

how to get actively involved in government

There are lots of ways to participate in our democratic system. Reading the newspaper, watching television news and attendance at public government meetings – from legislative committee hearings to open court proceedings to local school board meetings – are good ways to get informed about what is going on in government. Once you know what the issues are, you are better prepared to ask questions of elected officials and discuss possible courses of action. This is something you can start even now, while you're in school.

All residents of Minnesota are encouraged to contact their elected officials. Addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses for members of the Minnesota Senate and House are available from Senate Information at 651-296-0504 or 1-888-234-1112 or House Public Information at 651-296-2146 or 1-800-657-3550. A wealth of information is available from the legislative website:
<http://www.leg.mn>

Of course, after someone turns 18, he or she is eligible to vote. Voting is viewed by many people as the most important way for anyone to get involved in government.

The requirements for running for state and national offices are listed on the back page of this pamphlet. Local officials can tell you what the requirements are to run for local office in your community.

who can participate in government?

Everyone can participate in government. The United States and Minnesota use a form of government called "representative democracy," which depends on public involvement.

If you want to know who can run for public office, though, here's the answer:

To run for a seat in the Minnesota Senate or House, someone must be at least 21 years old when their term begins, have lived in the state for a year and in the district he or she wants to represent for at least six months before the election.

Candidates for governor and lieutenant governor must be U.S. citizens, residents of Minnesota for at least a year and at least 25 years old when their term begins. Other statewide offices require someone to be 21 years old when their term begins.

Members of the U.S. House must be at least 25 years old and been U.S. citizens for seven years. U.S. Senators are required to be at least 30 years old and citizens for nine years.

The President and Vice President must be 35 years or older, be natural born U.S. citizens, and have lived in the country for 14 years.

GOVERNMENT IN MINNESOTA

a guide for kids

levels of government

Government exists at many levels. When you hear people talk about government, they could mean the federal government, state government, or any of a number of local governments. Government includes everyone from the President of the United States to members of local town councils and school boards.

The federal government's headquarters are in many buildings in Washington, D.C. and Minnesota's government headquarters are in the State Capitol Complex in St. Paul.

areas of government (a.k.a. "branches")

There are three major functions of government: making laws, enforcing laws and interpreting laws.

The legislative branch—represented at the federal level by Congress and at the state level by the Legislature—makes the laws.

The executive branch is charged with enforcing and executing laws.

Meanwhile, the judicial branch interprets laws and settles disputes or disagreements about what the laws mean and how they should be applied or executed.

executive branch

If you ever hear people talking about the White House, Cabinet or the President, they are talking about the federal level. The federal executive is the president who enforces the laws passed by Congress.

In Minnesota, the chief executive is the governor who is advised by many commissioners who serve as part of the executive function of government by running state agencies.

Other statewide constitutional officers are the lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state and state auditor, who have their own separate areas of responsibility.

judicial branch

Laws, no matter how clear they might seem at first sight, are never simple things. There are always at least two sides to an issue. The courts, or judiciary, settle disputes about what laws mean and how they are to be applied by government and individual citizens.

Our courts have many levels. The federal judiciary has a Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., 13 Circuit Courts of Appeals and 94 District Courts across the nation. Minnesota has a U.S. District Court that sits in Minneapolis.

The state judiciary also has a Supreme Court and a Court of Appeals, both of which sit in St. Paul, and 10 District Courts throughout the state.

Minnesota's Legislature in action

what is a bill?

A bill is a proposal to make a new law or change or delete existing law. Some bills require people to do things. Others make certain activities illegal or spend or raise state money. Ideas for a bill can come from anyone. However, a bill must be introduced in either the House or the Senate by a member of that body for the bill to be considered by the Legislature.

the super-short story of how a bill becomes a law

Once a legislator has introduced a bill in the Senate or House, the bill is referred to a committee, where the bill will be discussed by the members and can be changed ("amended"). Members of the public can talk to the committee about the bill at the hearing. After a committee has approved a bill, the proposal goes before the full house for discussion, amending and a vote. If the bill passes, it goes to the other house, where it follows a similar path. If both houses pass exactly the same bill, the bill goes to the governor for his signature. If the bills passed are different, a group of members from each house will form a conference committee to reach a compromise. The compromised agreement must then be approved by both bodies and sent to the governor. If the governor signs a bill, the bill becomes law. If the governor vetoes the bill, the Legislature may override the veto by a two-thirds vote. If the Legislature is unable to override his veto, then the bill is dead.