

MassSenate

Senate Rules Proposal for the 194th General Court

Fact Sheet & Highlights

The Senate's rules proposals for the 2025-2026 session aim to create a transparent and efficient Legislature that meets our current moment. If approved, these proposals will build on the Senate's commitment to transparency and create a framework for increased productivity during legislative sessions. These changes would provide more opportunity to residents to participate in the Legislature's work, encourage greater insight into bills being considered by the Legislature, and provide more transparency on legislators' positions on issues that impact Massachusetts residents.

Senate Rules

For many years the Senate's joint rules proposal included requirements that all votes of joint committees and testimony submitted to joint committees be made public. Absent agreement on joint rules, Senate rules would ensure these actions are taken in the Senate.

Senate Votes in Committees. Senate rules would require that the votes Senators take in joint committees, such as whether or not to advance a bill out of committee, be posted online. In addition, the Senate currently requires Senate-only committees to make committee votes available online.

Testimony Received by Committees. Senate rules would require that written or in-person testimony received by Senate members of a joint committee be provided publicly online. To facilitate this, an email or online portal would exist where testifiers can submit testimony that would be made available online. In addition, the Senate currently requires public testimony in Senate-only committees to be made available to the public.

Bill Summaries. Senate rules would direct the Senate Ways and Means Committee to make bill summaries available online for legislation reported favorably out of the committee. Summaries have long been provided to Senators and members of the public who ask for them, but this provision would make the same information easily available online.

Cybersecurity Training. Senate rules would require every Senator and employee to undergo cybersecurity training every session. The Senate rules already require members and employees to undergo anti-harassment training, implicit bias training, and ethics training.

Joint Rules

Deadline for Conference Reports. The joint rules would allow for conference reports—which are compromise bills deliberated on by members of the House and Senate in a conference committee after both branches have passed a version of the bill—be filed and debated at any time throughout the two-year legislative session. The existing formal

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session deadline of July 31 in the second year of a two-year session would remain for bills not already assigned to a conference committee.

Joint Committee Reform. The joint rules would allow each committee chair and the respective members of the committee from that same branch the autonomy to vote on their respective branch bills. Committees would hear all bills before the committee jointly but, thereafter, Senate members would vote on Senate bills and House members on House bills. This measure would allow the Legislature to advance bills more efficiently by preventing stalemate among committee chairs.

Joint Committee Public Hearing Notice. The joint rules would extend the notice prior to a joint committee hearing from 72 hours to five days, thereby allowing residents and stakeholders more time to prepare to testify on the issues relevant to them and their communities. The Senate has proposed this measure in prior sessions.

Joint Committee Reporting Deadline. The joint rules would require joint committees to report bills out by the first Wednesday in December of the first year of a session to help guard against a backlog of bills in the second year of a session. This deadline is commonly known as Joint Rule 10 day.

Open Conference Committee Meetings. The joint rules would require the full first meeting of a conference committee to be open to the public and the media to bring more transparency to the conference committee process.

Conference Committee Report Time. The joint rules would require a full calendar day between when a conference committee report is filed and when the report is acted upon in the Senate or House to allow legislators and members of the public more time to review legislation before votes are taken. Currently, a report filed before 8:00 pm may be taken up after 1:00 pm the following day.

Bill Summaries in Joint Committees. The joint rules would require bill sponsors to submit comprehensive bill summaries to the joint committees holding hearings on the legislation. The joint committee would then be required to make the summary available publicly along with the bill text. This measure is intended to help the public better understand legislation being heard in joint committees.

Joint Committee Update. The joint rules would change the name of the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities, and Energy to the Joint Committee on Climate, Utilities, and Energy; and the Joint Committee on Agriculture to the Joint Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries.

Background

The Massachusetts Senate is committed to creating a more affordable, equitable, and competitive Commonwealth by lowering costs and expanding opportunities. During the first meeting of the 2025-2026 legislative session, Senate President Karen Spilka proposed comprehensive rules reforms to make the Legislature's business more accessible to the public and enable the Senate and House to pass legislation more efficiently. After soliciting feedback from Senators on how to make the Legislature's work more accessible, the temporary Senate Committee on Rules created comprehensive proposals for Senate rules and joint rules that reflect these ideas.