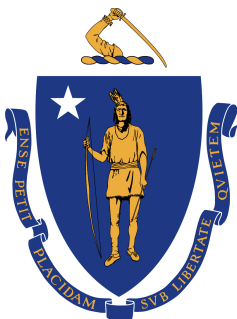


The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

– General Court –



GLOSSARY

[www.malegislature.gov/Bills & Laws/Glossary](http://www.malegislature.gov/Bills%20%26%20Laws/Glossary)

July 30, 2024

GENERAL COURT GLOSSARY

— A —

Act

A bill that has become law.

Acts and Resolves

A compilation of the bills and resolves that become law.

Ad Hoc Committee

A committee formed for some special purpose.

Adjournment

Termination of a daily session.

Administrative Agency

A state agency or department.

Adoption

The question on matters relating directly to the legislative body requiring only one vote. Usually associated with amendments, resolutions or orders.

Adverse Report

A committee recommendation that a matter “ought not to pass”.

Amendment

A proposed modification to a legislative document that is recommended by a committee or legislator for consideration in a daily session. *see also Governor’s Message.

Appeal the Decision of the Chair

A parliamentary procedure for a legislator to challenge the decision of the presiding officer.

Appropriations Bill

A budget bill. An appropriations bill determines how Commonwealth resources are allocated. If a tax is included within an appropriation bill it is

considered to be a “money bill” in addition to being an appropriations bill.
*see also Money Bill.

Approved by the Governor

The signature of the Governor on an engrossed and enacted bill or passed resolve.

— B —**Backing**

A data string that contains the name(s) of the primary sponsor(s), the words “petition” or “joint petition,” the petitioner’s name(s), type of document (bill, resolve, etc.), a brief description of document (may be the same or similar to the title), the committee reference and, if applicable, local approval information.

Biennial Session

The two-year period between the convening of the General Court in its first meeting and its prorogation or final adjournment.

Bill

Document calling for a permanent change in law while under consideration prior to becoming an act.

Bill History

The list or record of actions taken on a legislative document during a biennial session.

Bill Number

A number assigned by the Clerk to a legislative document that is then used instead of the docket number for identification purposes.

Branch of Origin

If a committee report is favorable or a bill is substituted for a matter that received an adverse report, the Chamber to which the legislative document is first reported or substituted is the branch of origin, unless the legislative document is referred by the Clerk, under Joint Rule 1E, to the Committee on Health Care Financing (“HCF”), then the branch of origin is the Chamber receiving the next favorable report on the document. Therefore, “Branch of Origin” is the Chamber in which the legislative matter has its first reading.

By Request

Indicates that the legislative document does not have a legislator as a petitioner and is being filed by a legislator under a citizen or group of free petition.

— C —

Calendar

An agenda for each day of a formal session.

Calendar Item Number

The unique number assigned by a Clerk to a legislative document being placed on the Calendar.

Caucus

Meeting of legislators, who are of the same political party or who share a common interest, to decide policy and course of action.

Chambers

The two meeting places of the House and Senate where the formal business of the day is conducted. Chamber galleries are open to the public.

Clerk

The person elected by the members of each Chamber who is designated as the official Parliamentarian of that Chamber. Responsible for the day-to-day operation of the Clerk's Office.

Clerks' Offices (Assistants and Staff)

The office of the Senate Clerk or the office of the House Clerk are responsible for processing all legislative documents and maintaining legislative records.

Committee

One of the 34 Joint Standing Committees, 11 House Standing Committees, or 11 Senate Standing Committees. Committees, their membership sizes, and appointment procedures are set forth in the Rules and may be changed periodically.

Committee Action

A committee's action on a legislative document.

Committee Assignment

The committees to which a legislator is assigned.

Committee Member

A legislator assigned to a particular committee.

Committee Reference

The committee to which a Clerk refers a legislative document.

Committee Report

A committee's recommendation on a legislative document that has been referred to the committee.

Committee Staff

People who work for a committee under the direction of the committee Chairman.

Committees on Bills in the Third Reading

Committees in both the Senate and House that are empowered to examine and correct bills and resolves prior to their final reading in the Senate or House; resolutions prior to their adoption; and, amendments to bills, resolves and resolutions before a branch for concurrence after adoption by another branch.

Concurrence

Agreement by one branch with an action originating in the other branch.

Conference Committee

A committee composed of three members of each branch for the purpose of resolving differences between House and Senate versions of the same bill. The report of a Conference Committee must be voted up or down by each branch and may not be amended.

Constitutional Convention

A term commonly used to describe the holding of a "Joint Session to Consider Amendments to the Constitution", which is a meeting of the Senate and House of Representatives in the House Chamber to consider and vote on proposed Constitutional Amendments. The procedure is governed by special rules adopted by both branches. [Also known as a "Con-Con"]. *see also Joint Session.

Cover Sheet

A sheet used to cover a legislative document containing key information about the action taken on that legislative document.

— D —

Daily List

List of committee hearings, giving the committee name, measures to be considered, and the time and room number of each hearing.

Date Filed

The date that a legislative document is submitted to or filed with a Clerk.

Debate

Formal discussion on a matter before a legislative body.

Discharge Report

A committee report filed with a Clerk and recommending reference to another committee if the original committee believes that a legislative document referred to it contains subject-matter that is outside its jurisdiction.

Dissenter

A committee member who disagrees with a proposed committee report and requests that fact to be noted on the report.

Division (House only)

The House is divided into four separate divisions separated by aisles. Members of the House are assigned to a desk equipped with an electronic voting station. Division designations are used by the Speaker to identify members wishing to be recognized by the Chair or for the taking of standing votes.

Docket Entry

A form or record containing the following data about a legislative document: docket number; refile number; refile year; date filed; by request; document type; type of legislation; primary sponsor; petitioners and related information; brief description (or title); and, a blank to be later filled in with the bill number.

Docket Number

A chronological number assigned to the legislative document upon receipt by the Clerk that is used to identify the document prior to the assignment of a bill number.

Drafting

The preparation of the text of a legislative document prior to its being filed with a Clerk.

— E —

Emergency Preamble

A preamble to a legislative document, setting forth the facts constituting an emergency and stating that the law is necessary to take effect immediately for the preservation of the public peace, health, safety or convenience.

Enactment

Final passage of a bill by the House or Senate.

Engrossed Bill or Resolve

Final version of a bill or resolve as passed to be engrossed by the House or Senate.

Engrossing Division

A joint office responsible for, among other things, preparing legislative documents on special parchment for final passage.

Executive Session

A committee meeting during which the committee members decide upon the report type to be filed with a Clerk for consideration by the larger body and (if discharge, favorable, study or extension) to which Chamber the report will be submitted. At such meetings, only committee members testify.

Extension Order

An order extending the reporting deadline for a committee.

— F —

Favorable Report

Any of the several variations of a committee recommendation that a matter “ought to pass”.

Filibuster

A legislative maneuver to delay action on a piece of legislation in which those engaged in debate refuse to relinquish the floor for a vote on the matter at hand.

First Reading

The first reading of a legislative document receiving a favorable report from a committee occurs automatically when the committee report appears in the journal of the branch of origin. It is also considered the first reading when a bill or resolve is submitted for an adverse committee report. *see also Branch of Origin.

Formal Session

Meeting to consider and act upon reports of committees, messages from the Governor, petitions, orders, enactments, papers from the other branch, matters in the Orders of the Day, and various other matters that may be controversial in nature and during which roll call votes may be taken and debate may take place.

— G —

General Court

The formal name for the Massachusetts State Legislature.

General Law

Existing law that applies generally to the Commonwealth and its citizens. *see also Special Law.

Governor's Message

A legislative document submitted by the Governor or Acting Governor that may include recommended legislation, a veto, or a recommended amendment to legislation passed by the House and Senate, as well as any communication to the General Court from the Governor.

— H —

House and Senate Rules

Order of procedure adopted by each Chamber at the beginning of each biennial session.

— I —

Informal Session

A daily session designated by the Speaker of the House and Senate President to consider reports of committees, enactments, papers from the other branches, amendments, matters in the Orders of the Day, and various other matters that are of a non-controversial nature.

Initiative Petition

A request for legislation or a Constitutional amendment filed with the Secretary of the Commonwealth by a specified number of signatures of registered voters and transmitted to the legislature, prior to submission (by state-wide election) to the people for approval or rejection [see Amendments to the Constitution, Art. LXVIII as amended by Art. LXXXI].

— J —

Joint Committees

Currently 34 committees, consisting of Senators and Representatives, responsible for holding public hearings and reporting on all legislative documents referred to them.

Joint Rule 10

Rule ordering that all matters referred to joint committees be reported out of committees by the third Wednesday in March of the second annual session and within 30 days on all matters referred to them on and after the third Wednesday in February of the second annual session of the General Court.

Joint Rule 33

Rule allowing the alteration, suspension or recession of joint rules by a concurrent $\frac{2}{3}$ vote of members present and voting. Some rules are suspended only by a $\frac{4}{5}$ vote and a very few by unanimous consent.

Joint Rules

Rules for the governing of the two bodies, adopted by both branches.

Joint Session

A meeting of both branches in Joint Session for the purposes of considering Constitutional amendments, initiative petitions, etc.

Journal

A record of the proceedings for the House, the Senate or a Joint Session for a particular daily session (which may include multiple legislative days), including legislative documents considered, amendments offered and votes taken.

— L —

Lay on Table

To temporarily lay aside the consideration of a specific legislative document or motion. *Senate only.

Legislation

A generic term used for legislative documents (bills, resolves, special acts, Governors' messages and department recommendations) filed with and pending before the General Court.

Legislative Aide

An assistant to a Legislator.

Legislative Document

Any document submitted for consideration or considered during the legislative process.

Legislative Year

The first legislative year starts with the opening of the biennial session and, unless concluded sooner, ends at midnight on the Tuesday before the first Wednesday of the following year. The second legislative year starts on the first Wednesday of the second year and, unless concluded sooner, ends at midnight on the Tuesday before the first Wednesday of the following year.

Legislator

A member of the House or Senate. There are 200 legislative districts (160 Representatives and 40 Senators).

Local Approval

The authorization required from an individual city or town that wishes, under home rule, to have the General Court consider legislation relative to that particular city or town action.

— M —

Massachusetts General Laws

All of the laws of Massachusetts of a general and permanent nature as embodied in the Official Edition of the Massachusetts General Laws.

Money Bill

A bill that transfers money or property from the people to the Commonwealth. Appropriation bills generally are not “money bills” under the Constitutional definition. A “money bill” has generally been referred to as a “tax bill” and, under the Constitution, can only originate in the House.

— N —

Non-concurrence

Disagreement by one Chamber with the action of the other Chamber.

— O —

Orders of the Day (Calendar)

Listing of most matters to be considered by the Senate and the House at each sitting.

Outside Section

A section of an appropriations bill that may deal with an existing line-item in an appropriation, but may also amend an existing law or create a new law.

Override

To overturn the Governor’s veto by a 2/3 vote of the members present in both the House and Senate.

— P —

Pass a Resolve

Final passage of a resolve by the House or Senate.

Petition

A request filed by one or, in some instances, two legislators briefly describing the nature of the proposed legislation and the objects sought by it, signed by one or more petitioners, and accompanied by a draft of the bill, order, proposal, resolutions or resolve embodying the legislation proposed.

Petitioner(s)

The name(s) of the person(s) advocating for legislation filed with the Clerk. May include the primary sponsor(s), other legislators and private citizens.

Pocket Veto

A veto resulting from the Governor's failure to sign a bill within 10 days following prorogation or dissolution of the General Court.

Point of Order

Challenge to a breach of Order or Rule.

Presenter

The legislator who is the primary sponsor of a measure.

Proposal

Document containing legislative or initiative amendments to the Constitution of the Commonwealth.

Prorogation

Termination of a legislative year by agreement of the Governor and both legislative bodies.

Public Hearing

A committee meeting during which the public may testify about particular legislative documents before said committee.

— Q —

Quorum

Twenty-one members in the Senate, eighty-one members in the House. Quorum is set by the State Constitution and by Rule. This represents a simple majority of legislative districts for the respective branches and is not altered by the existence of vacancies.

— R —

Recess

Temporary suspension of a session.

Recommittal

When a legislative document is returned to a committee for additional consideration within a given biennial session.

Reconsideration

Motion to return to and re-take a previous vote.

Referendum Petition

A petition signed by a specified number of voters to repeal a law enacted by the legislature and requesting that the legislation be suspended until the vote is taken.

Refile

A legislative document similar to or exactly the same as one that was presented to the General Court in a previous biennial year.

Refile Number

The bill number that was assigned to a legislative document from a previous biennial session that is being re-filed for the current session.

Report Due Date

The deadline by which a committee must report on a legislative document.

Report of Committee

Recommendation on a legislative matter by the committee to which it was referred.

Resolution

Document which may or may not accompany a petition, expressing an opinion of the sentiment of one or both Chambers of the General Court, used for congratulations, for memorializing the Congress of the United States regarding public questions, etc. Resolutions do not require the Governor's signature.

Resolve

Document proposing policy of a temporary nature, such as a payment from the State Treasury or establishing a study group.

Roll Call Vote

The “Yeas and Nays” votes recorded in the session.

Rules

Rules are generally adopted at the beginning of a biennial session, but may be amended, inserted or deleted during a biennial session. There are Senate Rules, House Rules and Joint Rules.

— S —

Senate and House Journals

Records of proceedings in each Chamber for each legislative day, including matters presented, matters considered, amendments offered and votes taken.

Session Law

An Act or Resolve passed during a legislative year.

Special Commission or Special Committee

A special commission or special committee established for a unique purpose, usually tasked with making an investigation and study with a deadline for filing a report.

Special Law

Legislative Act applying to a particular county, city, town or district, individual or group of individuals and not general in nature.

Standing Committees

Permanent committees in the Senate and House as well as Joint committees. Members and Chair appointed at the beginning of each two-year session.

Study Order

A committee recommendation to place a legislative document in a study.

Substitute

A measure recommended or offered as a replacement for another measure. Adoption of a substitute changes the bill number assigned to the subject-matter.

Substitute text

Text recommended for or offered as an amendment to a measure that simply replaces the text of the measure, but does not change its bill number. While the underlying measure retains the same bill number, a substitute text may be assigned a bill number for publication and identification purposes.

Substitution for an Adverse Report

Procedure by which a committee's adverse report is overturned on the floor of the House or Senate.

— T —**Third Reading**

The final reading of a legislative document in the House or Senate after the legislative document has been released from a Committee on Bills in the Third Reading or upon suspension of the Rules.

Time Filed

A data field recording the exact time a legislative document was filed with a Clerk.

Title

A brief synopsis assigned by the presenter to describe the contents of the legislation being filed. A title may sometimes be changed during the legislative process, so that it better describes the legislation.

Transmit to Secretary of State

Some legislative documents must be referred to the State Secretary to comply with provisions of law before they can be admitted for consideration by the General Court.

— U —**Unanimous Consent**

This occurs when no member objects to suspension of the Rules so that an action, which otherwise would be prohibited, may take place.

— V —

Veto

Governor's objection in writing to legislation enacted by the General Court. The legislation is returned to its branch of origin. It requires 2/3 affirmative vote in each Chamber to override a veto.

Voice Vote

Oral expression of the members when a question is submitted for their determination. Response is given by "Ayes" and "Nays" and the presiding officer states his/her decision as to which side prevails.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. How does an idea become a law?

A. See “How an Idea Becomes a Law” in the “Educate and Engage” section of the website for a description of the law-making process.

Q. Is there a way to track a bill that is under consideration during the current legislative session?

A. Proposals currently before the Legislature can be looked up by visiting the “Bills and Laws” section of the website. Among other information, you will see the bill’s current status, upcoming hearings and bill history.

Q. Can I view the full text of a bill?

A. Yes. Entire bills can be viewed by conducting a bill search in the “Bills and Laws” section of the website. Bills can be searched by several methods, including bill number, key word or phrase, as well as city or town.

Q. Where can I find existing Massachusetts laws?

A. General Laws, Session Laws and the Massachusetts Constitution can be viewed by clicking on the “Bills and Laws” tab of the website and then clicking on “Existing Laws”.

Q. Some words and phrases on your website are unfamiliar to me. Is there a glossary of legislative terms?

A. Yes. A glossary can be found at [www.malegislature.gov/Bills & Laws/Glossary](http://www.malegislature.gov/Bills%20%26%20Laws/Glossary)

Q. How do I find a law on a particular topic using the website?

A. A search of Massachusetts General Laws or Session Laws can be done in our “Bills & Laws” section, using keywords and phrases or chapter and sections numbers and by clicking on “Existing Laws”.

Q. Where can I go to find my legislator on the website?

A. Information about individual legislators, including your own Representative and Senator, can be found by clicking on the “People” tab. If you do not know who your legislators are, you can perform a search using your address. There is also a link to this same search function in the “Educate and Engage” section, under For Teachers and Kids.

Q. How many members are elected to the House of Representatives? How many members of the Senate are there? How are these numbers determined?

A. The Massachusetts General Court, the formal name for the Massachusetts State Legislature, is comprised of 160 House of Representatives districts and 40 Senate districts, as required by the Massachusetts Constitution. Representatives and Senators elected from these districts serve two-year terms.

Q. Are visitors allowed to observe the proceedings while the House or Senate is in session?

A. Yes. The House and Senate galleries, which are accessible from the 4th floor of the State House, offer balcony-level vantage points and are open to the public during legislative sessions. Sessions usually start at 11:00 A.M., while formal debate generally starts at 1:00 P.M.

Q. If I am unable to make it to Beacon Hill, will I be able to use my computer and watch legislative sessions from the State House online?

A. Yes. Live and archived webcasts of formal legislative sessions can be accessed via links in our “Events” section of the website.
