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Profile of the 2017 Wisconsin Legislature

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Profile of the 2017 Wisconsin Legislature

The first Wisconsin Legislature convened in 1848. For most legislators elected that session, the legislature was only a part-time position that separated them from their families, farms, or businesses for part of the year. Today, the 2017 legislature, though vastly different from the legislature that first convened, faces those same challenges: members have left behind careers and small businesses and sacrificed family and personal time to serve the state to the best of their abilities. This report profiles the members of the Wisconsin Legislature at the time of their inauguration on January 3, 2017.

Senate profile

The Wisconsin Senate has 33 members, including 20 Republicans and 13 Democrats. Of the total, nine senators are women and two are African American women.

Legislative experience. Of the 16 seats up for election in 2016, 12 members from the 2013 senate were reelected and four new members were elected. Two of the four new senators have previous legislative experience. Seventeen members are senators in the middle of their terms.

Thirty-three senators served previously in the assembly. In the 2017 senate, five senators have served ten or more sessions; seven have served between five and nine sessions; and the remaining 21 have served fewer than five sessions. Notably, Senator Fred Risser (D–Senate District 26) is the longest-serving legislator in the United States and has the longest legislative tenure in Wisconsin history, with 27 sessions in the senate and 3 in the assembly for a total of 60 years of service.

Three senators had previous experience in a legislative staff position. Two worked for either a state senator or representative. Another two worked as staff for members of the U.S. Congress.

Local government experience. Thirteen senators have had experience in local government as elected public officials: seven served as county board supervisors; four served on city councils; two were on a school board; and seven were on a town or village board.

Age. As of December 20, 2016, the average age of a senator is 58, making this the oldest senate since at least 1943; it is fractionally older than the previous senate. The 2017 senate ranges in age from 29 to 89 years. At the age of 89, Senator Risser is the oldest person to serve in the Wisconsin Senate.

Occupation. Twenty-four senators list themselves as full-time legislators. Two senators are practicing attorneys. Other current occupations include newspaper publisher, accountant, small business owner, and nurse practitioner.

Education. All 33 senators continued their formal education beyond high school. Eighteen have an academic degree and five attended either a technical school or a college or university. Ten senators continued on to graduate studies and hold master's degrees in fields ranging from public health to education. One senator has a PhD.

Military service. Six senators have served in the nation's armed forces, including the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the U.S. Army Reserve, and the Air National Guard. One senator is a World War II veteran, one is a Persian Gulf War veteran, and one is an Iraq War veteran.

The 2017 session also marks the passing of Senator Rick Gudex, who passed away in October 2016. Senator Gudex served two consecutive sessions in the senate and was active in his local community, serving as mayor of Mayville from 1998 to 2000 and on the Fond du Lac city council. The Senate District 18 seat was filled in the 2016 general election by Dan Feyen.

Assembly profile

There are 99 representatives elected to the Wisconsin Assembly, including 64 Republicans and 35 Democrats. This is the largest majority held by one party in the assembly since the 1957 session in which the Republicans held 67 seats. This session, 22 members are women, one fewer than in the 2015 session. Four representatives are African American and two are Hispanic.

Legislative experience. Eighty-nine representatives were reelected in 2016, while ten are serving their first terms in the assembly. Only one candidate defeated an incumbent in the 2016 general election. The longest-serving member is Representative Kessler (D–Assembly District 12), who has served in the assembly since 1961.

Twelve representatives have had previous experience in a legislative staff position. Six worked for members of the U.S. Congress, six worked in the state legislature, and one worked for both Congress and the state legislature.

Local government experience. Of the 65 representatives who have been locally elected officials, 14 held office at both the county and the municipal levels, 14 held county offices, and 37 held municipal offices.

Twenty-one representatives have served as county board supervisors or board members. Seven representatives were city council members, five were town board members, and three were village trustees. Five have served as school board members. Two have served as city mayors, one as village president, and three as alders. Representative Todd Novak currently serves as mayor of Dodgeville and has done so since 2012.

Age. As of December 20, 2016, the average age of a representative is 50. The 2017 Assembly ranges in age from 26 to 78 years.

Occupation. Thirty-two representatives list themselves as full-time legislators. Eight representatives are farmers, and six are practicing attorneys. Among the other representatives, 28 list themselves as business owners or self-employed. Other current occupations include realtor, labor arbitrator, veterinarian, accountant, librarian, and pilot. Former occupations range from educator to large animal veterinarian.

Education. Of the representatives who continued their formal education beyond high school, 48 hold academic degrees and 67 attended college, university, or agricultural, business, technical, or trade school after high school graduation. One representative holds a doctor of veterinary medicine degree, nine hold law degrees, ten hold master's degrees, thirty-two hold bachelor degrees, and three hold associate degrees.

Military service. Ten representatives have served in the nation's armed forces, including the Navy, the Air Force, the U.S. Army Reserve, the U.S. Naval Reserve, the Army National Guard, and the Air National Guard. Two representatives each served in the Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq Wars. ■