



Washington State Legislative Service Project: Legislators 2012 **Executive summary – Winter 2012**

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The *Washington State Legislative Service Project* examines the views of key individuals involved in the Washington State Legislative process to determine how developments in this process have affected legislative civility. Study participants include state-wide elected official; legislative and agency staff, members of the media, lobbyists and legislators who served during the 1990 to 2012 legislative sessions. Survey questions posed to Washington legislators who served over the course of the past two decades included the areas of: preparation for legislative service, public perceptions of the legislature, civility and bipartisanship, work/sleep performance effects, and the effectiveness of varying leadership/management approaches. A rate of response of 30% was achieved among of a combination of current and past legislators.

State legislators tend to feel that their legislative experience is/was very 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. They indicated that community involvement, formal education, and previous experience in public affairs best prepared them for serving in the legislature. The amount of legislative workload has increased for most legislators, and legislators report working on legislative matters more than full time during session and over half-time outside of session. State legislators managed their workload by prioritization, specialization, working long hours, and hiring able staff. The most effective ways for constituents to influence legislators involve building personal relationships prior to legislative sessions, building ongoing collaborations with other groups to support issues of interest to them, and communicating concisely and personally one's stance on issues coming before legislators to decide.

Legislators graded their own performance higher than citizens tend to grade the legislature. The aspects of the legislative process which legislators feel are most favorable to citizens include constituent services, interaction and communication with citizens, having a good work ethic, and being civil. The aspects which are least favored in their view include incivility in public conduct, appearance of unethical or unduly influenced behavior, and wastefulness in the use of public resources. Legislators felt that the legislature could improve its public image through more visible collaboration, working for what is best for the state regardless of partisan advantage, exercise of statesmanship among legislative leaders, and more timely communication to citizens. Ideas for improving legislative efficiency included session schedule changes, working across the aisle more effectively, reducing the number of bills submitted, making the legislature full-time, modernizing the rules of the House and Senate, and increased training for legislators, newly elected and incumbent alike.

Legislators defined the term *civility* to include treating colleagues with respect, working with people with whom you disagree, protecting bridges once built over time, the exercise of statesmanship over

boastfulness, and demonstrating professionalism by engaging in active listening and inclusiveness in seeking to address state policy challenges. In general, legislators felt that they were “more civil than most other legislators.” They also tend to feel that a legislator should be held to a higher civility standard than the average citizen, and that civility in the legislature is on a decline. This decline in civility has resulted in some legislators avoiding other legislators who are viewed as uncivil, worrying about incivility and its impact upon the public perception of legislators and the legislature, and decreasing their legislative work effectiveness and commitment as a consequence of experienced incivility. Legislators tend to feel that part of the legislative incivility problem is due to increased campaign costs, the actions of special interest groups, and ideologically-driven media outlets and some constituents who encourage incivility and reward legislators who demonstrate it. The majority of legislators feel that the polarization taking place in Washington D.C. and other states is also occurring in Washington State.

Legislators overwhelmingly agreed that cross-party legislative interactions improve the working relationships of legislators, and more than half of the legislators opined that more cross-party legislative interactions should take place. Many legislators provided suggestions for legislators to get to know each other; most frequently methods of doing this which were noted were: through meals and social functions which are limited to legislators; by visiting other legislators in their home districts; by working on joint projects with other legislators; and, by integrating seating and office assignments during legislative sessions. Legislative leadership and the media support are viewed as critical in the implementation of these types of changes.

Almost 90% of the legislators feel that campaign hostility (incivility) affects legislative working relationships adversely, and three-fourths of the legislators believe that campaign hostility is increasing. The reasons offered for the increase in campaign hostility include increased campaign funding, the influence of national campaigns, belief that hostile campaigns are effective, media delighting in the coverage of incivility, and the expectancies of some well-resourced special interest groups. To repair legislative relationships affected by hostile campaigns requires professional attitudes, the development of a thick skin, leadership involvement, and one-on-one meetings.

When comparing sleep habits during session to out of session, Legislators’ quality of sleep is reported to be worse during session. During session, legislators get tired sooner, go to bed later, take longer to fall asleep, wake up more often at night, sleep fewer hours, get up earlier, and have a harder time getting up. Three-fourths of the legislators feel the best time for them to make decisions is between 8am and 1pm.

Legislators feel they are most likely to use an office leadership style which emphasizes teamwork and working together for setting a vision, but allowing staff ample freedom in the implementation. The management style which legislators feel they most likely use is one which involves listening to the staff and helping them reach their goals, or that of delegating decision making ability to the staff. Legislators self-identified their personalities to be slightly more likely to focus on people over projects, express openness to explore new information, and prefer a planned and stable life. Two-thirds of the legislators feel they make decisions based on logic as opposed to values or personal beliefs.