Compliance with the Joint Rules:

A First Measurement

Beacon Hill Compliance Tracker – 2025-2026

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Abstract

The Beacon Hill Compliance Tracker[i] is a non-partisan software project that tracks the Massachusetts Legislature's public compliance with the Joint Rules they adopted in June 2025 for the 2025-2026 session of the General Court. The Tracker primarily focuses on four core metrics aimed at improving transparency: 10 days of advance notice for hearings, timely reporting deadlines, posted summaries, and posted votes. By the end of formal sessions in July 2026, the Tracker flagged a total of 8,768 possible violations of the rules across 11,550 bill actions[1]. To date, this project is the only systematic public measurement of compliance with the Joint Rules; as such, the purpose of this report is to document everything I found and learned. After a year of tracking the Legislature, there remains a substantive gap between the rules as written and the public-facing record.

I. Background

On June 26, 2025, the Massachusetts Legislature adopted the first new set of Joint Rules since 2019, aimed at addressing the enormous volume of legislation and the public demand for greater transparency. Among the most significant changes were a longer notice period for committee hearings (from 72 hours to 10 days), public posting of individual committee members' votes, plain-language summaries ahead of hearings, and date-anchored reporting deadlines. Although these efforts represented a stated commitment to reduce legislative opacity to the public, there remained a significant gap: the ability to track compliance with the new rules. Without a way to know if the rules were being followed, there could be no systemic way to assess their impact.

In August of 2025, I connected with civic transparency advocates to find if there was a way to measure this as objectively and apolitically as possible. After several months of measurements, tests, revisions, and re-writes, I arrived at the first version of the Beacon Hill Compliance Tracker: a program which scrapes the full corpus of the Legislature every night, finds documents via algorithms built specifically around the Legislature's public records, and assesses each committee's individual compliance with the Joint Rules bill-by-bill. The Tracker has since been used and cited by local media, advocacy groups, and the Legislature itself. As of today, the Tracker's hundreds of nightly record sweeps come together to form a unique, data-driven perspective of transparency and compliance in the Legislature.

II. What the Rules Require

The Joint Rules[ii] encode a long list of rules the Legislature set for itself this session. The Tracker focuses on four quantitative measurements within this set; as mentioned previously, they are the rules calling for 10 days' advance notice of hearings, plain-English summaries ahead of hearings, publicly posted votes, and reporting deadlines to act on a bill.

1 A "bill" is a single, unique bill; a "bill action" is the tenure window in which a committee was responsible for a bill.

1) Hearings must be announced 10 days in advance:
    a) *"All joint standing committees, and special joint committees of the Senate and House of Representatives, shall notify the Sergeant-at-Arms of the time, place and agenda of all public hearings and executive sessions. Notification to the Sergeant-at-Arms for public hearings conducted shall not be less than 10 days prior to the time of such meetings. Said agenda and docket of bills to be heard may only be amended upon agreement of the chairs and upon posting notice of such amendment more than 72 hours from the time of such hearing."*
2) Plain-English summaries must be posted in advance of hearings:
    a) "Prior to the hearing, the staff of each branch shall ensure that a plain-language summary of each bill to be heard by their respective branches is available on the official website of the General Court."
3) Public votes of each committee member must be recorded and posted:
    a) "Any vote of a committee on a matter shall be taken by roll call or electronic poll of each member of the branch calling the vote; provided, however, that the committee shall cause the record of such roll call or electronic poll to be available on the official website of the General Court within 48 hours of such roll call."
4) Bills must be reported out within a specific deadline – typically 60-90 days after a referral or hearing, depending on the chamber:
    a) **Joint Rules:** *"In the absence of final report deadline determined by rule of the branch where the matter was filed, all joint committees and the committees on Rules of the two branches, acting concurrently, shall make final report not later than the first Wednesday in December of the first annual session of the General Court on all matters referred to them before the first day of October of the first annual session and within 60 days on all matters referred to them on and after the first day of October of the first annual session of the General Court except that the committee on Health Care Financing shall make final report not later than the last Wednesday of January of the second annual session on all matters referred to them on or before the fourth Wednesday of December of the first annual session and within 60 days on all matters referred to it after the fourth Wednesday in December of the first annual session of the General Court."*
    b) **House Rule 27[iii] (supersedes Joint Rules):** *"The House chair of each joint standing committee shall make final report on all matters referred to and heard by their committee prior to the third Wednesday of December of the first annual session of the General Court by not later than 60 calendar days after the matter is heard; provided, however, that an additional 30 calendar days may be granted on a matter by the House chair who shall notify the Clerk of said extension."*

In plain English, the transparency-oriented goals of this ruleset are to:

- Give the public enough time to prepare for a hearing,
- Present the public with the content of the bill in a digestible manner,
- Record who voted, and how, and
- Require action on a bill within a pre-determined timeframe.

III. What the Data Shows

As of the end of formal sessions, the Tracker tracked a total of 11,550 bill actions and reported 5,557 possible[2] bill actions with at least one rule violated, and 8,768 total violations:

Rule Tracked	Violations Detected
Posted summary not found	549
Posted votes not found	2,162
Less than 10 days' advance hearing notice	1,349
Reported late or past due[3]	4,708
Total	**8,768**

Summaries

According to the Tracker, the least common violation type was a missing summary, with fewer than 5% of bills missing one. Though the rules state summaries must be posted ahead of hearings, time was not factored into the rules assessment; only the binary presence check at the time of snapshotting was taken into account, due to the fact that changes to the detection algorithm over time could hypothetically erroneously add noise to time-based assessments. The Tracker detects summaries via an exhaustive search of likely locations on the website and a keyword search to increase confidence, resulting in a highly accurate presence check.

Votes

Publicly posted votes were missing nearly 19% of the time per the Tracker's measurements. The methodology used to find and detect votes is similar to that of summaries, though tuned to "looks like a vote" rather than "looks like a summary", and with some extra page traversal logic for complex study order based searching. Like summaries, this is a presence check; the 48-hour rule is ignored.

Hearing Notice

The Tracker detected 1,349 hearings with less than 10 days' advance notice. Unlike the binary presence checks used for votes and summaries, assessing compliance with the hearing-notice rule requires determining whether the interval between notice and the hearing crosses a specific 10-day threshold. For that reason, the Tracker only counts hearing-notice violations after June 26, 2025 (the day the rules were formally adopted).

Hearing notice violations are detected by parsing when a bill was referred to a committee, marking the hearing(s) date(s) for that bill within that committee's tenure, and measuring the number of days between the announcement and the hearing. Substantive changes to the agenda outside of the 72-hour grace period outlined in the Joint Rules reset the count, but *ex post facto* clerical adjustments (such as to reflect the actual time a hearing ended) do not.

2 "Possible" is used here due to the nuance of the rules and the possibility of misclassifications.
3 "Not reported out" and "reported out late" are sometimes presented separately in Tracker content.

Deadlines

Reporting deadlines were not met approximately 40% of the time according to the Tracker's calculations. The Tracker takes into account that the House and Senate have different internal rules for calculating deadlines, and parses the website for extension orders to the extent that they match the rules; for example, House rules allow for 30 day extensions, so an extension of 31 days only grants 30 days in the Tracker's rules engine.

The effect of this rule, if followed, would be to prevent legislative logjams and provide the public with a discrete decision within a predictable time-frame on a given bill. As such, the Tracker adheres strictly to the rules-as-written, and doesn't assume extensions where it cannot find any. If evidence of action exists outside the "Bill History" page, the Tracker anchors upon the date which suggests the earliest action. If a vote of an action is present but the bill does not itself report the action, the bill document is parsed instead to populate the missing timeline data.

Because of the complexity of this rule, the dependency on the website infrastructure, and the various considerations to take into account, the Tracker devotes most of its computations to this rule.

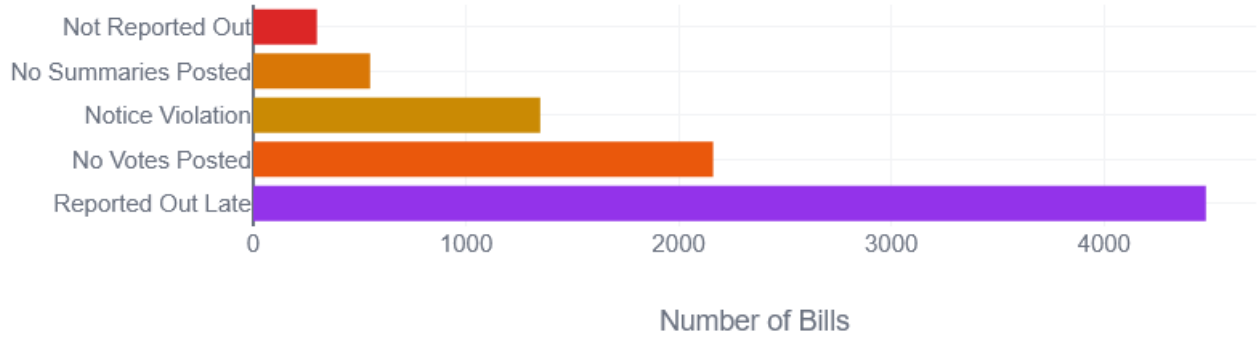


Figure 1: Graph depicting flagged violations by type. Note that reporting violations are broken down for visual clarity.

On Error Modes

If the Tracker misses a vote, or summary, or misreads a bill timeline's reporting dates, and records a violation, this creates a false positive. Unmitigated, this would create an asymmetry where the number of violations reported by the Tracker is a ceiling, not a point estimate. However, I have taken several steps to mitigate this effect; for example, reporting deadlines and votes are cross-referenced to cover any gaps that may exist on the website (a vote recorded on one date but "reported out" a month later will count as the earlier date). The vote and summary detection algorithms explore dozens of locations per bill, and if a new location or format is ever discovered, it gets added to the search parameters for all future searches, ensuring comprehensive coverage.

IV. What the Data Doesn't Show

As important as it is to present what the data shows, it is important to note what the data does not show or does not claim. For example, "not found" does not mean a piece of data does not exist – it means a comprehensive, algorithmic search of the Legislature's website did not find it. Reporting a bill as "late" does not mean it was definitively late – it means the algorithm which parses deadlines according to the format and location the Legislature typically posts them arrived at the conclusion that action was not taken within the allotted time.

The value of the Tracker is in its ability to assess each of the thousands of bills with the same computational scrutiny and apply a carefully curated ruleset evenly to each. This guarantees fairness from bill to bill and committee to committee, as well as a high-level picture of the overall detected compliance within the Legislature's body of work, but does not guarantee 100% accuracy for every single assessment of every single bill. Certain methodological[4] constraints diverge results from legislative workflows; for example, a bill the Legislature treats as a slight redraft of an existing bill looks like two unique bills to the Tracker, which has no way of quantitatively measuring written "uniqueness".

While every effort is taken to ensure accuracy at the atomic level, the reality of automatically tracking session-wide statistics given a public-facing record which is not favorable for automated tracking means that errors are possible. Users are encouraged on the site to check the Tracker's results against the official legislative record.

V. What a Year of Tracking Taught Me

I originally set out to put a number to the question of compliance with transparency rules, but along the way, I faced a lot of challenges and questions which had nothing to do with numbers. For example, when the Tracker claimed a document was "not found", I had to define my personal limit for searching for it – "is it missing, or is it so hard to find so as to be functionally missing to the public?" I decided my role was to be *thorough*, not the "gatekeeper of effort necessary to find things", but it was a quandary I had not expected to have to confront. I received feedback, from advocacy organizations to committee chairs, on what "ought" to count or not. People on different sides of the State House's walls can interpret the same rule (or what "compliance" of it looks like) wildly differently. In one interesting case, a committee's compliance number was hampered by the website's ability to present data in their favored format – an interesting case where transparency was hampered by a technical glitch the Legislature itself wasn't aware of until the Tracker marked every bill "non-compliant" for the same reason.

The project also gives me a somewhat unique perspective on the Joint Rules as the only person tracking them at scale like this. The Tracker reports that one out of every two bills breaks at least one rule. At face value, that reads as simple systemic non-compliance; in practice, it's a combination of lateness, workload, legacy workflows, differing interpretations, self-exemptions, technical glitches,

4 https://github.com/arbowl/beacon-hill-compliance-tracker/blob/main/METHODOLOGY.md

infrastructural limitations, discrepancies between a thing happening and the website time-stamping it, and a myriad of other issues all contributing to a quite tangled public record.

The Tracker taught me how rules are important for setting a baseline, how tracking them highlights the gaps, and the multi-faceted approach needed to address them.

VI. What This Means for Transparency

The greatest outcome for this project would be for it to become obsolete. In a world where the Legislature publishes its own compliance with the rules according to an interpretation that aligns with the public's, there exists no need for me to do it myself. As of today, the alternative to the Tracker is not a more accurate number – it is no number at all. There is no enforcement mechanism driving compliance with the rules, and one of the only levers the public has to promote accountability for our Legislature is via elections. The Tracker claims non-compliance in thousands of cases, but the only impact on the public and the Legislature is a number on a website I run. As long as that remains the case, it is up to each voter and each legislator to decide what that number means to them.

Conclusion

The formal sessions of the 194th General Court close this year with a compliance record that is neither a vindication nor a condemnation of the transparency rules it adopted. The rules produced measurable results in some areas – summaries were posted, hearings were announced – and fell short in others, particularly on votes and deadlines. What the data doesn't resolve is whether that gap reflects indifference, incapacity, or infrastructure. Probably all three, in different proportions, depending on the committee.

What I can say with confidence is that the gap is real and that it was previously unmeasured. Whether a 48% possible violation rate is alarming or expected for a first session under new rules is a question I'm not positioned to answer; there's no prior session to compare it to, and I'd be cautious about anyone who claims certainty either way.

The 195th General Court inherits both the rules and the patterns. Some committees demonstrated that high compliance is achievable (see the website for details)[5]. Others demonstrated that without an enforcement mechanism, the rules function more as aspirations than requirements. The public record will continue to reflect whichever of those a given committee chooses, and the Tracker will keep tracking it.

5 https://beaconhilltracker.org/dashboard

i Beacon Hill Compliance Tracker, https://beaconhilltracker.org/about

ii Joint Rules, https://malegislature.gov/Laws/Rules/Joint

iii House Rules, https://malegislature.gov/Laws/Rules/House