

Understanding the Texas Legislature: How does it work?

The Texas Legislature is the lawmaking body for our fast-growing state, but it operates very differently from the US Congress and most other state legislatures. It meets in regular session for just 140 days every odd-numbered year. This compressed calendar creates a system in which many important decisions are made long before lawmakers convene in Austin.

The Legislature is made up of two chambers:

- Senate: 31 members (upper chamber)
- House of Representatives: 150 members (lower chamber)

Each legislator represents a geographic district, and Republicans currently control both chambers. State House districts represent about 194,000 residents, and state Senate districts are apportioned with approximately 940,000 residents.

Leadership structure is central to how power flows through the system:

- Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick presides over the Senate and is elected statewide; he determines what is set for debate on the Senate floor and appoints all committees.
- House Speaker Dustin Burrows is elected by House members and controls committee assignments and much of the flow of legislative debate.

Representatives serve two-year terms, while senators serve four-year terms, except in the immediate aftermath of redistricting, when some serve shorter terms to rebalance the cycle. Knowing the structure, let's take a look at how and when the legislature meets.

Regular and Special Sessions

Lawmakers gather in Austin on the second Tuesday in January of odd-numbered years for the regular legislative session. Over the course of 140 days, they must pass a two-year state budget and consider thousands of bills covering everything from education and healthcare to infrastructure and public safety. The pace is intense, deadlines are unforgiving, and the volume of legislation ensures that only a fraction of filed bills ever become law.

Last session, more than 8,700 bills were filed during the regular session, with 1,213 passed and signed into law. That's roughly 14% of the bills making it through the process. Outside of the regular session, only the governor can call lawmakers back to Austin:

- Special sessions last up to 30 days
- Lawmakers may only consider topics designated by the governor

These special sessions are typically used to address unfinished priorities or politically urgent issues. What happens in the months after the regular and special sessions end is very important.

The Interim and Interim Charges

Focusing only on the regular and special sessions themselves misses how the system really works. The period between sessions, known as the interim, is where much of the substantive policymaking takes shape. During this time, lawmakers study issues, hold hearings, meet with constituents, and begin developing the proposals that will later be introduced as legislation.

State agencies continue implementing laws passed in the previous session, translating statutory language into rules and programs. Budget staff track spending and begin preparing for the next biennial budget, often making early decisions about what is financially feasible long before the public sees a draft.

The 2026 interim follows this familiar pattern but with its own political rhythm. Early in the year, after the March primaries, legislative leadership will issue interim charges directing committees on what topics to study. The House Speaker has issued these charges, and the Senate will follow soon. These charges effectively set the agenda for the next session.

Once both chambers have their interim charges, several tracks of work begin moving at once:

- Committees organize hearings and gather stakeholder input
- State agencies implement laws passed in 2025
- Budget staff monitor current spending and begin planning for 2027

After Labor Day

As the year progresses into the spring and summer, committee work becomes more visible. Interim hearings provide a forum for testimony from experts, advocates, and industry representatives, helping to frame the policy debates that will dominate the next session. Behind the scenes, stakeholders are already drafting legislative proposals, testing ideas, and building coalitions. By late summer and early fall, the process intensifies:

- Committees finalize and prepare interim reports
- Agencies submit Legislative Appropriations Requests (LARs)
- Budget writers begin assembling early versions of the state budget

These steps often determine what is viable before the public ever sees a bill or budget.

Fall Elections

While most primaries determine the outcome of state House and Senate races, given how many safe districts are drawn during redistricting, some competitive races will remain this fall. Early voting begins October 19th, and election day is November 3rd.

Pre-Filing Period

By November, the transition from interim work to active lawmaking is underway. Bill pre-filing begins on November 9th, allowing early introduction of legislation. Work intensifies as the election season concludes, clarifying political priorities and power dynamics for the upcoming session. The election results often signal what lawmakers will feel pressure to act on when they return to Austin. The result is a system where the visible legislative session is only the final act. The debates, decisions, and compromises that play out over 140 days are shaped by nearly two years of preparation, political signaling, and policy development.

Bottom line

Developing an effective advocacy program isn't hard if you break the legislative cycle into parts, start early, and prepare for all phases of the process.

- The session is fast, public, and deadline-driven
- The interim is slower, quieter, and when much of the policy work takes place
- By the time the session begins, much of the agenda is set

Influencing the Texas Legislature requires looking beyond the session calendar and recognizing that much of the real work happens in the interim. HMWK positions our clients to take advantage of the full legislative cycle, engaging early in the interim, building momentum in 2026, and converting that work into results when lawmakers are called into session at noon on January 12, 2027.