

Washington State Democratic Party Advocacy Committee

January 2020 Report of the Advocacy Committee and 2020 Legislative Priorities FAQ

Legislative Priorities Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Q: What is the Legislative Priorities Agenda?

A: The Legislative Priorities Agenda is our “to-do list” for the current state legislative session. It spells out a selection of policy goals from our platform that we would like the House, Senate, and Governor Jay Inslee to focus on adopting. The Priorities Agenda is furnished to our legislators upon its adoption by the SCC. This is the third Agenda developed by the Advocacy Committee, following the 2018 and 2019 ones.

Q: When will the legislative session take place?

It's happening now. The session began in January and ends in March. In even numbered years, the Legislature only meets for sixty days, whereas in odd numbered years, it can meet for as long as one hundred and five days. These timeframes are set forth in the Washington State Constitution. When the Legislature cannot accomplish its essential business in a regular session, it goes into special session. Since Democrats regained the State Senate majority, however, there have not been any special sessions, nor are there likely to be this year. Democratic legislative leaders want to end on time so that they can go out on the campaign trail. (While in session, state-level officeholders may not raise funds for their reelection; this is known as “the freeze”.)

Q: What's the difference between the Legislative Priorities Agenda and the platform?

A: The platform is a comprehensive document we develop every two years laying out our positions on the issues and our vision for Washington and the United States. It's created by the Platform Committee and adopted by the Washington State Democratic Convention. The Agenda is a document the Advocacy Committee creates each year for the State Central Committee to adopt. The platform focuses more on the long term; it is only rewritten every forty-eight months. The Agenda is more like a short-term “to-do list”, as previously stated. The Agenda is very much fueled by the platform, so while the two documents aren't the same, they are related.

Q: Aside from the content in our platform, what data or input drives the creation of the Legislative Priorities Agenda? How did the Advocacy Committee decide what to put in this year's list?

A: Here's a breakdown of where the priorities in this year's Agenda came from.

- Many items (like death penalty abolition) are carried over from 2018 or 2019 because the Legislature didn't get them done and we're seeking to get them over the finish line in 2020.
- Most new items were proposed by grassroots Democratic leaders who took our Priorities survey. The survey got an excellent response, with participants from every region of the state. We heard an overwhelming desire for progressive tax reform and a capital gains tax, so that is listed first. Survey takers also heavily emphasized the need for climate action, so that is our second bucket.
- Constituency caucuses and constituency caucus leaders also influenced the content of the Agenda. For example, members of the Small Business Caucus told us they wanted to see a priority pertaining to lowering B&O tax obligations for small businesses. We acted on their input and included that.

- The Advocacy Committee also heard from Democratic legislators regarding bills they intend to work on in the upcoming session. A significant number of our priorities are bills that passed one house last session, but not the other. These are ideal candidates for a “to-do list” in a short session. Some are carried over, as mentioned above, but we’ve also added several new ones – like comprehensive sex ed.

Q: A bill I’m interested in isn’t mentioned or referred to in the Agenda. Does that mean the party will not be doing any work to support that bill?

A: No. Think of the Agenda as a starting point for the session. It’s a reference meant to give legislators and the public a sample of the issues that we want to call attention to. The Agenda is not the extent of our advocacy; the Agenda is rather our seasonal menu, so to speak. A Priorities Agenda cannot be exhaustive because then it wouldn’t be a list of priorities at all. If we were to try to prioritize everything, then we’d be prioritizing nothing.

Q: What has to happen for the Priorities (or any other bills we care about) to become laws?

A: Bills or budget provisos must get an affirmative vote in each chamber (fifty ayes in the House, twenty-five ayes in the Senate) after clearing the committee process and getting leadership’s approval. Bills with fiscal impacts are subjected to additional scrutiny by fiscal committees – in the House, the Appropriations Committee; in the Senate, the Ways & Means Committee. The House also has a fiscal committee that focuses on revenue – the Finance Committee. Finally, Governor Inslee must sign a bill for it to become law. It’s not an easy process, especially not when the Legislature is on a tight timeframe, as it is in this short session.