

## Legislative Sessions: A Primer

By Angela Andrews

Providing order and predictability to the legislative process, as well as the organizational structure of the institution, are the reasons behind the constitutional provisions, statutes and chamber rules that govern state legislatures. When legislatures meet, the length and purpose of their sessions may be straightforward, yet each legislature varies in how it addresses these questions. This brief provides a concise overview of legislative sessions, including a summary of how convening and adjourning dates are established and the difference between annual and biennial sessions.

### Convening and Adjourning Dates

“Mason’s Manual of Legislative Procedure” defines a legislative session as “the period of time between the initial convening and adjournment sine die.” During that time, the legislature sits “in session” from day to day. Every legislature’s convening date—the day in which the legislature begins its business—is set by constitution or statute. Most legislatures convene in January and February, although a few convene in early spring. For example, the Louisiana Legislature convenes the second Monday in April in even years and second Monday in March in odd years.

The date of adjournment—or the limit on the **length of legislative session**—is set by various methods. In 28 states, the length of the legislative session is limited by a constitutional provision, while in five states (Alabama, Alaska, Indiana, Maine and South Carolina), statutes control the length of session. Chamber rules govern session length in two states (Arizona and Massachusetts). California’s session length is controlled by both constitutional provision and chamber rules. The California State Constitution directs the Legislature to adjourn by Nov. 30 in even-numbered years. In addition, the chamber rules of the California Senate and Assembly direct the Legislature to recess from



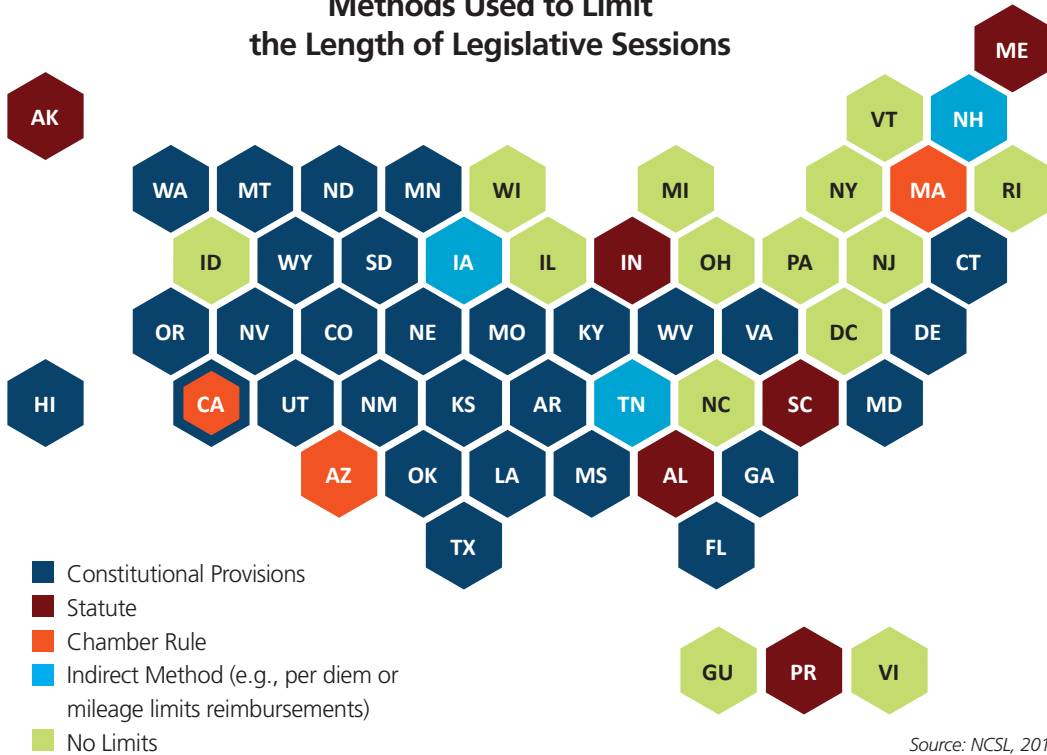
Sept. 12 to Jan. 1 in odd-numbered years and in even-numbered years, to recess from Aug. 31 until “adjournment sine die” on Nov. 30. In Iowa, New Hampshire and Tennessee, indirect methods—such as legislator salary or per diem restriction—are limiting factors. Iowa legislators receive a per diem, or allowance, for the first 110 calendar days of session in odd years and the first 100 calendar days of session in even years. In the remaining 11 states, there is no limit on the length of legislative sessions. Most of the states in this category (Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin) meet year-round. However, in Idaho, North Carolina, Rhode Island and Vermont, custom and tradition tend to dictate adjournment. For example, the Vermont General Assembly traditionally adjourns in mid-May and the Idaho Legislature adjourns the end of March or early April.

Each of the U.S. possessions and territories hold an annual regular session and convene in January. Puerto Rico meets two times during the calendar year, from January to May and August to Novem-

### Did You Know?

- Sine Die is a Latin term that means, “without day.” When a legislature adjourns sine die, it means it is the final adjournment of the assembly without a day being set for reconvening.
- Forty-six state legislatures hold annual regular sessions and four states hold biennial regular sessions.
- Twenty-two special sessions were called in 2016.

## Methods Used to Limit the Length of Legislative Sessions



ber, except during election years. The U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam and the District of Columbia meet year-round.

### Annual and Biennial Legislatures

Today, 46 legislatures meet in regular session **annually** and four (Montana, Nevada, North Dakota and Texas) are biennial legislatures, meaning they convene in regular session every other year. In the early 1960s, however, legislative sessions looked much different. Thirty-one legislatures held biennial regular sessions and 19 met annually. Fast forward 10 years and the landscape of state legislatures—legislative sessions included—changed drastically. By the mid-1970s, 41 states held annual regular sessions while only 19 met every other year. By 2000, only seven states met biennially and by 2012, the number dwindled to four. Oregon, Arkansas and Kentucky changed from biennial to annual regular sessions and held their first annual regular sessions in 2011, 2009 and 2001, respectively.

### Limited Scope Sessions

Most states that meet annually have a general session scope, meaning there is no restriction on the issues or legislation they can consider during the regular session. However, seven states that meet annually have **limited scope sessions**. In these states, the second year of their two-year biennium

is limited to addressing specific issues, most commonly fiscal issues.

### Special Sessions

In addition to regular sessions, state legislatures can also meet in **special, or extraordinary, sessions**. Regular sessions are intended for legislatures to conduct their usual and ordinary business. A special, or extraordinary, session is a meeting of the legislature to conduct business that was not completed during the regular session or to address an emergency or emerging issue.

Special sessions may either be called by either the governor or the legislature. In 15 states, only the governor may call a special session, either by proclamation or executive order. In 35 states, the governor or the legislature may call a special session. The scope of a special session typically is limited to the items listed in the session notice, often referred to as the special session call. Many factors can contribute to calling a special session and may include court decisions, federal government actions, redistricting, state economy, natural disasters and the political culture of the state.

While the substance of a legislative session can be unpredictable—and sometimes turbulent—legislative sessions are one organizational tool that keeps legislatures predictable and on schedule.

### Additional Resources

[2017 Session Calendar](#)  
[NCSL Legislative Sessions webpage](#)

### NCSL Contact

Angela Andrews  
 (303) 856-1349