



Washington State Legislative Service Project: Legislators

Executive summary - Spring 2010

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The *Washington State Legislative Service Project* focuses on preparing student legislative interns, engaging and preparing the next generation for public service and improving legislative bipartisan collaboration. As part of the project both current and past legislative interns, current legislative staff, current and past legislators, news media representatives and registered lobbyists are being surveyed. *This summary focuses on Washington State legislators who served during the 1990 to 2009 legislative sessions.* Of the 458 legislators who served during this twenty-year period, current addresses were determined for 374 present and past legislators. Survey questionnaires were mailed during the fall of 2009, and a follow-up mailing was sent to those who did not respond to the initial mailing. Responses were received from 145 current and past legislators, with 141 participating and 4 choosing to not participate. A rate of response of 38% was achieved of both current and past legislators responding. A follow up study to the 2009 survey is now in process.

Legislators who took part in the 2009 survey reflect a broad range of attributes with respect to party affiliation, political viewpoints, gender, legislative districts, state geography, urban and rural jurisdictions, background prior to serving in the state legislature, whether they served in the house\senate\both, the number of years serving as a legislator, when they served, and the types of jurisdictions (competitive/safe, single party delegation or mixed) represented.

Legislators tend to feel that their legislative experience is/was highly worthwhile, and if they had the opportunity to go back in time they would very likely choose to serve again in the Washington State Legislature. Legislators found benefit in being a legislator in that they were able to represent and help their constituents, learn the legislative process in-depth, influence the crafting of legislation, have access to important policy influencers, and grow professionally. At the same time, legislators also found some challenges associated with legislative service. These included separation from family, a short election cycle, persistently tight schedules, hyper-partisanship, too frequent display of disrespect and incivility, and some poor public policy outcomes.

Virtually all of the legislators taking part in the survey (94.8%) feel that bipartisan collaboration improves the effectiveness of the legislative process. The legislators also felt that since they became involved in the Washington State legislature the state's legislative process has become more partisan, and they felt that less bipartisan collaboration is taking place than in the past. When comparing themselves to their peers, most legislators felt that they themselves work in a more bipartisan fashion than do their fellow legislators.

Legislators felt that bipartisan agreement ranged across topics from agreement on few issues to agreement on most issues. Issues with the greatest bipartisan agreement included: education, transportation and criminal justice/public safety. Issues with the least bipartisan agreement included: budget, social issues and taxes. A common sentiment was that there are a number of

topics on which the legislators agree the problem exists – but don't agree on the solution. The chief hindrances to legislative bipartisan collaboration included: party and caucus leadership influence, pressure from lobbyists/special interest groups on issues, and legislators focusing intensely on re-election. Legislative bipartisan collaboration is encouraged by: legislators developing personal relationships with other legislators, legislators maintaining mutual respect/courtesy/civility and by working in committees and study groups. Legislators indicated that dialogue and deliberation with members of the other party frequently were very important contributions to the legislative process.

Legislators feel very strongly that civility in legislative discourse and debate is important in fostering bipartisanship and producing good policy outcomes. Legislators differed a good deal, however, on the matter of the level of civility they experienced during their period of service. They also differed on whether the level of civility was increasing, remaining largely the same, or declining.

Seven-in-ten of the legislators responding to their survey had experience with student interns, and over 85% of the current legislators who had worked with interns would like to have one again. The legislators felt legislative interns vary widely in the degree of their preparation for the experience, and they listed the following areas as important for intern preparation: prior knowledge of legislative district issues; meeting the legislator prior to session; touring the district; constituent casework experience; and, knowing and communicating what the student is seeking to get out of the intern experience.

Prior to running for election, legislators had varying degrees of contact with their respective political parties. Most had very little contact with the other political party. Legislators experienced the extremes of either little or significant election competition. Overall, legislators experienced more competition from candidates of the other party than from candidates from their own party in primary elections. During general elections treatment experienced by competitors from the other party was fairly evenly distributed over the full spectrum of civility to hostility. These campaign experiences served to color the perceptions of the other party legislators considerably once in office.

The televising of legislative proceedings has caused legislators to bifurcate their audiences when they speak. Even with this bifurcation in focus, the people present in the meeting still receive the majority of legislator's focus. Legislators tend to feel that the impact of televising the legislative process was mostly positive. They tend to feel that it has increased the openness and public awareness of the process and increased the ethical conduct of legislators a bit. At the same time, the presence of TVW has slightly decreased the candidness of legislators and somewhat reduced their willingness to work in a bipartisan fashion. Legislators felt that televising the proceedings has resulted in legislators relating to each other in a slightly more formal and retrained fashion.

Changes in information and communication technology have dramatically affected the work of Washington's legislators. They admit that use of this computer-based technology has reduced legislators' attention and increased distractions in meetings. This, however, is offset by increases in legislators' and legislative staff work efficiency, constituent access to legislators, legislators' interaction with other legislators, and legislators' timely access to bill information.