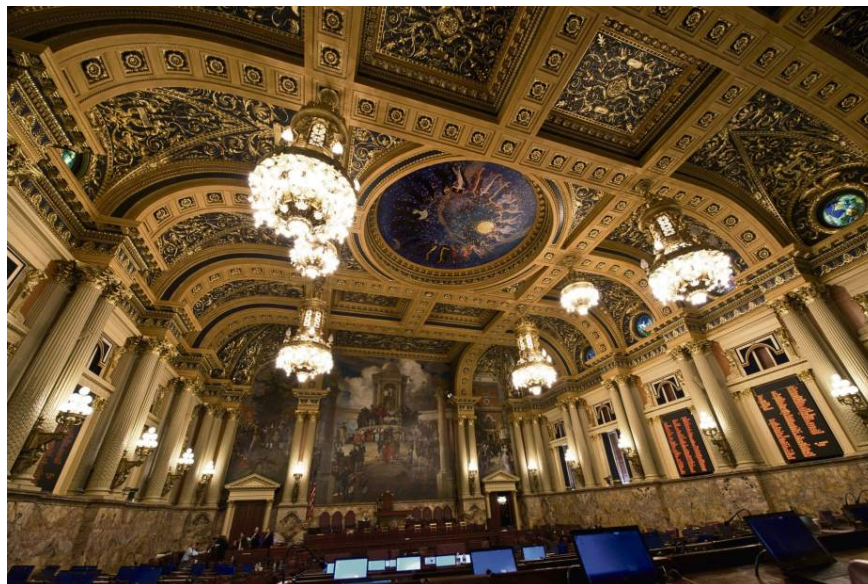




Antony Davies & James R. Harrigan: Shrink unworkable, dysfunctional Legislature

ANTONY DAVIES & JAMES R. HARRIGAN ([MAILTO:TRIBCITY@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: ANTONY DAVIES & JAMES R. HARRIGAN: SHRINK UNWORKABLE, DYSFUNCTIONAL LEGISLATURE STORY ON TRIBLIVE.COM](mailto:TRIBCITY@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: ANTONY DAVIES & JAMES R. HARRIGAN: SHRINK UNWORKABLE, DYSFUNCTIONAL LEGISLATURE STORY ON TRIBLIVE.COM)) | Saturday, Dec. 16, 2017, 4:27 p.m.



SEAN STIPP | TRIBUNE-REVIEW

The House Chamber in the Pennsylvania State Capitol on May 23, 2016. The House Chamber was designed in the Italian Renaissance style.

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Pennsylvanians might have a hard time believing this, but being a legislator in most states is a [part-time job](http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/full-and-part-time-legislatures.aspx) (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/full-and-part-time-legislatures.aspx>). More than that, most state legislatures are much smaller than Pennsylvania's. State Rep. Jerry Knowles might not have much to say about the part-time/full-time divide, but he sure hopes to shape the debate regarding the size of the commonwealth's Legislature. He has [proposed](http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/commentary/pennsylvania-state-legislature-house-of-representatives-jerry-knowles-20171201.html) (<http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/commentary/pennsylvania-state-legislature-house-of-representatives-jerry-knowles-20171201.html>) a state constitutional amendment that would shrink the size of Pennsylvania's House of Representatives from 203 to 151 members. At 253 total members, Pennsylvania currently has the [largest full-time Legislature in the country](http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/number-of-legislators-and-length-of-terms.aspx) (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/number-of-legislators-and-length-of-terms.aspx>), and it is time for a cold, hard look at what we are getting for the expense. The expense is not just approximately \$25 million per year in salaries and benefits, not to mention staff and office costs, but the continuing inability of Pennsylvania's legislators to fulfill one of their most important tasks: delivering a balanced budget.

Pennsylvania is a large state with a complex economy, so the urge toward a big, full-time Legislature is understandable. But there are other, much larger states that manage with much smaller legislatures. Consider Texas. In terms of landmass, Texas is six times the size of Pennsylvania, and its economy is twice as big. Texas has twice Pennsylvania's population, seven times the road mileage, four times the number of counties, and three times the number of public schools. Everything is bigger in Texas except the size of the Legislature.

~~Texas' 181 state legislators are in session for 140 days every two years. Pennsylvania's 253 legislators, on the other hand, are in session around 690 days over the same period. On a legislator-hour basis, Pennsylvania's Legislature is about seven times as large as that of Texas. And the size difference doesn't end there. Pennsylvania state legislators earn over \$84,000 per year (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/2014-ncsl-legislator-salary-and-per-diem-table.aspx>). That makes Pennsylvania's legislators the second highest paid in the country after California's, and more than 10 times better paid than Texas legislators, who are paid \$7,200 annually.~~

Perhaps it's time that Pennsylvania voters ask whether we need a Legislature this large, and what exactly we're getting for our money.

What we certainly aren't getting is fiscal responsibility. Over the past 20 years, our Legislature has managed to triple (https://www.usgovernmentspending.com/state_spending_rank_1996bH0C) the state's debt, and drive fully-funded state employee pension funds into a hole that's somewhere between \$75 billion (<http://www.cpbj.com/article/20170124/CPBJ01/170129925/pas-unfunded-pension-liability-up-to-74b>) and \$150 billion (<https://www.mercatus.org/system/files/Norcross-PA-summary.pdf>) deep. To put that in perspective, just the margin of error on Pennsylvania's unfunded pension obligations is larger than the economies of 60 percent of the world's countries.

The larger our Legislature is, the more unworkable it becomes. And Pennsylvanians have been seeing this in repeated budget impasses, stopgap measures and apparently never-ending tax increases. Judging from the commonwealth's deteriorating financial condition, our legislature has become dysfunctional. Significantly cutting the Legislature's membership might be just the thing Pennsylvania needs to get it working again. It is time that those in Harrisburg find a way to do more with less, just like the rest of us.

Antony Davies is associate professor of economics at Duquesne University. James R. Harrigan is CEO of FreedomTrust. They host the weekly podcast **Words & Numbers** (<http://www.wordsandnumbers.org/>).

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Jim Bowers

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