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Legislative resolutions raise the question: What's the point?

Lawmakers use resolutions to highlight subjects ranging from guns to stuttering to Frank Sinatra

BY: **DANA DIFILIPPO** - AUGUST 30, 2022 6:55 AM



📷 Gov. Phil Murphy signs a resolution commemorating the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14th, 2018. (Photo by Edwin J. Torres/Governor's Office)

New Jersey lawmakers will soon return to Trenton to continue considering weighty matters left hanging when they recessed in June for the summer.

Like [honoring](#) football tight ends, [recognizing](#) National Day of the Cowboy, and [mapping](#) scenic motorcycle routes.

Those are just three of 735 resolutions state legislators have introduced since January.

Resolutions are a popular way for state lawmakers to butter up constituents, grab headlines, or publicize their positions on federal issues or other matters over which they wield little control. So far this legislative session, resolutions represent about 10% of all legislation in the Statehouse.

Despite their popularity, they rarely go anywhere. Only 22 resolutions – less than 3% of those introduced – have passed this year, while 100 of the 1,133 resolutions introduced in the last two-year legislative session passed.

John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, said some resolutions pushed by lawmakers “are not exactly heavyweight public policy,” and he thinks the public can rightly question, “What’s the point?”

“Most of these resolutions simply express a position or urge Congress or some other agency to take action, and they have no force of law at all. They don’t require anybody to do anything,” Froomjian said.

Julia Sass Rubin is a professor at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University and a board member of the Good Government Coalition of New Jersey. She described many resolutions as akin to a lawmaker showing up at a local event – good politics.

“They are definitely a way for the Legislature to score points with constituents without needing the other legislative house to agree or the governor to sign it, and without actually changing anything, as would be the case if they passed legislation,” Rubin said.

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In New Jersey, lawmakers can introduce three types of resolutions:

- A one-house resolution, adopted by either the Assembly or Senate, expresses policy priorities or opinions, sets internal procedures, or establishes a study commission under its sole jurisdiction. Lawmakers have introduced 234 so far this year. One pending Senate **resolution** would declare racism a public health crisis in New Jersey.
- A concurrent resolution – adopted by both bodies – expresses policies or opinions of the whole Legislature. It’s used to petition Congress to act, adopt joint rules, propose amendments to the state constitution, or establish study commissions. It doesn’t require the governor’s signature. Lawmakers have introduced 251 so far this year. One **concurrent resolution** now before the Assembly proposes a constitutional amendment to restore the death penalty in certain cases.
- A joint resolution – adopted by both bodies – acts as law and must be approved by the governor. It can be used instead of a bill when its purpose is temporary or it establishes a commission with members besides legislators or legislative appointees. Gov. Phil Murphy has approved just three of 251 joint resolutions introduced this year and 15 of 371 in the last legislative session. One **joint resolution** Murphy approved earlier this year designates April as Military Child Appreciation Month.

Legislators also can make ceremonial resolutions to honor a person or group or memorialize someone who died. They don’t typically require a vote and are the most common.


A hodgepodge of issues

There are all sorts of resolutions now pending in the Legislature that echo the question Froonjian raised: What’s the point?

One urges all New Jerseyans to read the Declaration of Independence at noon every Fourth of July. Thirty-seven lawmakers signed on as sponsors of **one resolution** that would commemorate the celebration of St. Patrick’s Day.

Some seem far out of the scope of a Garden State politician, like an Assembly **resolution** denouncing organ harvesting from Falun Gong practitioners and political prisoners in China. Others aim to dedicate a day, week, or month to causes ranging from **stuttering** to **Frank Sinatra** to the sports supplement **creatine**.



 Loretta Weinberg retired from the Legislature in January after 30 years representing parts of Bergen County. (Photo by Kena Betancur/Getty Images)

While reading resolutions might seem like an exercise in free association, political observers say they can serve several practical purposes.

“Sometimes it is to make a point. A resolution requesting the governor to do whatever is a much easier lift than to actually pass a bill or joint resolution,” said Loretta Weinberg, a recently retired senator who served 17 years in the Legislature.

But, she acknowledged, “if you can’t get traction on a bill, you’re probably not going to get much traction on a resolution.”

Legislators lobbying for measures that are unlikely to pass – like Sen. Ed Durr’s efforts to expand gun rights in a state known for its strict gun control – also might rely on resolutions to show their constituents they’re acting on an issue, said David Matos, a retired lobbyist who worked for the Assembly in the mid-1980s as director of research and policy and staff parliamentarian.

“You get loners like Ed Durr, who’s really kind of way out there on policy, particularly when it comes to guns. He can put in bills that most people knowledgeable with New Jersey politics are going to say, ‘Well, that’s going nowhere.’ But if he does a [resolution](#), he can take that to his constituents – the pro-gun people that voted for him and contribute to him – and he can say, ‘Look, I did this,’” Matos said.


Durr, a Republican who represents Gloucester County, said he regards resolutions as “conversation starters.”

“Resolutions are a way of trying to move the needle, without actually getting a bill passed,” he said.

His [resolution](#) proposing a constitutional amendment establishing a state right to bear arms would merely bring New Jersey’s constitution in line with the U.S. Constitution, he added.

He also recently introduced another [resolution](#) that would designate Aug. 27 every year as Billy Cray Day, named after the developmentally disabled man found dead in his Somers Point group home in 2017. He hopes that resolution will give peace to Cray’s grieving relatives, as well as help move a [bill](#) he introduced in March to install video monitoring in group homes housing people with developmental disabilities. That bill has bipartisan support but failed to pass in the last legislative session.



 *Sen. Ed Durr said resolutions can help give him an idea of whether a policy position of his has support in the Legislature. (Amanda Brown for New Jersey Monitor)*

“A resolution does give a gauge of whether the bill itself has merit, because if the resolution is popular, then a bill that’s similar could have a much less restrictive pathway to passing,” Durr said.

It’s undoubtedly more cost-effective for a lawmaker to communicate their opinions and priorities by sending out press releases, Froonjian said.

“For each of these resolutions, paid staff has to draft a three- or four-page piece of legislation that probably requires some research. They have to print copies, and then there’s record keeping. And most are not even getting to a vote,” Froonjian said. “So it’s legitimate for the public to ask: ‘Are we using public resources to do what amounts to political PR?’”

Still, he said, resolutions help lawmakers cultivate support and goodwill they can rely on later for more substantive goals.

“Is it cost-efficient for the taxpayer to have all this work being done? Probably not, from their point of view,” Froonjian said. “Is it an effective communication tool for the legislator that probably helps in building coalitions and maintaining stakeholder relationships? Yes. And ultimately, that’s probably good for democracy and democratic participation.”



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