



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF PENNSYLVANIA

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**STATEMENT ON REDUCING THE SIZE OF THE PENNSYLVANIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

In the early 1970s, local Leagues across Pennsylvania studied of the structure and practices of the General Assembly. League recommendations then included changes in the rules of procedure, greater public access to the legislative process, and a substantial reduction in size. This position was reviewed and confirmed in 1996.

The League's focus during the past several years on promoting a reduction in the size of the most expensive legislature in the United States has received support from many citizens of all ages, both genders and both political parties. Gateway Newspapers, a chain having an estimated 100,000 circulation, conducted a survey and received 1,776 replies. Of these, 7 favored no change, 12 favored a reduction in the House only, and 1,757 favored a reduction in both chambers.

Cost is one argument in favor of a smaller legislature. In 2005, IssuesPA published the information comparing the cost of operating the Pennsylvania legislature with that of other states in the attached chart. Compared with its peer states, Pennsylvania then ranked highest in total salary cost. Pennsylvania has a higher number of staff per legislator than other states except California and New York, which have many more constituents per legislator than Pennsylvania. From 1979 to 2003, the Pennsylvania legislative staff increased 106%. A chart of their information is attached.

We realize that while the primary function of a legislator is to legislate, constituent service has become very important in this increasingly complex world. Larger districts may require additional offices. But when we compare staff and population numbers with other states, we are convinced that the increase in staff for the larger legislative districts can be less than the reduction in staff due to fewer districts.

Per diems, while generally comparable, cost more because of Pennsylvania's longer sessions. Defined-benefit pension plans are being phased out by most private industries because of their high cost, while the Pennsylvania Legislature's similar plan is particularly generous, adding to the taxpayers' burden for years to come. Legislators' extremely generous health plan is another example of taxpayer largess. All these costs are magnified by the excessive number of legislators.

But cost is not the whole reason to downsize. It's not even the **most important** reason. We repeat that the primary function of legislators is to legislate. The present size is too large for an individual legislator's opinions to be considered in meaningful floor debate. Several legislators have told us that it has been very difficult and sometimes impossible to organize the number of members needed to get consideration of any initiative.

One effect we anticipated from a reduction in size of the legislature was a decrease in the concentration of power that has been accumulated by the legislative leadership over many years. We expected a realignment of districts to result in the election of some new legislators, and a legislature that at least had a chance to start with fresh leadership. At the present size of the legislature, the chance for any individual member reaching a level of influence where his or her voice is effectively heard is much smaller than in legislatures of a more reasonable size. A small legislature with revised rules should enable individual legislators to share power more equitably, reducing the leverage of political leaders and ensuring greater accountability to the constituents of each

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legislator. Smaller size will enable the other reforms to be handled more efficiently. We also believe it will begin to reverse the disrespect for legislators widely felt by the public.

We are not under the illusion that a reduction in the size of the General Assembly will solve all of Pennsylvania's legislative procedure problems. It may exacerbate one — Pennsylvania's abysmal record on creating districts that are competitive and therefore encourage citizens to vote. You have to fix that too, and you will continue to hear more on that subject from the League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania.

Reducing the legislature's size requires a constitutional amendment, which is a long process. A convenient, logical time for new, larger districts to be formed is after the 2010 census. Two bills to do that are House Bill 55 and Senate Bill 248, which I believe are identical. They call for about a 20% reduction in size to a total of 201 legislators. I am inclined to wonder whether that is enough. California manages with 120 legislators for about three times the population, about 300,000 people per legislator as opposed to Pennsylvania's approximately 50,000 people per legislator. A legislature of about 120 would give Pennsylvania something near 100,000 people per legislator, closer to the figures for New York, Florida and Texas. Nevertheless, some reduction is better than none, so we commend the authors of those bills for starting the process.

House Resolution 68 has also been introduced. It calls for a study commission (made up of the leadership) to examine the effects of reductions on staff size, savings, and constituent services. We find it interesting that the resolution asks the study committee to report back by November 1, 2008. That postpones any action until 2009, which is too late for getting the bill passed by two legislative sessions and on the ballot for voters in time for redistricting in 2011. Why so long? We hope that this committee will hasten the reform process, and that we will be electing a smaller legislature by 2012. Thank you for your attention.