

REDUCING THE SIZE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE STATE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

August 19, 2008

Thank you, Chairwoman Josephs, and members of the House State Government Committee for the opportunity to testify today on the issue of reducing the size of the Pennsylvania legislature.

My name is Matthew Brouillette and I am a president and CEO the Commonwealth Foundation, a public policy education and research organization based in Harrisburg.

At 253 Members, Pennsylvania has the 2nd largest state legislature in the nation, trailing only New Hampshire which with 424 members boasts the 3rd largest legislative body in the world (rivaled only by the U.S. House of Representatives and the British Parliament. But as you all know, New Hampshire is the epitome of a citizen-run legislature, where members receive only \$100 per year for their part-time and limited legislative service.

In addition to being one of only four truly full-time legislature in the nation, Pennsylvania is among the most highly “professionalized,” according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. This takes into account legislative pay, number of days in session, and staff per legislator.

In terms of compensation, Pennsylvania legislators are the 4th highest paid in nation at over \$76,000 in base pay per year (trailing Michigan at \$79,650, New York at \$79,500, and California at \$116,000 in 2008). In terms of support staff, the Pennsylvania General Assembly has the 2nd highest number of legislative staff (after New York, as of 2003) with over 11.6 staff members per legislator (an increase of 106% since 1978).

Given these facts, it is no surprise that Pennsylvania’s General Assembly is the most expensive operating legislature in the nation (even spending more than California’s \$260 million and New York’s \$220 million). In the current 2008-09 fiscal year, \$332 million was appropriated for the operations of the House, Senate, and legislative support services. This is up from \$88 million in 1984-85—an increase of 84% after adjusting for inflation.

Obviously these nation-leading numbers do not reflect well on the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, so it is no surprise that there are proposals to reduce the size of the General Assembly. Over two years ago, we testified on this very issue before a Senate Committee (RE: Sen. John Pippy’s SB 890 which would reduce the General Assembly by 40% from 203 House members to 123, and from 50 Senators to 30) and produced a policy brief, which I have included with my testimony.

Our analysis and critique then still applies now. Allow me to highlight a few of the salient points.

Our conclusion is that reducing the size of the Pennsylvania General Assembly could impact three areas of state government operations: First, it *could* lead to a reduction in the cost of the legislature. Second, it *could* provide greater accountability and transparency in legislative processes. And finally, it *could* bring about different public policy outcomes.

We emphasize *could* because reducing the size of the legislature on its own—as a stand-alone reform—will not likely improve either state government’s efficiency in spending taxpayers’ money or state government’s policymaking effectiveness. In and of itself, this structural change would only have a minimal effect on the costs and benefits to citizens.

I will, however, briefly address each of these three potential areas of impact.

First, many proponents suggest that a smaller legislature will cost taxpayers less money. But barring other reforms, these savings will be minimal. The operating cost of the General Assembly, though large, represents only a fraction of the Commonwealth’s \$60 billion operating budget. Additionally, reducing the number of legislators would not automatically result in an equivalent reduction in either direct or indirect costs to taxpayers.

Indeed, even if a 25% reduction in the number of legislators resulted in a 25% reduction in the legislative budget, the savings would amount to approximately \$7 per Pennsylvanian. Of course, this is not totally insignificant, but far greater savings can be achieved through other, more substantive cost-cutting policy changes and reforms.

The second area of possible impact is in legislative accountability and transparency. We believe that a smaller legislature could be a component of a broader set of reforms. Reducing the size of the legislature (and making larger legislative districts) could result in greater accountability and transparency by leading to the adoption and implementation of more substantive reform measures. A smaller legislature may also increase the chances of making the legislative process more open, transparent, and independent of special interests. But none of these outcomes are guaranteed by any means.

There are potential downsides, including a reduction in the attention an elected official can pay to a larger number of constituents, and the possibility of further concentrating power in the hands of a few legislative leaders. For these reasons, we emphasize that reducing the size of the legislature can only lead to increased accountability and transparency if it is complemented with other critical reforms.

Finally, the potential impact of reducing the size of the General Assembly on policy outcomes is unclear. A number of academic studies comparing state legislative size to policy measures reach different conclusions. Some find that states with smaller legislatures spend less per-capita than states with larger legislatures; while other studies conclude that larger constituent size results in more spending (thus shrinking the legislature would lead to

more state spending). There is no clear evidence linking legislative size with other measures of state policy, such as economic freedom or tax burden—two important measures of a state’s potential for lasting prosperity.

Several studies, however, have found that state spending, tax burden, and economic freedom vary much more closely with legislative “professionalization” than size. The number of staff per lawmaker, the pay of lawmakers, and the time in session have a strong correlation with the level of spending, taxes, and regulations enacted by state government.

States with highly professionalized legislatures spend more per-capita, have a higher tax burden, and have a higher, more burdensome level of regulation than do states with part-time, citizen-led legislatures. Thus, reforms that move Pennsylvania away from a full-time, professional legislature will have a much greater impact on improving policy outcomes than just reducing the number of members.

I have qualified the Commonwealth Foundation’s support of reducing the size of legislature to needing additional, more substantive reforms. Two of the most important measures we’ve identified include Limited Terms and Limited Sessions:

- **Limited Terms.** Pennsylvania currently limits the number of terms the governor can serve. Similar limits should be placed on members of the General Assembly to restore the ideals of public service and a truly representative body of the citizenry.
- **Limited Sessions.** Pennsylvania is among only a handful of “full-time” state legislatures with an unlimited number of session days. Limiting the number of session days, coupled with limited terms, would also return Pennsylvania to a citizen-led legislature.

In summary, our analysis suggests that a reduction in the size of the Pennsylvania General Assembly could improve the lawmaking process, but only if it includes other, more comprehensive reforms.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I would be happy to answer any questions from the committee.