

Commonwealth Forum: Does Pennsylvania Need a Large, Full-Time Legislature?

YES

James Madison argued that representative democracy works best when legislatures “refine and enlarge the public views.” This means that legislators from many backgrounds are chosen to bring issues of importance to government, debate them, and then produce laws in the best interests of the citizenry. Including a diverse array of voices in the legislative process ensures that the consequences of legislation can be weighed in an effort to preserve everyone’s rights and interests. Having a large, full-time legislature enables this to occur. Pennsylvania has to balance multiple regional, ethnic, economic, and cultural interests. Having more legislators ensures that this range of views is included in policy discussions. A professionalized legislature also provides an adequate salary, enabling people from all walks of life to participate in government. Most people lack the wealth or a flexible schedule to be able to serve in a citizen legislature where remuneration is minimal. Receiving the pay of a full-time job allows Pennsylvania’s legislators to dedicate their time to matters of importance to their communities and focus on constituency service back in their districts.

One final benefit of Pennsylvania’s full-time legislature is the professional staff who help legislators do their jobs. The Commonwealth has a number of legislative service agencies such as the Legislative Reference Bureau, which helps members draft laws, and the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, which provides unbiased policy research. These resources ensure legislators’ independence from the executive branch and special interests because they have access to information through their own resources. Capitol and district staff also help legislators understand the needs of their constituents and help them when they encounter problems with state government. In sum, a full-time, professional legislature serves the interests of Pennsylvania citizens.

NO

Pennsylvania has the largest “full-time” legislature in the country. Its 253 members are outnumbered only by New Hampshire’s 424, where legislators receive just \$200 every two-year session. Compare that to the lowest

salary of about \$87,000 for Pennsylvania's General Assembly. Those in leadership make even more, between \$99,410 and \$136,094 depending on the position. The U.S. Congress has just 535 members for an entire country, and other states are able to govern themselves with much smaller legislative bodies without bloated salaries.

Furthermore, Pennsylvania's legislature does not even meet all that regularly. Session days are Monday through Wednesday if they even convene for that long during a week, hardly a full-time job. For the fall 2018 legislative calendar, the House met only thirteen days, and the Senate convened just ten days. This is for the entirety of four months, and does not even include the fact that there were no session days throughout July and August. Regular people can't work that often and still be considered full-time employees commanding high salaries and excellent benefits, so why should those who are elected to represent their interests?

Research shows large legislative bodies cost more, all else equal. In particular, the size of the upper chamber contributes to higher spending. Large legislatures also have more committees, thus overlapping duties and policy issues and adding to the problem of needless bureaucratic expansion. With today's modern methods of communication, we don't need so many so-called full-time legislators. Cutting their ranks and time on the job would save the people of Pennsylvania millions and, more likely than not, lead to reduced government spending and better deliberation among the body's fewer members.

For More Information

American Legislative Exchange Council (<https://www.alec.org>) is a non-profit organization of conservative state legislators and members of the private sector. They meet to draft model bills and distribute to legislators.

National Black Caucus of State Legislators (<https://nbcsl.org>) serves and represents the interests of black state legislators and their constituents. It also works toward education and the sharing of relevant public policy ideas.

National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators (<https://nhcsl.org>) is a non-profit dedicated to serving the interests of Hispanic legislators in the fifty U.S. states, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Its mission is to organize its members and on behalf of the people they represent in government.

National Conference of State Legislatures (<http://ncsl.org>) is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to improving state legislatures, sharing policy innovations, and giving the states a strong voice in the federal system.