EVANS SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC POLICY & GOVERNANCE
UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

Project for Civic Health

2025 LEGISLATIVE INTERVIEW REPORT

Background

The Joint Select Committee on Civic Health was established under Senate Concurrent Resolution 8414 as a bipartisan committee. It is aligned with the statewide Project for Civic Health which seeks to bring together people concerned about the current polarized climate to develop practical ideas and take intentional action to engage with respect and disagree productively.

In the summer of 2025, the Joint Select Committee on Civic Health commissioned the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy & Governance to interview Washington state senators and representatives to reflect on the 2025 session and describe their ideas for cultivating civic health in the Washington State Legislature going forward. The goal of this interview project is to: support legislators, individually and collectively, in reflecting on their roles as public servants and their work with fellow lawmakers; surface shared themes and places of agreement across party lines; and glean practical recommendations to working with greater collaboration and civility in future legislative sessions.

Methods

We targeted a representative sample of legislators, and fifty-one participated in semi-structured interviews. They were asked about their roles, their experiences, and their ideas about how to bolster civic health in the state legislature. An even representation of members by party and chamber, with slightly higher representation from Republican Senators, participated. Interview notes were inductively coded to sort observed challenges and suggested solutions into related categories. Analysis proceeded through summarizing these themes.

Table One: (Number) Percent Interviewed by Party and Chamber

Party	House	Senate	% of Total Party Members
Democrat	(21) 36%	(10) 33%	35%
Republican	(12) 31%	(8) 42%	34%
Grand Total	**(33) 34%**	**(18) 37%**	**(51) 35%**

Findings

The interviews focused on legislators' experiences with the 2025 session; however, these experiences shaped their broader understanding of their jobs and what they can do in the future.

Members voiced that they faced obstacles and challenges throughout the 2025 session, ranging from poor or absent interpersonal relationships between members, processes and concerns that hinder effective participation, and an inadequately structured or antiquated institution. A majority indicated that the last legislative session was difficult. Many described it as "terrible," "horrible," "tough," "frustrating," "brutal," and the worst that some people had ever seen. The difficulty of the session caused one interviewee to remark that they no longer knew if they wanted to keep serving as a state legislator. Given this reality, identifying perceived and experienced problems can unify efforts to improve future conditions within the Legislature.

Interpersonal Interactions and its Consequences

The interviews were striking because legislators talked about interpersonal issues related to ideology in ways that were unexpected. While there were disagreements across the political aisle, there were also significant differences among members of both the Democratic and Republican caucuses, particularly in the House. Within the Democratic party, there was a sentiment of fear. Members are afraid to offer their opinions or speak up. It can be "crucifying," as one lawmaker characterized it, when on the opposite side of the dominant party position.

One Democratic legislator told a story in which she moved to block a bill introduced by a member of her own party. As a result, she was shamed, bullied, and called names. Others offered similar experiences of retribution and pushback, including being denied the chance to speak on the floor. Factions within parties have created an environment where legislators are competing with and fighting against their own party members. There were moments where one lawmaker "felt better and safer alone in a room with a member from the other side than another Democrat." A lack of civility within caucuses appears just as much, if not more, of a concern as between them.

> *"... curiosity is not welcome, dissent is not welcome, questions are not welcome ... The culture discourages asking questions or speaking truth or having substantive differences of opinion."*

Expectedly, interviewees described the political challenge of bipartisan collaboration. Multiple comments detailed how support for policies was purely partisan—there is political pressure to disagree with ideas presented by the opposing party, even if someone agrees with or sees value in a bill. Members serve alongside colleagues who are closed minded, combative, and "ideologically entrenched." One legislator described how hard it is to stray outside of their party and hear other perspectives, given party pressure, personal ideology, institutional silos, and the high-stress nature of session. A Democratic lawmaker shared how she secretly worked on policy with colleagues across the aisle, knowing that her party would vote against it otherwise. There is a clear sentiment that working with the other side is stigmatized and discouraged. Another House Democrat stated that there were instructions from party leadership in both caucuses to freshmen legislators not to sign onto bills from the other party.

Tactics and control of information are also used to inconvenience and punish opposing parties, imply "because they can." Others discussed instances where voting against bills favored by committee chairs resulted in their own being procedurally killed in retaliation. Some members

felt their colleagues view those across the aisle as enemies to be defeated by any means rather than political opponents with differing values. Political pressures by parties and colleagues hinder working together across the aisle. Interestingly, senators on both sides said their chamber was relatively tamer than the House, attributing it to the fact that Democrats were themselves in the minority less than a decade ago. Having been in the minority more recently, there was greater empathy for their Republican colleagues.

> *"Some [legislators] are so ideologically entrenched that they won't vote for another member's bill just because it comes from that member."*

Legislators consistently reported poor and aggressive communication patterns within the Legislature. Some members refused to talk to one another. Since Democrats have a majority in both chambers, there is little desire to listen to or include Republicans, according to interviewees on both sides of the aisle. Lawmakers noted that leadership in the House often does not communicate to minority members simple process details, such as when they plan to end session for the day. Discussions and negotiations involving party leadership often occur behind closed doors in a way that keeps members on both sides of the aisle "in the dark."

> *"Some [legislators] ... are totally closed off and there's no point talking to them; they're there to fight a war."*

Beyond a lack of communication, legislators spoke specifically about more hostile behaviors. There is a perception that rhetoric dehumanizing, belittling, blaming, "othering," or villainizing the opposing caucus has increased. One Democratic representative shared how her party leadership threatened her with arrest and having her capital project funding withheld if she left the Capitol Campus early. There were also accounts of yelling and screaming in the caucus rooms and on the chamber floor. Civil, respectful communication is critical for developing healthier, more productive relationships within and between caucuses.

Outside of the Legislature, issues around the media create further barriers to cooperation. A couple of legislators pointed out the lack of a dedicated journalist covering the State Legislature. Several others commented that the media fails to highlight the overwhelming amount of bipartisan work being done or the positive elements of what happens in Olympia. Some worry about how they will be portrayed in the media, while other members actively employ social media to further exacerbate partisan issues and encourage division.

> *"One of the real problems we have is social media. Some people have the tendency to call on the mob to assist them."*

These conditions have created a climate with a significant lack of trust, not only between parties but within them among colleagues. Members "hold their cards to their chest," operating out of fear of repercussions for expressing themselves. Others see their ideas subverted by opponents in the chamber. Acting out of self-preservation risks being perceived as "sneaky" by fellow lawmakers. Some people feel that they are backed into corners and cannot be vulnerable because it will be used against them by members across the aisle and in their own party alike. A Republican senator shared that he made political concessions with the understanding that there would be a compromise from the majority, but Democrats took the concessions without honoring what he had been promised. He felt the minority was shown no respect in taking part in the legislative process. If there is going to be collaboration within and between parties to accomplish the work of passing laws for the citizens of Washington, there must be trust among members.

How the Structure of the Job Contributes to These Challenges

Time significantly impacts the work of legislators. There often is not enough time to form relationships or collaborate with one another. Lawmakers indicated they often feel they lack enough time to converse with colleagues about legislation or offer amendments on bills. There is also not enough time in session to thoroughly vet and deliberate all bills and budgets from the other party or chamber, causing the resulting legislation to suffer. Simply, there is not enough time for every person to ask their questions and thoroughly review all material before voting.

Time has also constrained the ability to create relationships among caucus colleagues and those on the other side. Late nights and long hours, especially in the House, have led to a deterioration of product quality and physical health, further straining existing relationships and potential collaboration. Existing timelines and cutoff dates have manufactured pressure that prevents legislators' ability to work effectively.

> *"It's hard to change people's minds in such a short amount of time, especially when everyone is so busy."*

Interviewees identified issues within the institutional processes and structures of the Legislature that hindered robust policymaking. One Democrat noted that there are a lot of good bills by the end of session, but the threat of a long floor fight prevents them from being debated. Several other members pointed out the power a handful of individuals have (e.g., floor leaders and committee chairs) in unilaterally determining which bills move forward and who can speak on policy. While each chamber can set internal policies, the House lacks defined operational hours, resulting in frequent late-night business and impacting the amount of sleep representatives get. It was also mentioned that budgets are presented to the minority party near the very end of session without adequate time to read and respond to what is proposed. Existing procedures, including closed door and caucus meetings, limit robust open debate throughout the policy process.

Several Republicans, as well as some Democrats, expressed concern with the suspension of debate by a simple majority vote last session. Legislators who felt impacted by that decision

believed trust had been undermined and that they were silenced from contributing useful, impactful information or speaking about their position. Others felt it set a dangerous precedent or resulted in unintended consequences as the process slowed down further with resulting roll call votes. More generally, some Republican members feel decorum and procedural rules are not being enforced equitably in the chamber. Some stakeholders—such as state agencies and labor—have been described as having outsized influence in the policy process over other impacted parties. The part-time nature and salary of the Legislature create a burden for many citizens to run. For districts further away from Olympia, geographic constraints can take an additional toll on legislators. Each of these procedural and structural challenges impact lawmakers' ability to effectively and successfully do their job..

Legislators also shared heightened concerns for their personal safety. Several members expressed fear for their safety and security given recent political assassinations and an uptick in violence across the country. Others have seen a rise in aggressive actors here at home, including shouting and invasive individuals and stalkers and protestors who threaten their safety.

Ideas for Change and Recommendations for Action

Having over one third of the Legislature participate in this project suggests that there is hope that people want to move beyond past challenges. With many veteran legislators sharing the opinion that this last session was one of, if not the worst, they had ever experienced, it is imperative to consider how to make changes. In the interviews, people clearly recognized critical issues and have a desire to find solutions. Continuing down the current path will mean a further erosion of communication, trust, and opportunities for collaboration, not only with those across the aisle but also within their own caucuses. That division could further prevent bipartisanship and discourage members who value civility and collaboration from serving. Time will continue to constrain effective policymaking efforts and relationship building, and personal safety will remain a real concern among members. Other existing processes and structures will continue to alienate legislators and hinder more robust work at the capitol. All these things will result in greater polarization and further risk to the effectiveness of our governing institutions.

Yet Legislators suggested a range of recommendations to mitigate or counteract the challenges they had previously identified.

Opportunities to Build Quality Relationships

- *Intentional Personal Interactions –* Engage in one-on-one meetings with colleagues inside and outside their caucus to get to know them personally and their policy interests. Understanding other legislators' policy positions can uncover unlikely allies when future opportunities arise. Knowing them personally can result in social connections that discourage villainization.

- *Legislature-/Leadership-Sponsored Social Events –* Host a leadership-involved and approved dinner or friendly competition to encourage greater engagement among members. These sorts of events, like the frequently cited former "Odd Couples Dinner," offer a chance for lawmakers to get to know one another without the political pressure present within the chamber. Several members felt current ethics rules made individually hosting or attending non-Legislature-approved dinners challenging.

- **District Visits –** Tour the districts of other members. This helps policymakers get to know the context and community their colleagues represent and can serve as a friendly way to make a connection with the respective member(s).
- **Interacting with Respect –** Be friendly, gracious, and grateful to other members, especially those across the aisle. Consider small gestures like introducing yourself and occasionally checking in on colleagues or sending simple congratulatory and appreciative messages in email correspondence or floor notes.

Changes in Processes and Practices

- **Improving Legislator Onboarding –** Attempt to remove partisanship and party labels from the freshmen onboarding process. This—at least initially—can offer freshmen an opportunity to get to know one another and establish relationships before the stress of session that would otherwise be discouraged.
- **Integrating Space for All Ideas –** Integrate times and spaces where bills and votes could be made without judgement or retribution. One representative referenced conscience votes used in parliamentary systems where members have a space to voice their personal opinion over the party's. Employing this or a similar concept, at least occasionally or for certain votes, would address the wide-spread fear in voicing an opinion contrary to the party's position.
- **Codes of Conduct –** Use more robust chamber and caucus codes of conduct that outline acceptable behavior. This could combat behaviors such as name calling and bullying, as long as there is a clear enforcement mechanism the respective body can use.
- **Establishing Clear Procedures –** Detail clear chamber processes and practices where they are otherwise vague or contentious. For instance, setting a firm end-of-day time in the House similar to the Senate will offer clarity to representatives.
- **Greater Transparency –** Normalize communication and transparency between parties and between leadership and their members. This could foster greater trust and buy-in from more legislators. Inviting a "party liaison" or representative from each side into the opposing party caucus or closed-door discussions would provide a useful perspective during internal conversations and promote greater transparency. This offers another communication channel and prevents parties from being blindsided.
- **Restructured Debate and Discussion –** Increase the time allowed for debate in committees and on the floor, especially before a vote. This would encourage a sense of participation, allow for additional collaboration, and address a loss of trust from the minority party after last session.
- **Increased Public Participation –** Allow for more public comment time during meetings and hearings and equitably prioritize those who exert significant effort and resources to be present. This would help better inform policies and be fairer to constituents.
- **Caucus-Prioritized Bills –** As a caucus, determine which bills should be prioritized and focused on at the start of session, possibly using a rough bill total cap. This would promote greater focus on critical bills, resulting in higher-quality products and potentially allowing more time for further debate and public comment.

- ***Bipartisan Collaboration and Connection –*** Require bills to have a co-sponsor from the other party or an amendment from the opposition, or similar concept. This would promote collaboration, which is beneficial for sustainable policy. Leadership should also encourage and model bipartisanship rather than ostracize it.

Other Structural Changes

- ***Altering the Length or Structure of Session*** – Consider including a short recess in the middle of session or after an unforeseen event to allow members to visit their families, rest and recover, connect with stakeholders, and return to the communities they serve. Although more challenging to implement, some members suggested lengthening session for a longer period of the year or to full-time.
- ***Legislator Compensation –*** Adjust compensation to reflect the time members devote to their position inside and outside of session. Ensure the salary is a livable wage that allows more citizens the opportunity to run for office.
- ***Altering Physical Spaces and Features –*** Integrate Republicans and Democrats among each other when seated on the chamber floor rather than divided by party. Consider providing more non-/bipartisan collaborative spaces where legislators from both sides can meet and work together without judgement.

Conclusion

While these interviews reveal significant challenges—ranging from strained relationships and partisan pressures to structural and procedural obstacles—they also highlight a strong desire among legislators to improve the climate of collaboration and trust. The recommendations offered demonstrate practical steps that could foster civility, transparency, and bipartisan engagement. Moving forward, implementing even a portion of these ideas could help transform the Legislature into a more effective and respectful institution.