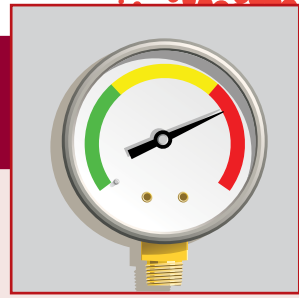


# States Under Stress

## Help Wanted: Must Enjoy High Stress, Low Pay, and Limited Autonomy



**T**his decade has been marked by massive turnover among state legislators. The most recent round of redistricting and big GOP gains in 2010 meant that as legislative sessions got under way in 2013, roughly half the legislators in the country had 2 years of experience or less. Lots of newcomers were elected in 2014 as well, even in states that don't impose term limits.

Some of this has to do with legislative structures and salaries, which have led to changes in the types of people the office typically attracts—and the amount of time politicians are willing to serve.

For many states in the 20th century, serving in a legislature offered a slice of political power and a concentrated few weeks of social networking. The job hardly paid anything, but time wasn't much of a disincentive because the sessions frequently were over by springtime. As a result, the job attracted local civic leaders—lawyers, farmers, insurance brokers—who could afford to spend concentrated periods away from work and who took it as an honor that their fellow citizens desired their services.

All that began to change in the 1960s and even more in the 1970s with the movement to reform and professionalize legislatures, promoted and largely financed by the Ford Foundation. The foundation supported annual legislative sessions, enhanced staffing and technical capacity, and far greater transparency in communicating with the public. The reformers also called for higher salaries to reflect the new level of responsibility that state legislators should be taking on.

By 1980, many of the largest states had essentially bought into the reform model. Legislatures in California, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, and a handful of other places were meeting through most of the year, hiring professional staff to manage much of the workload, and ramping up legislators' pay significantly.

A few states, most of them small ones, rejected the reform model almost entirely, continuing to run short sessions with minimal staffing and old-fashioned pay scales. To this day, senators and representatives in New Hampshire receive \$200 as compensation for 2 years of service, with no per diem included.

Left in between were midsized states, which chose to adopt most of the reform recommendations but declined to make corresponding adjustments in their members' pay. By the 1980s, most of these states were asking their members to give up substantial portions of their year to legislative sessions and postsession business, often making it difficult for them to hold private-sector jobs and paying them less than even the lower ranks of professional workers.

The result was that the old incentive structure disappeared. Service in a heavy-duty, low-paying institution ceased to be attractive to the Main Street business contingent that had signed up for it in earlier years. Instead, legislative careers began to attract a new cohort: the independently wealthy, citizen activists who were not the primary breadwinners in their families, and people engaged in low-paying professional jobs who could run without taking a significant pay cut. Being a legislator in the reform years meant accepting a financial squeeze, but for the politically ambitious, they could enjoy a good deal of influence.

In recent years, however, there's been less room for individual legislators to promote their pet causes. States' legislative leaders began reclaiming the power they had lost over the preceding decades. They raised leadership political action committee money to recruit favored candidates in competitive districts and maintained an influence over these new recruits once the legislative sessions convened. They began showing less tolerance for the mavericks and individualists who had acquired a substantial amount of power in the early reform years. Perhaps even more important, legislative politics started to take on a sharper partisan cast than had been the case before. The simplest way to explain state legislative politics in the past two decades is to say it has become more like congressional politics. Legislators vote more frequently in lockstep agreement with their party majorities than they used to, with opportunities for policy freelancing by individuals few and far between.

So it shouldn't be a surprise if significant numbers of legislators in heavily partisan states come to feel that there are more enjoyable, less stressful, and more lucrative ways they might be spending their time.