

## Senator Aument's Senator for a Day Reducing the Size of the Legislature Articles:



### Sizes of Legislatures

2/15/2016

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of change for state legislatures. It was a period when legislatures were assessing themselves, looking to become more co-equal branches of government rather than "sometime governments." Twenty-two legislatures shifted from biennial to annual sessions. Many upgraded staffing and facilities in order to strengthen the legislative institution. *Baker v. Carr* and other "one man, one vote" redistricting decisions in the early 1960s also sparked an interest in state legislatures and legislative size.

Thirty-four states changed their legislative size during these years. Many made multiple modifications. Adjustments to the sizes of legislatures slowed after this flurry of activity. Only five states—Idaho, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island and Wyoming—have made changes since 1990.

Overall, since 1960, there has been a slight downward trend in the total number of state legislators in the country—from 7,781 in 1960 to 7,383 today. Not all legislatures have gotten smaller, however. Examples of states where sizeable reductions or increases in the number of legislators have occurred are:

<i>Reduced size</i>	<i>Increased size</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Connecticut</li><li>▪ Illinois</li><li>▪ Massachusetts</li><li>▪ Rhode Island</li><li>▪ Vermont</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Florida</li><li>▪ Maryland</li><li>▪ New Jersey</li><li>▪ Utah</li></ul>

### Common Arguments

When a change in the size of a legislature is considered, debate typically centers around three major themes:

1. Representation
2. Efficiency
3. Cost

#### Proponents for larger-sized legislatures usually argue that:

- The more the members, the fewer the constituents. With fewer constituents, a legislator is more likely to have face-to-face dealings with them.
- One political party can more easily dominate a smaller-sized legislature. A smaller-sized legislature also may increase regional rivalries, particularly between rural and urban areas.
- Relatively few political positions are well known by the general population. Reducing the number of legislators probably will not change this fact.
- The legislative process was not intended to be neat and efficient. The legislature is designed to provide a cross-section of all points of view. Legislators are to study, debate and argue, and finally reach a compromise position that is acceptable to a majority of members.
- A large number of members allows for a more effective division of labor and specialization. The oversight of administrative agencies is greater among larger legislatures.
- There is a greater correlation between a state's population and legislative costs than between legislative size and cost.

#### Proponents for smaller-sized legislatures usually argue that:

- Fewer legislators does not mean less responsive legislators. Using modern communication mechanisms, a legislator can easily reach, and be reached by, many more constituents.
- Legislative elections will be more competitive.
- In a smaller body, the role of a legislator will be more prestigious and more satisfying. A smaller legislature increases the responsibility of each member. Individual legislators have more opportunity to influence decisions. Each legislator should be more visible and therefore more responsive to the voting public.
- With a smaller legislature, there will be better discussion and clearer debate. There is more opportunity for each member to make his or her views known, to have his or her voice heard.

- Larger legislatures tend to have more committees. Too many committees result in overlapping and fragmentation of work--making it more difficult for a legislature to formulate coherent, comprehensive policies on broad public questions.
- Large legislative bodies cost more.

### Summary

The authors of *The Sometime Governments* wrote:

*"Ideally, a legislature should be large enough to represent and reflect the diverse elements of its constituency and small enough to get things done."*

Each legislature represents a microcosm of its state's people, traditions and political cultures. These factors vary greatly across the country. Opinions about them differ within a state. Consequently, there may never be consensus on what the "right size" for a legislature is

<http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/sizes-of-legislatures.aspx>



## Reduce the size of the Legislature? Yes, please: Editorial

By PennLive Editorial Board

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The state Legislature took some encouraging steps this week toward restoring public confidence in an institution justly known for its cost, bloat and inaction, [as the Senate State Government Committee gave its approval](#) to a pair of proposed constitutional amendments that would downsize Pennsylvania's 253-member General Assembly.

The panel approved legislation being pushed by the presiding officers in the state House and Senate — **House Speaker Sam Smith** and **Senate President Joe Scarnati**, both Republicans of Jefferson County.

If eventually approved, the measures would eliminate 62 positions across the three branches of state government.

Specifically, **Smith's** bill would reduce the 203-member House by 50 members. It won House approval last fall.

**Scarnati** took a separate Senate bill seeking to shrink the 50-member Senate to 45 members and convinced the committee to also eliminate the lieutenant governor's office, two justices of the seven-member state Supreme Court and four positions on the 15-member Superior Court.

And we say eventually because these steps, while important, are only the first ones on a much longer road.

Any change to the state Constitution must be approved in consecutive legislative sessions and then by voters at a statewide referendum, likely in November 2015.

These proposals have come and gone before.

With voter confidence in the General Assembly at seismic lows, it's tempting to dismiss this legislation as little more than election year showboating by senior leaders in the General Assembly.

And these proposals have come and gone before.

But we're also willing to take **Smith and Scarnati** at their respective word that they are trying to trim costs and make state government more efficient.

If the 62 positions were eliminated this year, state spending would be cut by \$6 million with savings on salaries. That does not include benefits and other costs associated with those offices.

With the state facing as much as a \$1.2 billion deficit, that's an encouraging, if small, step in the right direction.

But two very important questions remain: Even if lawmakers approve one of the two measures this year, does that mean they stand a chance in the legislative session set to begin next January?

**Smith**, a House veteran, is set to retire at year's end, robbing his bill of a very influential steward. And it's not clear if there's anyone who will take up the cause — lawmakers, as they are, being historically reluctant to vote themselves out of a job.

And if actions in other states are any guide, the proposals face long odds.

Only four states — Idaho, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island and Wyoming — have reduced the size of their General Assemblies since 1990, according to data compiled by the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#).

"When a change in the size of a Legislature is considered, debate typically centers around three major themes: representation, efficiency and cost," the organization's program principal, **Brenda Erickson**, told **PennLive** this week.

While Maine and Montana's General Assemblies had size-reduction legislation introduced during this 2013-2014 session, she said, "these proposals, however, are more common closer to the time when Legislatures consider legislative reapportionment/redistricting.

For example, in 2011, legislation to change size was introduced in at least 12 states, **Erickson** noted.

And only two or three states in the country's history, including New Jersey, have ever eliminated its lieutenant governor's office and they have since reinstated it, according to the [National Lieutenant Governors Association](#).

Those aren't encouraging odds. But they are proof, at least, that such actions can take place, and that the operations of state government can continue.

In an interview with **PennLive**, **Senate State Government Committee Chairman Lloyd Smucker, R-Lancaster**, said he believes the time is right in Pennsylvania to consider the reduction proposals.

And any error in the legislation could be corrected in next year's legislative session. If all went to plan, changes in district boundaries would take effect with the 2020 redistricting.

In the name of savings, efficiency and public confidence, lawmakers should approve one of the downsizing proposals in this session.

And, with **Smith's** retirement, **Scarnati** should ensure that the push continues in the next legislative session so that the amendment can be placed on the statewide ballot as soon as possible.

[http://www.pennlive.com/opinion/2014/06/reduce\\_the\\_size\\_of\\_the\\_legisla.html](http://www.pennlive.com/opinion/2014/06/reduce_the_size_of_the_legisla.html)