



Resources for Massachusetts Activists

Jeanne M. Kempthorne, Progressive Democrats of Massachusetts

Our own *annus horribilis*, 2020, has made many of us determined to take a more active role in our democracy, and to pay closer attention to how and whether our government functions. While national politics has attracted and absorbed the attention and resources of many, the truth is that the policy and legislation developed at the state level affects our lives directly, immediately, and consequentially. Many of our problems can be and should be solved at the state level, so it is crucial that activists devote energy and attention to what is happening in their own state legislature.

This short resource guide is designed to help you stay on top of our state legislature and the people elected to represent us there.

How to find information on elections and candidates.

[Ballotpedia.org](https://www.ballotpedia.org) ("The Encyclopedia of American Politics") is an online, free resource which is a treasure trove of information about candidates for office, office holders, and election results at all levels of government. It also provides political news updates. Ballotpedia, a public charity under section 501(c)(3) of the tax code, is a neutral source of political information. The content is generated by professional writers, researchers, and analysts.

How to stay up-to-date on Massachusetts politics.

In addition to local news networks, radio and the print press, here are some useful news outlets:

- State House News Service. This privately owned, private subscription wire service for journalists, lobbyists, government officials, and law firms provides a free Weekly Roundup to the public. It is a recap and analysis of the week's statehouse news. Sign up at [statehousenews.com](https://www.statehousenews.com). SHNS also publishes a free daily email newsletter, MASsterList. You can subscribe at this link: <http://www.massterlist.com/subscribe>.

- Commonwealth Magazine (commonwealthmagazine.org), which calls itself a “nonprofit journal of politics, ideas & civic life”, provides a free daily news summary, called the Daily Download, delivered to your email inbox. It runs opinion pieces that are particularly useful. It also publishes a weekly podcast called the Codcast (cute), which features in-depth interviews and conversations on public policy and politics.

How to find out your legislators’ contact information and information about the status of pending bills.

The Massachusetts Legislature, whose formal name is the General Court of Massachusetts, maintains a website, malegislature.gov, which lists each of the 40 state senators and the 160 state representatives and provides contact information for each of them. It also lists committees, provides links to the text and legislative history of all bills, and publishes a calendar of hearings and events.

How to find public filings of public officials.

Digging deeper, to find public filings by candidates and officeholders, check out these online resources:

- Massachusetts Office of Campaign and Political Finance (OCPF). This public agency maintains a searchable database of candidates’ campaign contributions and expenditures at ocpf.us. There is also a useful Legislative Depository Year-to-Date Report, which lists receipts, expenditures, and cash on hand for all filers.
- Massachusetts State Ethics Commission. Statements of Financial Interest (SFI’s) and conflicts-of-interest disclosure forms are available online for state, county, and municipal officers. Go to sfi.eth.mass.gov to register to obtain copies of SFI’s. For conflict-of-interest disclosure forms, use this link: <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/disclosure-forms-filed-with-the-commission>.

Primer on How the State House Operates

- The Legislative Session. In Massachusetts, the legislative session begins in January of odd-numbered years and usually concludes on July 31 of the following year. The current legislative session opened on January 6, 2021, and will end on July 31, 2022. The Legislature may, as it did in 2020, extend the expiration date of the session.
- The Life Cycle of a Bill. Bills generally must be filed by the third Friday of the session, a deadline the Legislature sometimes extends. This year, the deadline is February 19, 2021. After a bill is filed, legislators may sign on as co-sponsors. Each bill filed is sent first to a joint committee, based on subject matter, for review. A public hearing will be held for every bill, although a single hearing may address numerous bills at once. The committee to which a bill is assigned may report it out favorably, or to study, or kill it (“ought not to pass”). If a bill emerges from committee with a favorable report, it is sent for review to the Ways and Means committee if passage of the bill will require spending or impact revenue, or to the Healthcare Financing committee if relevant, or to the Rules committee. There is no joint Ways and Means or Rules Committee; each chamber conducts its own review. Once it emerges from committee review, the bill is reported to the floor of the chamber for a vote. If it passes, the bill must go through a similar process in the other chamber.

- The annual Budget is subject to a different timeline. The Governor must present his proposed budget by the fourth Wednesday of January, or five weeks later, if the year is the beginning of a new gubernatorial term. The Governor's proposed budget is referred to the House Ways and Means Committee, which releases recommendations for review by the House. The full House then considers, debates, and votes upon amendments to the Ways and Means Committee's recommendations for inclusion in the bill. The Senate Committee on Ways and Means then reviews both the Governor's proposal and the House proposal and develops its own recommendations for debate in the Senate. It is often the case that unrelated bills, having nothing to do with the budget, are tacked onto the budget as "outside sections," by both the Governor and the Legislature. The budget process timeline is set forth in detail at mass.gov.
- Conference Committees. A bill is not passed unless the House and Senate agree on a single version. Differences in similar bills passed by the House and Senate can be worked out in a "conference committee" comprised of six legislators, three appointed by each chamber. Once a bill emerges from the conference committee, no additional amendments will be entertained. Bills that do not emerge from conference committee for a floor vote prior to the close of the legislative session effectively die, and must be refiled in the new session.
- Passage and Enactment. Once the House and Senate pass a bill, it is sent to the Governor who has ten days from receipt to sign it, veto it, do nothing, or return it to the Legislature with proposed amendments. If the legislative session ends before the ten-day period expires, the Governor's inaction amounts to a "pocket veto"; otherwise, inaction results in passage. The Governor has the power to veto specific line items of the Budget; he may not do so with respect to other bills. When the Governor vetoes a bill or a budget line-item, the Legislature can override the veto by a two-thirds vote in each house.

This is not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of the arcane rules and procedures governing the General Court, but rather a brief summary of the process. More information is available online at malegislature.gov and mass.gov. Also, bear in mind that the legislature can suspend or change its own rules.

Many legislative sessions, including both floor proceedings and some committee hearings, are webcast live and are also archived. Access to live and archived webcasts is available at malegislature.gov. As noted above, the history and status of any pending bill can be accessed online.

What's an Activist to Do: How Citizens Weigh In on the Process.

Citizens may attend committee hearings and floor debates and submit written or oral testimony to the committee hearings on pending bills. They may reach out to their representative or senator and request a meeting or a conversation with the staffer assigned to the issue of interest. Emails and phone calls are important but are likely not as persuasive as in-person meetings (remember them?) or phone communication. Joint action carries more weight: bring others along with you. Lobby Days at the State House, focused on a single issue, are effective vehicles for communicating to our representatives that we take an issue seriously and expect to see movement. Monitor hearing dates and events at malegislature.gov. Find contact information for your state representative and senator there as well. Partisan and non-partisan activist organizations send out action alerts on bills of interest. Sign up to receive email blasts on issues important to you. To join PDM's email list, sign up via website, progressivedemsof-mass.org, or by email to info@progressivedemsof-mass.org.