

New Mexico needs a modernized Legislature

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As the 2023 session of the New Mexico legislature begins, actions to “modernize” the state’s law-making body will likely be considered. Discussions about modernization occur in the context of a state whose population has grown by a factor of more than six since statehood, giving individual members of the House and Senate constituencies of 30,000 and 50,000 respectively. Additionally, New Mexico remains geographically large and demographically diverse. The Legislature needs to address complex challenges, including poverty, economic diversification, disposal of nuclear waste, and limited access to health care and internet services. The League of Women Voters and other civic organizations support lengthening the sessions, hiring permanent year-round staff, and creating salaries for members.

Currently New Mexico’s sessions are among the three shortest in the country (alternating between 60 days in odd-numbered years and 30 days in even-numbered years). The scope of the short session is limited to the budget and topics specified by the governor. Proposed changes involve expanding, at least the short session, to allow more time for bills to be studied and debated with consideration of a greater range of topics. Hopefully a longer session would also discourage delaying tactics of “running out the clock,” leaving bills to die at the end of the session.

Now the legislature’s work is supported by a permanent staff of about 168 (about 1.5 per legislator) and most legislators do not have dedicated staff. Having access to more staff throughout the year would assist legislators in researching and analyzing bills. Staff can also aid in providing improved oversight of executive agencies. Having more staff would also decrease legislators’ reliance on paid lobbyists for information on bills and would better serve constituents.

A third area of modernization involves paying legislative salaries, as is done in the other 49 states. New Mexico legislators do receive mileage and per diem payments to attend sessions and interim committee meetings, but lack of salary seriously limits the ability of a large part of the population to serve in the Roundhouse. Those financially most able to serve are retired (with various kinds of pensions), independently wealthy, or self-employed in businesses that can be more easily combined with legislative work. Younger people, essential workers, those with young children, and those with full-time jobs find service in the legislature to be far more difficult. If there is a decision to pay salaries, the level of salary can be set in a variety of ways, including by an independent body. Representative Angelica Rubio and others plan to introduce a bill creating a legislative salary commission.

If the legislature approves changes in the length of sessions and legislative compensation, those issues will be put before the voters as Constitutional amendments. Increased staffing may be approved by the legislature. A modernized legislature would enhance the capacity of the legislators to perform their role in the policy-making process. The League of Women Voters of Southern New Mexico encourages you to contact your legislators to support bills that improve fairness to legislators and the functioning of the legislative body.