Decades ago, after a session of Iowa’s part-time Legislature dragged into July, the state’s lawmakers agreed they needed to find a way to prevent that from ever happening again. Their bipartisan solution at the time: Create a series of deadlines for when bills had to advance or die.

First established in 1979, these “funnel dates” have been an important part of the legislative process ever since — closely tracked by constituents, interest groups, Capitol reporters and legislators themselves.

“Even within your own party caucus, an upcoming deadline forces people to work together,” says state Sen. Janet Petersen, adding that it’s “a good way for us to winnow down the bills we have to consider.”

In 2017, for example, the first big deadline for bill sponsors and legislative committees will come during the eighth week of Iowa’s legislative session. That’s when a measure must be reported out of committee or die.

Two weeks later comes the crossover deadline, when bills fail if they are not passed by the House and Senate and sent to the other chamber for consideration. And once a bill crosses over, deadlines are in place for when a standing committee and the full legislative chamber can consider it. (Some measures, including appropriation bills, are exempt from these deadlines.)

“More issues in the legislature would flounder without [the deadlines],” Petersen says.

A lot of bills, not a lot of time

Like Iowa, many legislatures in the Midwest are considered “part time” and expect to meet for only a handful of months. During this time, hundreds of measures are introduced; as a result, lawmakers rely on formal rules such as “funnel dates” to help manage the bills as well as the legislature’s limited time before adjournment. (Some states set dates for when session must end; Iowa does not.)

In this region, most states have deadlines for bills; action must be taken by a specific date — by a committee or the full legislative chamber, for example — or they die. Legislative rules can provide ways to keep bills alive past the deadlines. For example, Illinois legislative leaders can reschedule or extend final action for specific bills, and Minnesota’s rules committees have similar powers.

In some states, too, the legislature must act on all bills that were introduced. North Dakota requires every measure to be heard in committee (which recommends a “do pass” or “do not pass” vote) and to be voted on by the full legislative chamber from which it originated. In South Dakota, each House and Senate bill receives a final disposition vote, and all introduced legislation in Nebraska must receive a public committee hearing.