



GOV + LEGISLATURE POLITICS

## Democrats dominate in getting bills to become laws, with leadership snagging the most wins

Watchdogs and Republicans say power is concentrated in too few hands in Trenton

BY: **DANA DIFILIPPO** - FEBRUARY 15, 2024 7:03 AM



 Governor Murphy signs legislation to protect reproductive health care providers and out-of-state residents seeking reproductive services in New Jersey on Friday, July 1, 2022 (Edwin J. Torres/NJ Governor's Office).

Republicans introduced just 6% of the bills that became state law in New Jersey's last legislative session, even though they held 41% of legislative seats.

That's not exactly *eureka!* news for anyone who follows politics in Trenton, where Democrats control the Statehouse. But critics say that Democratic dominance in public policymaking can paralyze

legislators in the minority party even when they propose policies with bipartisan appeal.

“Elections have consequences, and to the victor go the spoils,” said John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University. “Bills by a minority member are not likely to ever see the light of day. It’s not a coincidence that Ed Durr, in his short Senate career, got virtually no legislation passed that he proposed. The Democrats basically shut him down in terms of getting any of his bills passed and then [criticized him](#) during the election for getting nothing done. But that’s the way the game is played.”

The stagnation of some lawmakers’ bills also underscores watchdogs’ warnings that political power is concentrated in very few hands in a state where even the ballot design, which gives political party leaders outsized influence on who gets advantageous placement, can feel undemocratic.

Of the 85 legislators listed as first prime sponsor on the 479 bills that became law in the last legislation session, most – 86% – were legislative leaders or committee chairs, according to a New Jersey Monitor analysis. The two-year session ended Jan. 9.

The lawmakers who got the most bills passed hold top leadership positions in their respective chambers, and all are Democrats – Senate Majority Caucus Chair Nellie Pou and Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz each had 18 bills become law; Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald, 17; Senate Democratic Conference Chair Vin Gopal, 16; Senate Majority Whip Troy Singleton, 14; and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin and Senate President Nicholas Scutari, 13 each.

Forty lawmakers couldn’t get a single bill passed into law, as first prime sponsor. Thirty of those are Republican. Of the 10 Democrats, five were freshmen; one, Sen. Samuel Thompson, was a lifelong Republican who [became a Democrat](#) to protest GOP leaders’ rejection of his reelection bid; and one, Sen. Ronald Rice, resigned eight months into the session and [then died](#).

Republicans, unsurprisingly, object to such trends.

# New Jersey's law-making winners and losers

A legislator's party affiliation largely determines whether the bills they introduce become law in Trenton's Democrat-controlled Statehouse. A third of state lawmakers — most of them Republican — had no bills (on which they were first prime sponsor) become law in the 2022-23 legislative session that ended in January 2024.



Legislator	Bills introduced	Bills that became laws	% success rate
Atkins	61	0	0
Auth	66	0	0
Barranco	17	1	6
Beach	199	3	2
Benson	203	9	4
Bergen	56	0	0
Bramnick	87	2	2
Bucco	194	1	1
Burgess	20	0	0
Calabrese	52	2	4
Caputo	45	2	4
Carter	43	2	4
Catalano	46	0	0
Chaparro	32	4	13
Clifton	28	0	0
Codey	85	7	8
Conaway	184	8	4
Connors	93	0	0
Corrado	116	0	0
Coughlin	116	13	11
Cruz-Perez	182	7	4
Cryan	162	4	2
Cunningham	45	1	2
Dancer	6	2	33
Danielsen	79	5	6
DeAngelo	76	10	13

DeFuccio	2	0	0
DePhillips	76	0	0
Diegnan	89	10	11
DiMaio	58	0	0

*Thompson switched parties from Republican to Democrat halfway through the session. McCoy and Yustein replaced incumbents who resigned shortly before the session ended. Dancer and Rice died during the session and were replaced by Burgess and Saurickia. Cunningham missed more*

“The way that they do things demeans the process, and it’s bad for your average citizen because the whole point of this is to have debate and discussion to refine things and bring bills a little bit more to the middle or improve them,” said Assemblyman Brian Bergen (R-Morris). “But they don’t even want to give the illusion of bipartisanship.”

It’s not just partisan sour grapes. Good government advocates, too, say such trends show the system is ripe for reform.

Campaign spending and New Jersey’s unique “[county line](#),” in which the party’s preferred candidates get prime placement on ballots, further expand the power among those who wield a stranglehold on the Statehouse, said Julia Sass Rubin, a professor at Rutgers University’s Edward J. Bloustein School of Public Policy.

Rubin pointed to legislative leadership political action committees, where legislators donate campaign funds for legislative leaders to use to defend vulnerable seats or win new ones.

“Legislators elected with the help of leadership PACs become beholden to the leadership and more likely to vote for them as leaders, further concentrating power in their hands,” Rubin said.

Lawmakers first created legislative leadership PACs in 1993, Rubin said. Before then, Senate presidents and Assembly speakers typically served one to four years, but since then, legislative leaders typically remain in their powerful posts until forced out, which further reinforces their power, Rubin said. In the three decades before leadership PACs existed, the Senate presidency changed hands 13 times; in the three decades since, just five people have held the Legislature’s most potent post, she noted.

Democrats acknowledged their edge as the majority party but maintained that getting bills to the governor’s desk is tough for everyone and requires relationship-building.

Sen. Paul Moriarty (D-Camden) was first prime sponsor on 86 bills last session, 10 of which became laws. Moriarty, a state lawmaker since 2006 who moved to the Senate this term, was a deputy speaker in the Assembly in the last term.

“There are thousands of bills at any given time in the state of New Jersey, and other states as well. And only a limited number of them ever get to the finish line. So it is a task: You are pushing a large rock up a hill all the time. You have to be relentless, and you have to stand out, sometimes be a noodge, be a pest – and you have to be the majority party most of the time because the agenda is set by the majority party,” he said.

## Glut of bills

Most bills lawmakers introduce never pass. Of 10,654 bills and resolutions in Trenton’s legislative pipeline in the two-year session that ended last month, just 4 percent became law.

That didn’t stop lawmakers from trying. The busiest filer was Assemblywoman Carol Murphy (D-Burlington), a state legislator since 2018 who’s now running for Congress. She introduced 355 bills, only three of which became law, including designating cranberry juice the state drink, declaring the last week in April Military Child Appreciation Week, and establishing the New Jersey Ireland Trade Commission.

Former Assemblywoman DeAnne DeFuccio (R-Bergen), who took office in 2021 and opted not to run for reelection last year, introduced the fewest – just two. Those bills would have required schools to teach students how to write their names in cursive and allowed police officers to stand guard at polling places located in public schools.

Legislators on either end of that scale “might be some cause for concern,” Froonjian said.

“If you’ve introduced no bills or just a few, you got to wonder, ‘do you care about anything if you’ve not introduced any legislation?’ You would hope that a legislator has some priorities that they hold dear or some issues back home in the district that are important that they’re going to champion,” Froonjian said. “But if you’re introducing hundreds of bills that don’t ever move, you wonder: Are they just a publicity hound trying to look like they’re actively legislating but really not doing anything productive to change public policy or make lives better?”

Still, he noted, other factors can drive lawmakers to introduce bills, even when they know there's no hope they'll pass. Bills can be a bald headline grab or a fundraising tool for lawmakers looking to show supporters they're doing something, he said. They can also help legislators gain influence and craft identities as an expert or champion on a particular issue, he added.

## On the bright side

Some Republicans are philosophical about the GOP bills that stall and die, saying such is the lot in life for conservatives in a state that skews blue.

“Democrats are in the majority and they are, to their credit, taking advantage of being in the majority and getting their issues and legislation through quickly, easily. That's the way it is,” said Assemblyman Gerry Scharfenberger (R-Monmouth). “I'm sure if you go to Kansas or anywhere else, it's the same thing there, with the majority getting their bills passed.”

Legislators who sign on to legislation as second prime sponsors or co-sponsors still get bragging rights, he added.

And there's more to legislative service than passing laws, others noted.

“It's not always a negative that some legislators are backbenchers. They can still vote their ideology, provide constituent services, and represent the voters by voting the way they would want them to. That doesn't make them bad legislators; you need some worker bees,” Froonjian said.

As for Bergen, he introduced 56 bills in the last session, on issues ranging from self-defense and physical fitness requirements for law enforcement officers to income tax exemptions for veterans to term limits for Assembly members.

None became law, and none that he introduced as first prime sponsor in the 2020-21 session made it to law either. But he hasn't given up on trying to get Gov. Phil Murphy's signature on his legislation – he's already introduced 55 bills since the new session started last month.



📷 Assemblyman Brian Bergen said he regards his role in the state Legislature as a voice of opposition against “bills that are stupid.” (Hal Brown for New Jersey Monitor)

Still, he’s come to regard his role as a much-needed voice of opposition against bills “that are stupid and make us worse off.”

That approach got him booted off the powerful Assembly appropriations committee after he repeatedly protested a Democrat-sponsored proposal to [hike lawmaker salaries](#) that legislative leaders fast-tracked last month. The bill passed and Murphy [signed](#) it into law last month.

“That stuff cuts to my core. It sounds maybe a little corny, but I really believe in this. This isn’t a joke to me, and that’s why I get so upset about it,” he said.

It’s also why Bergen called out his committee ouster in [a video](#) he posted on social media.

“When I first got into the Legislature, I wanted to pass bills with my name on it – that’s what everybody wants when they first get there,” he said. “But it didn’t take me long to realize that was not my role to play and that I could fulfill an important role, which is trying my damndest to stop bad legislation. In order to do that, you give up your opportunity to have your name on some bills, because you’ve got to stand up to the leadership, you’ve got to stand up to the Democrats, and that comes with a price. So I don’t need to [name the state drink](#) or get a [license plate bill](#) passed. What I want to do is make our state a better place.”



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