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Lieutenant Governor Got More Powerful **Senate authority is an often overlooked power**

“The Washington Supreme Court might as well have made Washington Lt. Governor Brad Owen king” when it ruled he has authority to require a two-thirds vote in the senate to raise taxes, opined the Seattle Times on March 9, 2009.

The Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Owen* that it is beyond the Court’s power to order the lieutenant governor to do something in a matter of the senate’s internal business. The ruling provides substantial power to the lieutenant governor in a year the Legislature is debating ways to close a multi-billion budget deficit.

“The majority of the members of the National Lieutenant Governors Association (NLGA) have significant senate authority,” according to NLGA Director Julia Hurst. “Their roles as Senate Presidents are an often overlooked but often poignant power of the office of lieutenant governor.” Thirty NLGA members preside over their state senates. Many of these lieutenant governors control the manner of debate, fourteen assign bills to committee, and others determine the order bills are heard. Several appoint committee members and chairs, according to “The Book of the States.”

In Washington, the constitution specifies a majority vote is needed to raise taxes. But in 2007, Washington Initiative 960 (I-960), an initiative petition, passed. The measure required, in part, either a two-thirds vote in each house of the legislature or voter approval for all tax increases. In *Brown v. Owen*, a senator challenged a ruling of Lt. Governor Brad Owen in regard to a liquor tax bill. The lieutenant governor ruled the bill failed due to lack of a two-third vote per I-960. The senator argued only a majority vote was required, per the Constitution, and that the bill actually passed. The Supreme Court ruled the lieutenant governor makes the decision on senate floor matters.

“Other lieutenant governors are viewed as having similarly substantial senate powers,” said Hurst. “The Hattiesburg American wrote the Mississippi lieutenant governorship is one of the most powerful positions in state government and KVUE-TV said the Texas lieutenant governor is arguably the most powerful person in state government as presiding senate officer.”

“Like in Washington, other examples of fiscal power exist,” said Hurst. “South Carolina Lt. Governor Andre Bauer notes his rulings as presiding senate officer have blocked more than \$2-billion in proposed new taxes, and North Carolina Governor Beverly Perdue, when she was lieutenant governor, cast the tie-breaking senate vote in 2005 to create a state lottery.” More information on the office of lieutenant governor is available at www.nlga.us.