

EdNC



What you need to know to be an effective advocate: North Carolina government 101

Updated for 2021

Introduction



CEO and Editor-in-chief, EducationNC

Mebane Rash is the CEO and editor-in-chief of EducationNC, a nonprofit news organization that covers the major trends and challenges bearing on education in North Carolina. She's been nationally recognized as a leader, such as being one of 60 women invited to study Women and Power: Leadership in the New World at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Mebane is a graduate of UVA and the UNC School of Law.

Much of my career has been spent trying to make sure people across the state are comfortable and confident participating in state government, from walking into the legislature to interacting with policymakers.

This moment in time makes that more important to me than ever.

Here is what I think you need to know to be a citizen advocate.

Let's start with how to talk like a Tar Heel. Bookmark this audio guide of cities, towns, and other places around North Carolina. You've got to sound like you know the places you are talking about.

And I keep a copy of "The North Carolina State Constitution: A Reference Guide" by my side all the time. Here is the newer version of the book.

Article II: Legislative power

Article II of our state constitution vests legislative power in the N.C. General Assembly.

From 1898-2010, Democrats largely controlled the legislature. Republicans have held power since.

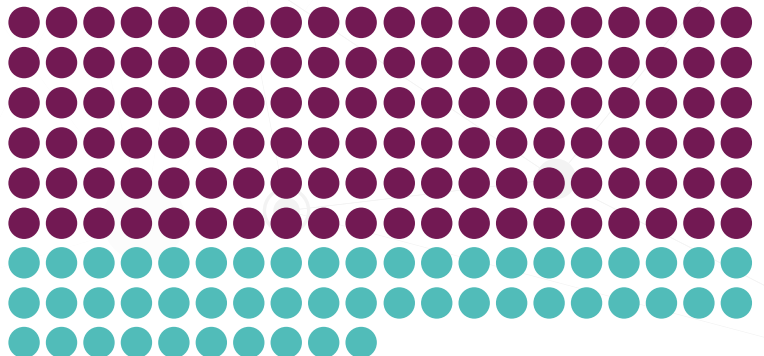
Each session of the General Assembly in North Carolina convenes for two years — often referred to as a biennium. This is when bills are introduced and a two-year budget is adopted. Each biennium the state House and Senate alternate which chamber takes the lead on budget legislation. Typically the long session lasts until July or so, but you can see here how long sessions have lasted since 2001. The “short” session will convene in spring 2022. Bills that have passed one house, recommendations from a study commission, or issues related to the budget are in play during the short session.

There are 120 members in the House of Representatives and 50 members in the Senate. All of the legislators in both houses serve two-year terms. There are no term limits in North Carolina. The legislators who are elected to the General Assembly serve part-time, and often have other jobs back home. During session, they typically meet on Monday evenings, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.

Both chambers — the House and the Senate — are in the Legislative Building. It is located at 16 West Jones Street in Raleigh. Rooms in this building have four digits, like 1226.

**There are 120
members in the House of
Representatives**

**50 members
in the Senate**



The Legislative Office Building, which has many of the offices for the legislators as well as larger committee rooms, is located across the street from the Legislative Building at 300 North Salisbury Street. There is a bridge over Lane Street that allows people to go from one building to the other easily. Rooms in the Legislative Office Building have three digits, like 544.

The House of Representatives

The speaker of the House is Tim Moore of Kings Mountain. He has served as speaker since 2015, and this is his 10th term.

In the House of Representatives, there are 69 Republicans and 51 Democrats. There are 21 new members in the House, 29 women, 23 African Americans, one Latino, and one Native American. Here is contact information, and here is where you can export contact information in Excel. Here is demographic information about the House, here are the birthdays of representatives, here is representation by county, here are terms served (helpful with understanding seniority), here is military experience, here are occupations and education.

The House principal clerk provides lots of information about the representatives.

More information about leadership, seats, offices, committees, and bill deadlines will be added as the session begins.

The Senate

Mark Robinson is the lieutenant governor and president of the Senate. Though not a legislator, the lieutenant governor serves as the presiding officer of the Senate and has the power to vote when the members of the Senate are equally divided. The president pro tempore of the Senate is Phil Berger from Eden. He has served as



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69 Republicans

president pro tempore since 2010, and this is his 11th term.

In the Senate, there are 28 Republicans and 22 Democrats. There are six new members. [Here](#) is contact information, and [here](#) is where you can export contact information in Excel. [Here](#) is representation by district, [here](#) are the birthdays of legislators, [here](#) is representation by county, [here](#) are terms served (helpful with understanding seniority), [here](#) are occupations, education, and military experience.

[The Senate principal clerk provides lots of information about the senators.](#)

More information about leadership, [seats](#), [offices](#), [legislative assistants](#), [committees](#), and [bill deadlines](#) will be added as the session begins.

More information about the legislature

[The General Assembly's website is quite good](#) so take some time ahead of the session to find your way around.

[The House and Senate calendars](#) are helpful for citizen advocates because they give you notice of when bills will be taken up in committee and on the floor. That doesn't mean that there aren't surprises!

The best way to monitor legislation is through the UNC School of Government's Legislative Reporting Service. There is no charge, and you don't need to sign in to view the daily bulletin, bills, and bill summaries. But if you create a free account, you can monitor select bills and create reports tailored to your interests. [Here](#) is the website, and [here](#) are FAQ for 2020.

Here is information about the [fiscal research division](#), [the legislative drafting division](#).



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22 Democrats

28 Republicans

[the program evaluation division](#), and the [legislative analysis division](#).

If you decide to make the trip to Raleigh, [here](#) is the information you need on directions to the legislature, parking, info on attending sessions, and dining. [Here](#) are the building rules.

If you can't come to Raleigh, you can listen in remotely. [Here is a link to audio broadcasts](#) so you can listen in on the House and Senate chambers as well as important committee rooms and the room used for press conferences. You can also follow activity in the chambers using the [House dashboard](#) and the [Senate dashboard](#).

This [very complicated chart](#) shows you how a bill becomes law in North Carolina. Note that often the ideas for bills starts with you, the concerned citizen.

[Here](#) is information about how to register as a lobbyist with the Secretary of State.



Article III: Executive power

Article III of our state constitution vests executive power in the Governor. [Here](#) is the website for Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat. The governor has the power to propose a budget. [Here](#) is the website of the Office of State Budget and Management. Charlie Perusse is the state budget director. The governor of North Carolina was the last governor in the country to receive veto power in 1996. [Here](#) is where you can see how many bills have been vetoed each session.

The governor has the power to issue executive orders. [Here](#) is where you can keep track of all of the executive orders. And don't underestimate the power of the governor to leverage the bully pulpit. The Council of State includes the lieutenant governor, the secretary of state, the auditor, the treasurer, the superintendent of public instruction, the attorney general, and the commissioners of agriculture, labor, and insurance. There are six Republicans and three Democrats in addition to the governor on the Council of State, and all members of the Council are elected.

The Cabinet includes appointed positions, including the secretaries of administration, commerce, environmental quality, health and human resources, information technology, military and veterans affairs, natural and cultural resources, public safety, revenue, and transportation. The governor's chief of staff, director of the office of state human resources, and the state budget director meet with the cabinet. The governor also has staff, and Geoff Coltrane serves as his senior education advisor.

By statute, there is also an education cabinet. The governor serves as chair, and the education cabinet includes the superintendent of public instruction, the chair of the State Board of Education, the president of the [UNC System](#), the president of the [NC Community College System](#), and the president of the [NC Independent Colleges and Universities](#).

North Carolina has three independent executive agencies: the Office of Administrative Hearings, the Office of the State Controller, and the State Board of Elections.

The NC State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA) "is a political subdivision of the state, governed by a nine-member Board of Directors, with administrative support provided by the University of North Carolina."

Conclusion

This session, I'll be watching a cohort of female leaders of nonprofits who care a lot about education, including Brenda Berg at [BEST NC](#), Cecilia Holden at [myFutureNC](#), Hiller Spires at the [Friday Institute for Educational Innovation](#), Leanne Winner at the [NC School Boards Association](#), and Mary Ann Wolf at the Public School Forum of NC.

The [merger of Civitas Institute and the John Locke Foundation](#) and the impact of a conservative “policy powerhouse designed to create, innovate, and advocate for freedom-forward solutions” will be on my radar.

And the [North Carolina Leadership Forum](#) — guided by John Hood and Leslie Winner, and funded by The Duke Endowment, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and the Pope Foundation — has been “providing a venue for North Carolina leaders to discuss the nature of the challenges, to understand different points of view about how to address them, and to advance mutually acceptable solutions that improve the lives of North Carolinians.” [Now, 24 of the alums of the forum will be serving in elected office.](#) I am hopeful they will be difference makers.

My colleague Ran Coble taught me that to be an effective citizen advocate, you need to first ask yourself what it is that you want out of the legislature:

Is it money?

Is it a change in law?

Or is it that you want to stop something somebody else is proposing?

Do you need the change in the long session or do you have a strategy for the short session if needed? Who are your legislative champions, and who will your champions be when they get tired or distracted?

If you want money, you have to have Republican support because they're the majority party and in control of the budget.

But you'll also need to have a relationship with the governor and his team if you need to make sure legislation is or isn't vetoed.

If it's a change in law, it's best for the short-term to have a lead Republican sponsor. But for a variety of reasons, including longer term support for an issue from both sides of the aisle, you might want to seek bipartisan sponsorship and support.

If what you want is to stop something, you may not need a legislative majority, because so much of the legislative committee process is by consensus, and consecutive, well-placed objections by a few legislators, or a suggestion from a legislator friendly to you saying "we need to study this some more" may postpone action on the bill.

And if you want to stop something, but can't stop it in the legislature, don't forget that the courts are there to review legislation.

The next question to help you think about being an effective advocate is to ask whether your issue is partisan (one or both parties are staked out on), a nonpartisan issue, or an issue where those for and against it divide not along party lines but some other dividing line.

I have loved watching the search for common ground in the legislature unfold for thirty years. If you have tips for navigating the legislature or state government, please share them with me via Twitter @Mebane_Rash.