

Veto Session Quiet Compared to Recent Years

This week legislators from across the State of Missouri assembled in Jefferson City for veto session. According to the Missouri Constitution the legislature is required to reconvene in September to consider overriding the governor's veto of any bills passed during the regular session that ended in May. The purpose of the veto session is to promote the necessary balance of power between the three branches of government. While the governor is given broad authority to veto an act of the legislature's 197 members, our system of government attempts to keep the state's chief executive from having too much power by giving the legislature a chance to override his veto.

Historically veto overrides are extremely rare. The main reason is that both the Missouri House of Representatives and the Missouri Senate must vote by a two-thirds majority to override. Though some bills vetoed by the governor may have passed the legislature with the support of more than two-thirds of the House and Senate during the regular session in the spring, the dynamics are different in September during veto session. One of the main reasons is that legislators who happen to be of the same party as the governor are often unwilling to embarrass him by voting to override. Consequently, bills are hardly ever overridden. In fact, there were only 2 vetoes overridden between the Civil War and 1999.

However, in recent years there has been a trend towards more frequent veto overrides. During the last 5 years alone the legislature has overridden 4 bills. There are two reasons for this. First, in the past few years Missouri has undergone a major political shift as both the House and Senate, which for most of the last half of the twentieth century were controlled by the Democratic party, now have Republican majorities. With the legislature controlled by one party and the governor's office controlled by another, the likelihood of a veto becomes greater. But the recent trend towards more overrides during the Carnahan and Holden administrations cannot be explained by party affiliation alone. There is nothing new in Missouri about having a legislature and a governor of different political parties. For example, when John Ashcroft was Missouri's governor for 8 years he never had a veto overridden even though in 1985 the Democrats came within one vote of having a two-thirds standing majority in the House of Representatives.

The main cause for the increase in veto overrides has had more to do with the overwhelming support of legislators of both parties for the rights of the unborn and the right to bear arms. These two issues have transcended party lines and have formed supermajorities of legislative support in both the House and Senate. The solid coalition of Republican and Democratic lawmakers on these two issues has led to 4 vetoes over the past 5 years, surpassing all the veto override votes in Missouri history since the Civil War combined.

Unlike the controversial veto sessions in years past, this is an election year and the session was more quiet with no vetoes overridden. It remains to be seen if the trend towards more vetoes will continue. I suspect it will depend on whether or not the person who next occupies the governor's office takes positions that are out of step with supermajorities of the legislature, positions that even his or her own party deems more important than party unity.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.state.mo.us. Also, you can read any of the bills I file on my website at: www.senate.mo.gov/bartle Thank you again for making it possible for me to serve in the Missouri Senate.