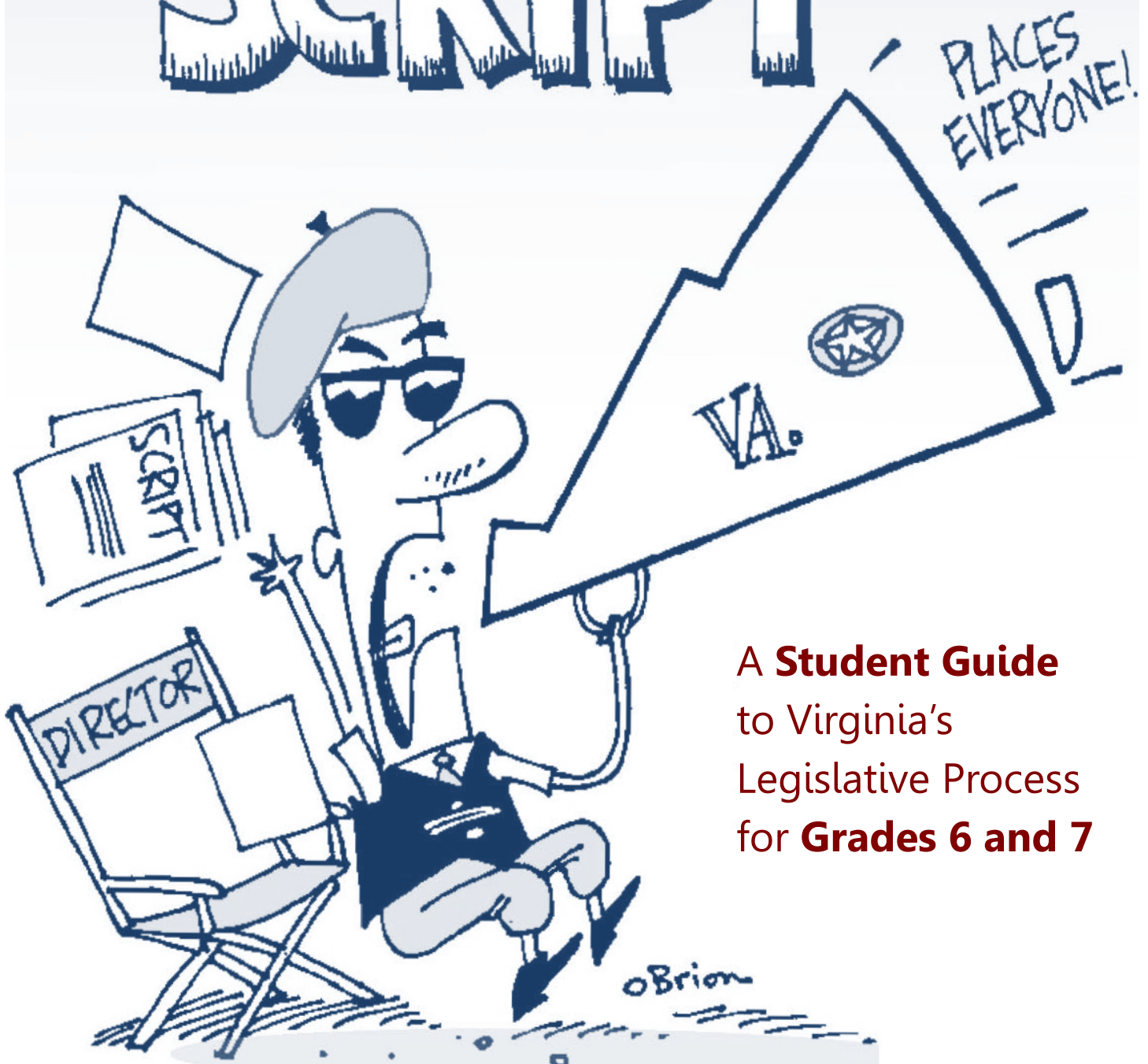


# A CAPITOL SCRIPT



A **Student Guide**  
to Virginia's  
Legislative Process  
for **Grades 6 and 7**



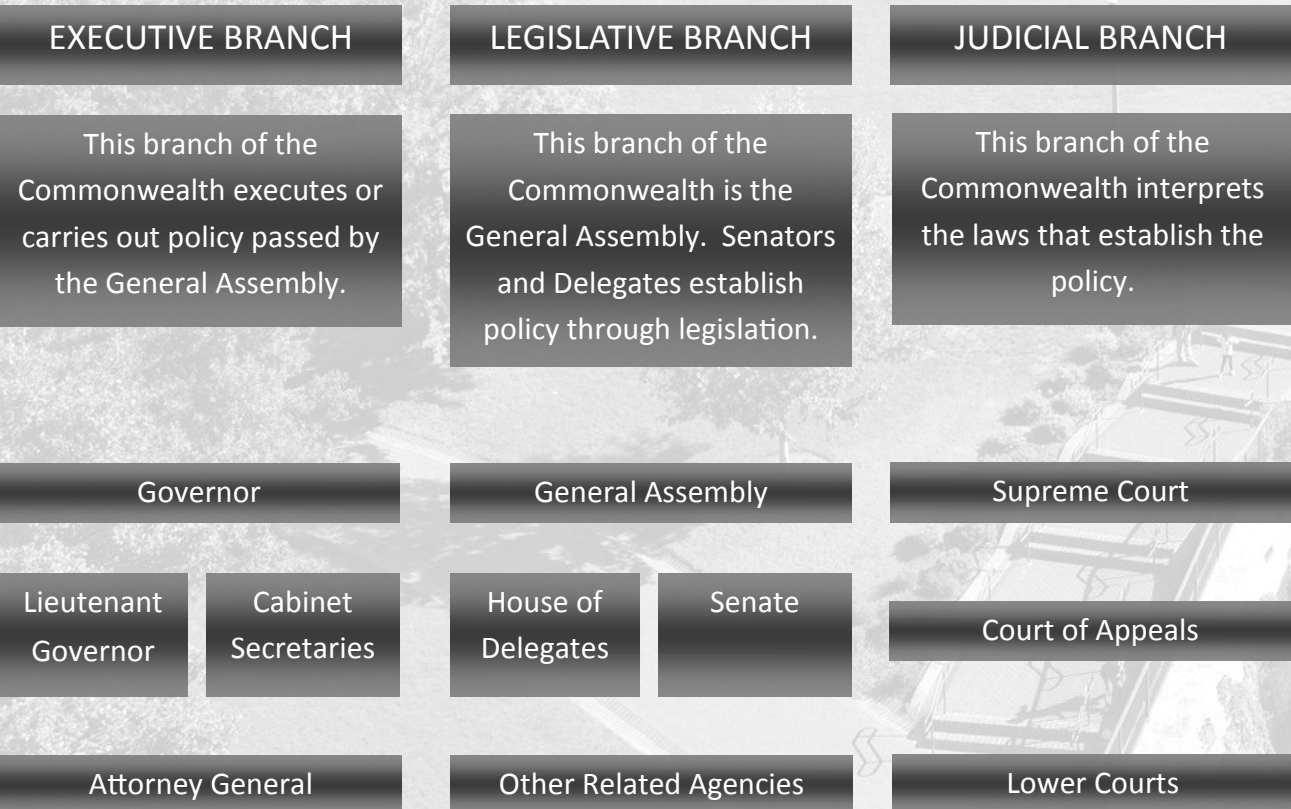
# Setting the Stage

The Constitution of Virginia was first approved in 1776. This document outlining Virginia's fundamental law has been completely revised on five occasions. Minor changes, also known as amendments, have been approved many more times. Changes or revisions to the Constitution of Virginia may be proposed by the Virginia General Assembly or a constitutional convention established by the legislative branch. Any changes must be approved by voters in the Commonwealth. The most-recent major revision occurred in 1971.

For Example, two changes were made to the Constitution of Virginia in 2000. The first change declared the right of people to hunt, fish and harvest game. The second change established the Lottery Proceeds Fund for all revenues from any state-run lottery. Those proceeds must then be spent locally for public education.

Two major components of the Constitution of Virginia are the provisions for three separate and distinct branches of state government, along with the election process for all statewide elected officials, legislators, members of local governing bodies and constitutional officers in localities.

State government is divided into three branches: executive, legislative and judicial. All branches are guided by the Constitution of Virginia.



# A Preview of Legislative Terms

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**AMENDMENT** A change made to legislation in committee or on the chamber floor that adds to, revises, or deletes language from the legislation.

**BILL** A proposal to amend, repeal or add sections to the Code of Virginia or Acts of Assembly.

**CALENDAR** The daily printed agenda of business for each house. The Calendar also contains scheduled committee meetings and public hearings.

**CODE OF VIRGINIA** A compilation of laws of the Commonwealth that is arranged alphabetically by subject, with each subject heading being referred to as a "Title."

**COMMITTEE** A group of legislators from the Senate or the House of Delegates organized for the purpose of considering and deciding on the disposition of a bill or resolution.

**CONSTITUENT** A citizen residing within the district of a legislator.

**ENGROSSED** A state in the legislative process when a bill passes the second reading in the house of origin.

**ENROLLED** Legislation which has passed both the Senate and the House of Delegates.

**JOURNAL** The compilation of legislative actions and proceedings of the Senate and House of Delegates which are published by their respective Clerk's office. The Journal is the official record of each legislative body.

**LEGISLATOR** An elected member of a legislative body.

**LEGISLATURE (GENERAL ASSEMBLY)** The branch of state government responsible for enacting laws.

**LOBBYIST** A person who represents a particular interest or group of interests before the General Assembly.

**MAJORITY LEADER** A member of the majority party designated to be its floor leader.

**MINORITY LEADER** A member of the minority party designated to be its floor leader.

**PATRON** A legislator who introduces a specific piece of legislation. Other legislators may show their support by signing on as co-patrons.

**SESSION** The period of time for which the legislature officially convenes. In even-numbered years, the Session meets for 60 days; in odd-numbered years it meets for 30 days. The Session may be extended for a maximum of 30 days. The odd-numbered year Sessions are usually extended to 46 days.

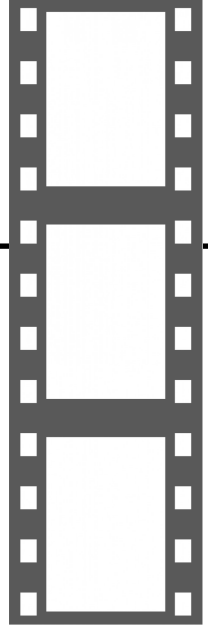
**VOTE, RECORDED** A roll call vote in which each member electronically votes yea, nay, or abstain. The vote is recorded in the Journal of each legislative body.

**VOTE, VOICE** Oral expression of the members when a question is submitted for their determination. Response is given by "yeas" and "nays," and the presiding officer states his/her decision as to which side prevails.

# Setting the Scene



The State Capitol not only serves as a functioning seat of government, but the building and surrounding grounds appear in many movie productions. Examples include “Lincoln” and “G.I. Jane.”



- Virginia’s General Assembly held its first session in Jamestown in 1619 (House of Burgesses). Jamestown was the capital of the colony until 1699, when Williamsburg became the seat of government. The Senate of Virginia was formed in 1776.
- Following the American Revolution, Virginia’s bicameral legislature (Senate and House of Delegates) began governing in 1776.
- In 1780, the General Assembly moved the capital to Richmond. The Assembly met in a building then known as the Cunningham Warehouse, located on the corner of Cary and 14th Streets, until the Capitol could be built.
- The Virginia State Capitol is the second oldest working Capitol in the United States, having been in continuous use since 1788 (Maryland has the oldest working Capitol, located in Annapolis). The cornerstone of the Virginia State Capitol was laid on August 18, 1785; the building was completed in 1792.
- Thomas Jefferson designed the central section and modeled it after the Maison Carée in Nîmes, France. Its most outstanding feature is an interior dome that is positioned twenty feet below an a-line roof and cannot be seen from the exterior. Flanking wings were added to the Capitol between 1904 and 1906.
- Virginia’s most treasured work of art, a life size statue of **George Washington**, is located in the Capitol Rotunda. This sculpture by Jean Antoine Houdon is the only statue of Washington for which he posed.
- The Capitol Rotunda also houses Houdon’s statue of Marquis de Lafayette, carved from life, and the busts of the other seven Virginia-born presidents: **Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor, and Woodrow Wilson.**



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# The Cast of Characters

The Commonwealth of Virginia is divided into 40 Senatorial Districts and 100 House of Delegates Districts. Each citizen is represented by a member of the Senate and a member of the House of Delegates. Each member of the Senate is elected for four years and each House member is elected for two years. The Constitution of Virginia does not limit the number of terms a legislator may serve. The Lieutenant Governor is the presiding officer of the Senate and is elected in a statewide election for a term of four years. In the event of his/her absence, the President pro tempore performs the duties of the presiding officer. The President pro tempore is a senior member who is elected by the members of the Senate for a four-year term. The Senate has a Majority Leader and a Minority Leader who are elected by their respective caucuses.



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## Supporting Roles

The Clerk of the Senate is elected by the Senators for a four-year term. The Clerk of the House is elected by the Delegates for a two-year term. The Senate Clerk's duties include overseeing the daily operations of the Senate, keeping the daily Journal, and referring bills to committees. The Clerk of the House is responsible for the administration of the House under the direction of the Speaker and is the Keeper of the Rolls of the Commonwealth.

### In the Spotlight

#### SENATE AND HOUSE PAGES

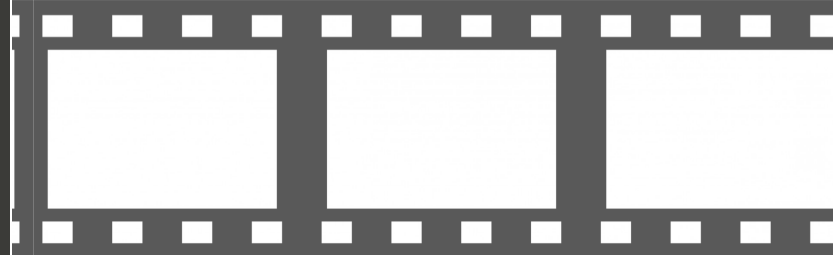
For each annual session of the General Assembly, Senators and Delegates appoint Pages in order to provide young people, **13 and 14 years of age**, the opportunity to observe and participate in the legislative process. In the Senate, the Clerk of the Senate also makes page appointments. In the House, the Speaker makes all page appointments.

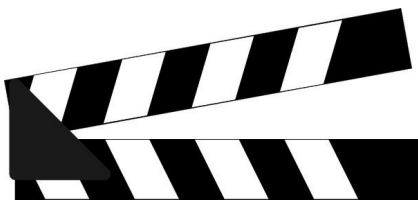
Legislative assistants aid Senators and Delegates in carrying out their duties. Their tasks include helping to draft speeches and remarks, assisting constituents, acting as a liaison between the member and state agencies, etc.

Pages are students from across the state who serve in Richmond during the General Assembly session. They learn about the legislative process by running errands, filing bills, and assisting at committee meetings.

#### SENATOR OR DELEGATE

In order to become a Senator or Delegate, a person must be at least **21 years of age**, an eligible voter, and reside in the district for which he is seeking to represent.





## Act 1: Preparation

Throughout the year, Senators are busy attending meetings and public hearings in Richmond and around the Commonwealth. These meetings are often called to study a particular issue. Ideas for new legislation may result. Senators also meet with constituents and civic groups, visit schools, and receive suggestions for proposed legislation. A Senator wishing to introduce legislation would request the Division of Legislative Services to draft the bill. Only members of the General Assembly may introduce legislation.

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## Act 2: The Committee Process



The Virginia General Assembly convenes at the State Capitol in Richmond on the second Wednesday of January each year. In even-numbered years, the session usually lasts 60 calendar days and in odd-numbered years the legislature meets for 46 calendar days.

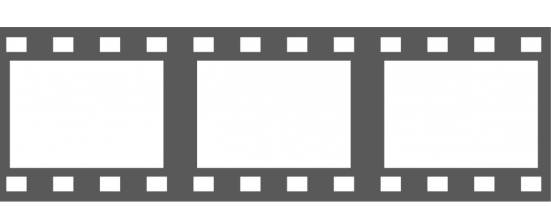
The Senate and House have standing committees to debate all introduced bills. The committee process allows each bill to receive careful consideration in each chamber. Senate bills are referred to one of ten standing committees or the Committee on Rules by the Clerk of the Senate. The Speaker of the House refers all House bills to one of 13 standing committees or the Committee on Rules.

Committees often hold public hearings on bills. This is an excellent opportunity for citizens to give input on proposed legislation. In an even-numbered year, a committee can continue the legislation to the next year.

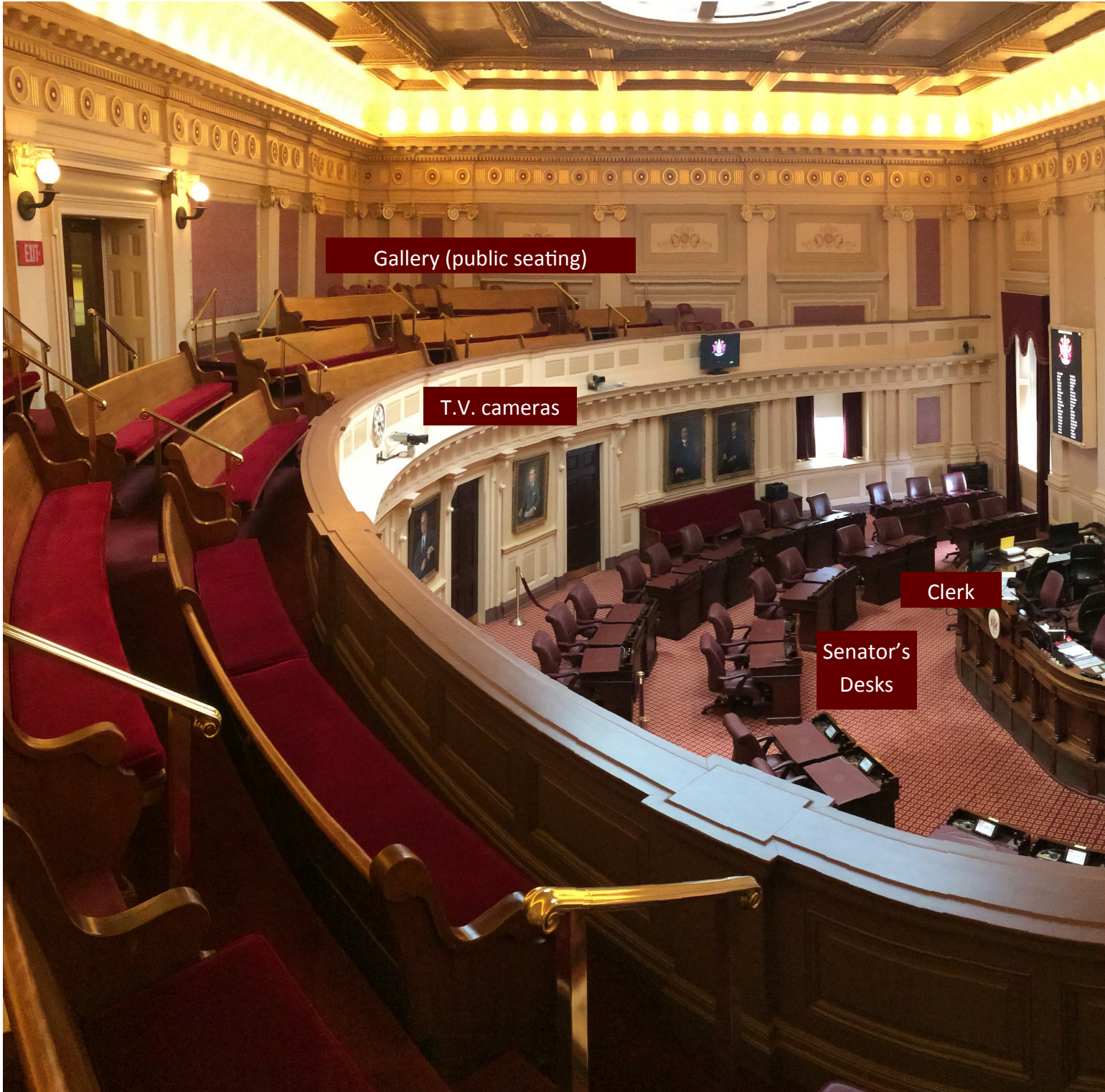
Bills are reported from committee before they are considered on the floor of the Senate or the floor of the House.

### “Take five” to learn about **standing committee procedure**

- Chair of the committee chooses the bill to be included on the docket, a meeting agenda made available to all patrons and interested parties.
- The regularly scheduled committee meeting is held.
- Chief patron explains the purpose of the bill.
- Experts may testify.
- Senators and Delegates pose questions.
- Public input (including testimony, letters, phone calls, e-mails, etc.).
- Committee action: Vote to report (bill goes to the House or Senate) OR recommend the bill to be referred to another committee OR defeat the bill/fail to act.



# Act 3: Floor Sessions



When a Senate committee votes in report a bill, the legislation is sent to the Senate Chamber for consideration by all 40 Senators. The bill title is read by the Clerk of the Senate three times. **First reading** indicates the bill was reported out of committee and is before the Senate. On **second reading** the bill can be amended. In other words, the bill can be changed. Those changes are

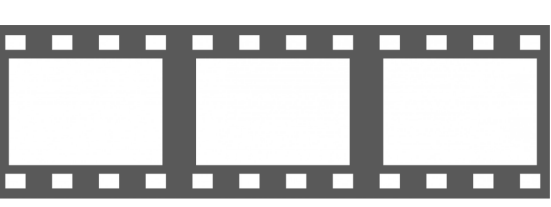


# Senate of Virginia



- The General Assembly is known as a citizen legislature. Most Senators and Delegates have full-time jobs such as lawyers, physicians, accountants and educators.
- The first woman to serve in the Senate of Virginia was elected in 1980, 60 years after women won the right to vote.
- Each Senator earns a salary of \$18,000 per year.
- Each Senator serves approximately 200,000 citizens.

considered and a vote is taken. On **third reading**, the bill can be debated amongst the Senators. A vote is taken to pass the bill or defeat the bill. Bills passed by the Senate are communicated to the House for consideration.



# Act 3: Floor Sessions



When a House committee votes in report a bill, the legislation is sent to the House Chamber for consideration by all 100 Delegates. The bill title is read by the Clerk of the House three times. **First reading** indicates the bill was reported out of committee and is before the House. On **second reading** the bill can be amended (changed). Those changes are considered and a vote is taken.

# Virginia House of Delegates



Speaker

Clerk

Page bench

- The first woman to serve in the House of Delegates was elected in 1924.
- Each Delegate earns a salary of \$17,640 per year.
- Each Delegate serves approximately 80,000 citizens.

Unlike the Senate, bills are debated by Delegates on second reading before moving the bill to third reading. On **third reading**, a vote is taken to pass the bill or defeat the bill. Bills passed by the House are communicated to the Senate for consideration.

*Desks in the Senate Chamber have been in continuous use since 1906.*



## Desks in the Senate

Desks in the Senate Chamber and House Chamber have power cords for electronic devices. Microphones are also available on desks in each chamber. The microphone allows everyone to be heard and must be used when a Senator or Delegate speaks. Microphones are wired to the desk on a retractable cord.

Voting consoles in the Senate (above) contain a variety of buttons. The **MIC** button turns the microphone on and off. Senators use the **REQUEST TO SPEAK** button to talk. Senators use the **REQUEST PAGE** button when they need assistance from a Senate Page. There are three buttons used when voting: **YE A** is pressed to vote in favor of a bill. **NAY** is pressed to vote against a bill. **R36** is pressed when a Senator is neither voting for or against the bill because of a conflict of interest. R36 stands for Rule 36, one of 54 Rules of the Senate that says Senators must participate in the voting process during a floor session. The voting console is also capable of displaying photos and information about Senators.

Voting consoles in the House of Delegates (below) look very different, but the buttons and their purpose are essentially the same.

## Desks in the House of Delegates



## Act 3 **EXTRA:**

If each house insists on its own form of a bill, a committee of conference is usually created. A compromise report from the committee is sent to each house for approval.



## Act 4: Governor's Action

The Governor can 1. sign a bill into law (if no action is taken within seven days, the bill becomes law). 2. amend and return bills (both chambers must approve those changes) or 3. veto and return the bill to the appropriate chamber (a veto may be overridden by 2/3 vote in both chambers).

Unless a specific effective date is provided in the bill, all laws from a regular session become effective on July 1 of the year of passage. If a bill contains an emergency clause, the effective date is the day that it is signed by the Governor.

The Governor may convene a special session when it is deemed necessary or advisable and must do so when petitioned by two-thirds of the legislators of both chambers. Laws passed during a special session become effective on the first day of the fourth month following adjournment, unless otherwise specified.

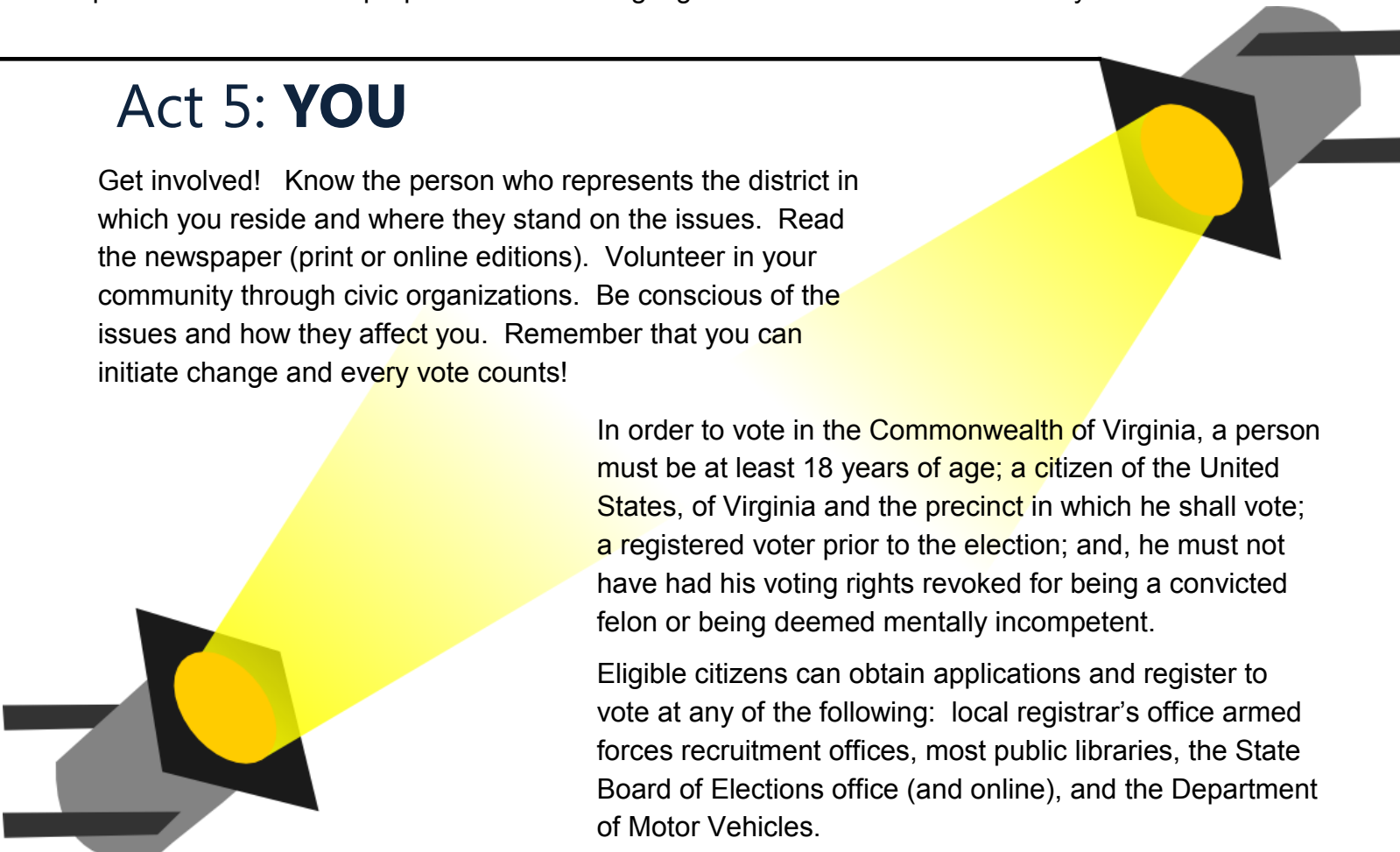
A reconvened session is held on the sixth Wednesday after adjournment of each regular and special session for the purpose of considering legislation amended and vetoed by the Governor.

## Act 5: **YOU**

Get involved! Know the person who represents the district in which you reside and where they stand on the issues. Read the newspaper (print or online editions). Volunteer in your community through civic organizations. Be conscious of the issues and how they affect you. Remember that you can initiate change and every vote counts!

In order to vote in the Commonwealth of Virginia, a person must be at least 18 years of age; a citizen of the United States, of Virginia and the precinct in which he shall vote; a registered voter prior to the election; and, he must not have had his voting rights revoked for being a convicted felon or being deemed mentally incompetent.

Eligible citizens can obtain applications and register to vote at any of the following: local registrar's office armed forces recruitment offices, most public libraries, the State Board of Elections office (and online), and the Department of Motor Vehicles.



# The Finale

When the Virginia General Assembly is in session, Senators and Delegates can be reached by calling their office on Capitol Square. When the legislature is adjourned for the year, all correspondence should be directed to their district office. Names, mailing addresses, e-mail addresses and telephone numbers are available in the “Members and Session” section of the Virginia General Assembly website. Some Senators and Delegates maintain separate social media pages and websites through which constituents are able to communicate.

Below is a sample piece of correspondence that may be used when drafting comments to your Senator or Delegate.

*January 15, 20\_\_\_\_\_*

*The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_*

*Street address*

*City, Virginia, Zip Code*

*Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_,*

*My name is \_\_\_\_\_, a \_\_\_\_\_ year old student who attends  
\_\_\_\_\_ (school name). I am writing to you because I am concerned  
about \_\_\_\_\_ (the issue you want to address). I think*

*Please vote \_\_\_\_\_ (for or against) this measure when it comes before the  
Senate (or House). Your consideration of my opinion is appreciated.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sign your name here and make sure it is legible.*



Produced by the Senate Clerk's Office  
Susan Clarke Schaar, Clerk of the Senate

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(804) 698-7410  
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“Capitol Classroom” and the Legislative Branch: <http://viriniageneralassembly.gov>

Executive Branch: <http://governor.virginia.gov>

Judicial Branch: <http://courts.state.va.us>

Commonwealth of Virginia: <http://virginia.gov>

State Board of Elections: <http://sbe.virginia.gov>

Department of Motor Vehicles: <http://dmv.virginia.gov>