

WisPolitics.com study of committee rolls finds attendance gaps for some lawmakers

State Reps. John Macco and Beth Meyers each missed 32 percent of their committee meetings in the past session, the highest absentee marks in the Legislature, a WisPolitics.com review finds.

By comparison, eight of 99 Assembly members and 20 of 33 senators, including those who served partial terms, closed out the session with perfect attendance records. Overall and not including partial terms, reps missed meetings at an average 9 percent clip in the past session, while senators closed the two-year period with a 2 percent absentee rate.

Lawmakers at both ends of the spectrum noted the attendance difference in the houses partially stems from the Senate's letting committee members call in, while the Assembly doesn't follow that protocol. Others added several legislators were dealing with family health problems.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos' spokeswoman, Kit Beyer, highlighted the preponderance of family illnesses, saying in an email in response to the attendance study "there have been times when a member has had to attend to a sick loved one at home."

Macco, for example, had to care for his cancer-stricken wife. That was not an issue for Meyers, who cited, among other things, the long distance from her northern district to Madison.

Sen. Alberta Darling also had extraordinary circumstances. The River Hills Republican's husband died last year, and the Joint Finance Committee co-chair said she missed meetings either when she was with him in Florida for a transplant or when he was in the hospital.

"If that isn't a good enough reason for missing meetings," Darling said, "I don't know what would be."

She served on six committees and missed 11 of 85 meetings, placing her second in absentee percentage in the Senate with 13 percent. Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, was first in percentage, but he missed only one of six meetings.

Darling, Macco criticize attendance review, note health issues with spouses

Darling described the attendance count as a "crummy" way to measure lawmakers' performance, and she explained the reasons behind all of her missed meetings.

She said she never missed a vote, either on the floor or in committee.

"The only vote I would have missed," she said, "was accepting the governor's budget, and that was a formality."

Macco's wife, he said, was diagnosed with cancer in August. The Ledgeview Republican was on six committees and missed 30 of 93 meetings, though he also pointed out he never missed a floor session.

"I think it's impossible to get to absolutely every meeting unless your workload is so little that you're not pulling your weight," said Macco, a freshman legislator, financial advisor and asset manager who started Macco Financial Group, Green Bay, with his son.

Rep. Evan Goyke made it to every meeting. The Milwaukee Dem, like Macco, was on six committees and was 72 for 72 in attendance.

Goyke, like other lawmakers who had perfect attendance records, said showing up is part of the job. Though, like those other lawmakers, he acknowledged luck played a role, particularly in the crush of bills at the end of the session when committee schedules were stacked every day.

"I can't speak to what somebody did or didn't do, but I can tell you what I did, and that's: I jogged," said Goyke, who is single and a full-time legislator.

Macco, like other lawmakers at or near the top of the absentee list, also took issue with the WisPolitics.com attendance study. He said the point people will take from it is the percentage, but, he argued, that tells only a portion of the story.

"I think it's a disingenuous statistic," Macco said, "that really doesn't show the efficacy of what's been done."

The idea for the attendance count came from criticism lobbed at U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, who is facing Dem challenger Russ Feingold, over the number of Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee meetings the Oshkosh Republican missed. WisPolitics.com took the idea and applied it to the Legislature.

The records check focused on attendance noted in all records of committee proceedings published on the Legislature's website for standing and joint committees and task forces. The study did not differentiate between "absent" and "excused." After compiling the numbers from the ROCs, WisPolitics.com double-checked the overall number of meetings with each committee clerk.

Macco used Meyers, D-Bayfield, to illustrate his complaint over rankings based on percentage of meetings missed. The two tied atop the Legislature, but, he said, she was on two fewer committees and, with 41 meetings, had 52 fewer than were on his schedule.

"Her unproductivity number would be twice as high as mine," Macco said.

Meyers: Distance contributes to record

Meyers said she never missed a floor session or committee exec despite facing an up to six-hour drive from her district.

She said she had an "excellent record of attending standing committees." Of the 13 meetings she missed in the session, eight were from the Speaker's Task Force on Alzheimer's and Dementia.

"But it wasn't because I was being lackadaisical," Meyers said, adding she was "surprised" by her percentage of missed meetings.

She said she also spends much of her time focused on her district. While she said she doesn't think she was on too many committees or that the workload was too much, the attendance numbers have her attention.

"I think going forward," Meyers said, "we'll have an eye on this a little closer."

Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca used Meyers as an example of how the numbers could get skewed by including in the attendance count task forces that might meet "all over the state." The Kenosha Dem also said committee chairs play a role, particularly because some often give little notice of upcoming meetings.

He said he checks in ahead of time to see what kind of workload people can carry, but ranking committee members also shoulder responsibility once meetings get rolling.

"The minority has fewer members," Barca said, "so ranking members, there's a lot of pressure on them to make sure members are at the meetings."

Those in the Legislature with the most meetings in the past session were:

*Sen. Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg: eight committees, 128 meetings, 2 percent missed;

*Sen. Leah Vukmir, R-Brookfield: six committees, 127 meetings, 8 percent missed;

*Rep. JoCasta Zamarripa, D-Milwaukee: six committees, 124 meetings, 2 percent missed;

*Rep. John Jagler, R-Watertown: eight committees, 123 meetings, 11 percent missed;

*and Sen. Frank Lasee, R-De Pere: six committees, 115 meetings, 3 percent missed.

Risser rips call-in option for Senate

While some suggested removing task forces from the attendance count, others, such as Sen. Fred Risser, said the records review didn't include enough.

The Madison Dem placed just below Darling on the Senate's absentee list at 10 percent, missing nine of 87 meetings. He served on five committees but took issue with that, saying it didn't take into account his membership on multiple boards, including the Historical Society of Wisconsin's Board of Curators and the State Capitol and Executive Residence Board.

He also hammered the Senate's call-in allowance for attendance, saying the policy gives credit to people who phone in for roll call and then disappear. Risser said the WisPolitics.com attendance list isn't really that but rather a record of what the committee clerks say are check-ins for a quorum.

"I really think a lot of those call-ins are fictitious attendance," Risser said, later adding, "The committee clerks are going to do everything they can to make it look like their members are present."

But there's a reason for the call-in policy, Sen. Jon Erpenbach said. Senate districts are much larger than those for the Assembly, he said, and senators, by extension, often have more ground to cover that takes them away from the Capitol.

The Middleton Dem, though, had a perfect attendance record, serving on four committees with 87 meetings.

"Hey, a gold star for me. I was always really good at attendance in school," Erpenbach joked, adding his proximity to the Capitol and schedule flexibility made it "easy" for him.

But no legislator, Erpenbach said, wants to miss committee meetings. And that's particularly true for those in the minority because committees offer the best chance for those in opposition to speak out.

Attendance a top priority for some

Sen. Howard Marklein, though, echoed others in saying attendance is a job requirement.

The Spring Green Republican had a perfect record on five committees with 112 meetings.

"I didn't know that missing a meeting was an option," Marklein said.

Still, Risser said, he would put his attendance record against any senator's. For instance, he said, for the Senate's Judiciary and Public Safety Committee, of which he missed four of 45 meetings, it often was just him, Sen. Lena Taylor and Chairman Sen. Van Wanggaard physically present in the room.

"You're not listing the time spent," Risser said.

Risser's arguments drew agreement from Rep. Al Ott. The retiring 30-year Assemblyman finished his final session with a perfect attendance record on five committees with 57 meetings.

The Forest Junction Republican said attendance is a high priority for him but acknowledged all lawmakers are different with different responsibilities. Still, he said, he's noticed that having "a computer in your pocket" has changed behavior in the Capitol.

But that's no excuse for legislators not doing what they were hired to do, he said.

"I have noticed over the years, and this is with all due respect to my colleagues," Ott said, "that there has been a lesser degree of attention toward that committee priority."

See the attendance rankings:

<http://wispolitics.com/1006/160428AttendanceChart.pdf>