



---

# Wisconsin Briefs

*from the Legislative Reference Bureau*

---



Brief 07-5

January 2007

## TURNOVER IN THE WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE JANUARY 1963 – JANUARY 2007

This brief reviews legislator turnover for the past 22 legislative sessions (1963-2005), including members who resigned or did not seek reelection and those who were unsuccessful in their bid for reelection.

A total of 22 members of the 2005 Wisconsin Legislature (16.7%) left office during or at the conclusion of the 2005-2006 session for a variety of reasons. This compares to the average turnover rate of 23.3% over the last 22 legislative sessions. From January 1963 to January 2007, a total of 647 legislators were sworn into the senate or assembly for the first time, for an average of 30.8 newly elected members per session.

Generally, the greatest turnover has occurred at those sessions following redistricting. Included in the 44-year period are legislative elections held under six different redistricting plans first used for the elections of 1964, 1972, 1982, 1984, 1992, and 2002, respectively. (Following the 1980 census, a 3-judge federal panel redrew the districts used for the 1982 general elections and the Wisconsin Legislature subsequently revised the plan for 1984.)

State senators are elected to 4-year terms. In presidential election years, 16 senators are elected. In nonpresidential election years, 17 are elected. Since the 1964 election cycle, 20 senators have been defeated in party primaries and 26 have been defeated in general elections, an average of under .9 per biennial cycle in the primary and 1.18 in the general election.

In the assembly, all 99 seats are up for election in each biennial election cycle. Since the 1964 general election, 47 members have been

defeated in party primaries, and 109 have been defeated in general elections, an average of 2.1 in the primary and just under 5 in the general election.

According to information compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures, during the period 1991-2003, 82% of state legislative seats nationwide had turned over. This is higher than the 72% turnover rate for Wisconsin during this period. Twelve states operated under term limit laws from 1991-2003, which resulted in a turnover of at least 96% for each of these states. Wisconsin has never enacted a term limit law.

Eight states (Alabama, Delaware, Indiana, Mississippi, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia) had a lower turnover rate than Wisconsin during the period 1991-2003.

**Table 1** shows the number of newly elected legislators from the 1963 Legislature through inauguration of the 2007 Legislature. The table separates members elected in November from those chosen in special elections.

**Table 2** summarizes the number of members leaving the legislature by session and the reasons for their departure. It is sometimes difficult to categorize members' reasons for leaving legislative service. This study used generally available information, such as Legislative Reference Bureau publications and newspaper clippings. However, it is possible that some members chose not to seek reelection for other reasons. In addition, members were listed as accepting a government appointment only if they accepted it during their legislative term or shortly thereafter.

**Table 1: Newly Elected Legislators  
January 1963 – January 2007**

Session	November Election		Special Elections		TOTAL
	Senate	Assembly	Senate	Assembly	
1963 <sup>†</sup>	7	20	–	2	29
1965	5	30*	1	2	38
1967	6	22*	1	1	30
1969	5	25*	2	1	33
1971	6	29	2	3	40
1973	7	29*	–	–	36
1975	6	23*	2	3	34
1977	6	14	1	3	24
1979	5	18	5	6*	34
1981	3	12*	–	4	19
1983	7	33*	5	4	49
1985	5	26*	–	–	31
1987	2	13*	4	5	24
1989	1	15*	3	4	23
1991	3	14	1	3	21
1993	4	23	4	5	36
1995	1	12	4	1	18
1997	1	10	1	2	14
1999	3	21	–	–	24
2001	3	10	1	1	15
2003	6	15	3	4	28
2005	5	19*	–	1	25
2007	4	17	–	–	21

<sup>†</sup>Earl Elfers served January 9 to February 7, 1963, but was replaced by Russell Olson pursuant to Assembly Resolution 9, which resolved a contested election by declaring Russell Olson the winner.

\*Includes member(s) who served in a prior, but not the immediately preceding, session.

**Table 2: Legislators’ Reasons for Not Returning  
1963-2005 Sessions**

Session	Sought Other Office		Defeated in Primary Election		Defeated in General Election		Accepted Other Govt. Position		Other Reasons		TOTAL	
	Senate	Assembly	Senate	Assembly	Senate	Assembly	Senate	Assembly	Senate	Assembly	Senate	Assembly
1963	2	1	1	10	1	8	–	–	2	13	6	32
1965	–	6	2	4	–	7	–	2	4	2	6	24
1967	3	4	1	5	1	6	–	–	–	11	5	26
1969	–	6	3	4	1	15	–	1	4	4	8	30
1971	2	10	3	4	–	5	–	3	2	7	7	29
1973	–	7	–	2	2	9	–	–	4	5	6	23
1975	1	4	1	1	3	1	–	3	1	8	6	17
1977	3	6	4	2	–	7	–	3	1	3	8	21
1979	2	4	1	3	1	2	–	2	1	1	5	18
1981	3	6	–	4	2	11	–	1	4	12	9	34
1983	1	9	–	–	1	5	–	–	4	12	6	26
1985	3	4	1	3	–	3	1	–	–	3	5	13
1987	1	3	–	–	–	5	–	1	1	7	2	16
1989	2	8	–	1	2	2	1	2	3	5	8	18
1991	–	6	–	1	2	3	2	–	2	12	6	22
1993	2	9	1	–	–	3	–	1	1	4	4	17
1995	–	6	–	–	1	3	1	–	3	–	5	12
1997	1	6	–	1	–	3	2	3	1	10	4	23
1999	–	1	–	–	2	1	–	1	1	8	3	11
2001	1	6	1	1	3	2	–	–	2	6	7	16
2003	2	10	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	9	8	23
2005	–	5	–	–	3	6	–	–	1	7	4	18

Note: “Other Reasons” includes members who died during their term of office.