

FUNCTIONS OF A STATE LEGISLATOR

The chief function of a legislator is to enact laws. Each legislator represents a certain area as well as a number of individuals, referred to as constituents, who live in that area. In Minnesota, a state senator represents roughly 78,000 people, while a representative or house member represents approximately 39,000 people. There are 67 members in the Senate and 134 in the House. Senators' terms are four years (two years in the first election following redistricting) while House members terms are two years.

In their pursuit of enacting or passing laws it is often said that a legislator wears three hats, or plays three specific roles.

- 1) Each legislator represents a specific area or district. In this capacity it is important that a legislator be in tune with the specific interests and problems associated with his or her district. For example, some districts are primarily rural, others strictly urban, or suburban, while others contain pockets or combinations of all three.
- 2) Most legislators are either Democrats or Republicans. Their primary role is to serve their constituents, although they may also take into consideration their party's position when making decisions.
- 3) Each legislator must also look at an issue in terms of its effect on the entire state. In other words, "Is it good statewide policy and is it something I strongly believe in?"

Minnesota, like most states, has a part-time legislature. A legislative session is roughly five months long during odd-numbered years and three months during even-numbered years. During a legislative session a legislator's time is consumed with committee meetings, floor sessions, in which the entire membership of the respective Senate or House participate, office meetings with constituents, lobbyists, and other members, as well as responding to phone calls, mail and e-mail requests. Of utmost importance in the legislative process is the necessity of compromise. Each legislator spends many hours analyzing bills, discussing them in detail, and as a final step, ironing out key differences with other members as well as the other body.

Minnesota has a "Citizen Legislature" which means most members have other occupations in addition to being legislators. The most prevalent are attorneys, educators, farmers, or employment in the business sector. When the legislature adjourns, members return to their district to resume their other occupations.

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However, each member still spends numerous hours per week, often at night and on weekends, meeting with various groups such as teachers, labor organizations, business groups, senior citizens, town councils, municipal boards, etc. During an election year, a great deal of a legislator's time is also spent door knocking or visiting cafes and coffee shops, where information and ideas can be shared with individuals in a very direct, personal way.