Virtual Snapshot Series

The Senate Chamber
The Senate

The Senate is the upper house of the New Jersey Legislature. Senators sponsor and vote on ideas for laws called bills. They also confirm all appointments made by the governor, including judges. The Senate has 40 legislators. One Senator is elected from each of New Jersey’s 40 legislative districts.

Senators typically serve four-year terms. They must be at least 30 years of age, a United States citizen, a New Jersey resident for four years prior to an election, and a resident of their district for at least one year prior to an election.
The Senate President

The rostrum, a two-tiered platform located at the front of the Senate chamber floor, is where the Senate President and Senate Secretary work.

The upper level of the platform is for the Senate President. The Senate President is voted into the position by the other Senators, and is typically from the majority party. They choose what bills are introduced and voted on, and determine the rules for discussing a bill in the chamber. The Senate President is the second in line to become acting governor if the governor becomes incapacitated, leaves office, or travels out of New Jersey for an extended period of time.
The Senate Secretary

The lower level of the rostrum is for the Senate Secretary. The Secretary plays an administrative role and is responsible for taking attendance (referred to as a quorum call), announcing the bills, and reporting the vote totals made by the legislators. The Secretary is appointed by the Senate President and is not a legislator.
Voting in the Chamber

The Senators meet in a special room called a chamber. Each of the 40 Senators have their own desks.

Voting for bills in the Senate is tracked on electronic boards to the upper right and left of the Senate rostrum. Senators push buttons on their desks to cast their votes. Green buttons are marked with “yea” (yes) and red buttons are marked with “nay” (no). Members push a white button to ask for permission to speak.
The Public Gallery

During a legislative session, members of the public are invited to sit in the gallery — a balcony that overlooks the chamber floor. Members of the press, executive branch, and lobbyists (people whose business is to try and influence public policy) may also sit in the public gallery.

Citizens in the public gallery are not allowed to speak during a session, but they can share their opinions about a bill earlier in the legislative process as legislators discuss bills in committee hearings. Senate proceedings are televised over cable networks and streamed online in real time on the New Jersey Legislature’s website.
During the 1700s and 1800s, the Senate met in two different locations in the State House. The chamber on the left was located in the original State House structure built in 1792. The chamber on the right was used from 1871 until 1900. By 1900, the Senate needed a larger meeting space with better air circulation.
The Senate Chamber

The Senate chamber was completed in 1903 at a cost of $250,000. During construction, the Senate met at the Trenton House, a local hotel. The Senate held its first legislative session in the chamber on January 12, 1904.

In 1903 there were only 21 Senators, one from each county in New Jersey. In the 1960s, the number of Senators increased to 40 when the legislative district map was created to allow for equal representation. The increase in Senators led to the demolition of a wall in the back of the chamber to accommodate the new legislators.
The chamber includes many fine details including Corinthian columns, stained glass windows and skylights, hand painted murals, and a faux marble called scagliola (ska-lee-o-la).

Made from plaster and pigments, scagliola covers the walls and columns of the Senate chamber and hallways. It is designed to resemble marble.

The entrance of the chambers is flanked by stained glass windows depicting figures of Peace and Justice.
Look Up!

The ceiling’s stained glass dome contains the names of New Jerseyans who contributed to the history of the state. They include inventors, Revolutionary War figures, politicians, and Civil War generals.

Recognizable names include:
William Livingston, New Jersey’s first governor
John Witherspoon, Declaration of Independence signer
George B. McClellan, Civil War General
Garrett A. Hobart, U.S. Vice President
Seth Boyden, Inventor
Joseph Henry, Scientist and Secretary of the Smithsonian
Murals

Sixteen murals painted under the direction of William Brantley Van Ingen are featured in alcoves along the upper walls. Van Ingen was inspired by the state motto, “Liberty and Prosperity.” The murals depict industries that made New Jersey prosperous and Revolutionary War engagements that helped make us free. The mural directly over the Senate rostrum (pictured bottom left) includes the figures of Liberty, on the right holding a rifle, and Prosperity, on the left, cradling a cornucopia filled with fruits and vegetables.