



LEGISLATIVE REFORM

Progressive Democrats of Massachusetts (PDM) envisions a Legislature that operates in a democratic and transparent manner, while encouraging and incorporating public engagement. Voters should have easy access to the information they need to hold their elected representatives accountable. Legislation should progress and pass in a timely manner, end-of-session logjams should be minimized, and the use of non-germane riders on budgets and other bills should be limited. Passed legislation should be clear and well-crafted, and therefore effective. Members of the Legislature should vote and act based on their personal judgment about the best interests of their constituents and the Commonwealth, grounded in their personal expertise, experience, values, and beliefs, instead of routinely bowing to the wishes of and pressure from their chamber's leadership.

However, currently, the Massachusetts Legislature is not doing its job effectively and hasn't for years. Its operation is maddeningly slow, inefficient, and opaque. Not infrequently important legislation is delayed with serious negative effects for the residents of the state. The state's budget hasn't been passed by the start of the fiscal year for 13 years in a row. In addition, each budget has been laden with over 100 outside sections that include major policy changes. These outside sections typically avoid the scrutiny of the legislative committee process and any opportunities for public input, transparency, review, or accountability.

Major legislation (including the budget) is often left to the last days of the two-year legislative session and is then rushed through with little scrutiny of the final bills, without roll call votes, and with limited transparency and accountability for rank-and-file legislators, let alone for the public. This maximizes the leverage of leadership and sometimes compromises the quality of legislation.

The concentration of power in the hands of the House Speaker and Senate President is substantial and is supercharged by their power to appoint legislators to leadership positions (such as the chairs of committees) that include a substantial increase in legislators' pay. Furthermore, staffing levels and office space for individual representatives are controlled by the legislative leaders.

To address these issues, in early 2021 PDM convened a Legislative Reform Working Group (LRWG), which in November 2021 issued *The Massachusetts Legislature: Democracy in Decline* (link below). This report documents that the Massachusetts Legislature, particularly the House, has disempowered its members and become unresponsive to the voters and citizens of the Commonwealth. It concludes that over-centralization of power in leadership and inadequate

non-partisan research expertise have resulted in an inefficient and often ineffective legislative process, a lack of transparency, and a persistent lack of diversity in the Legislature. The report:

- Identifies and documents problems with the operation of the Legislature,
- Identifies best practices for legislative operation, and
- Lays the groundwork for building a powerful coalition to advance legislative reform.

The link to the recording of the press conference announcing the release of the report is below. The release of the report was covered by Commonwealth Magazine and MassLive, which ran the story published by the State House News Service (see links below).

Following on the report, PDM leadership team members are now participating in the **Coalition to Reform Our Legislature** (website link below). The desire for reform cuts across issues and ideologies and so too does the Coalition. The Coalition's Steering Committee is working to engage a wide range of constituencies, including politicians and political activists of all stripes, as well as the business community, in a broad-based campaign for change (links to op-eds and letters written by Coalition members can be found below). In May 2024, the Boston Globe published two articles (also linked below) on flaws in the budget process, drawing significantly on the work of the Coalition.

The Steering Committee is currently focused on two main strategies for changing our Legislature so it better serves us all. One is to advocate for establishment within the legislature of a professional, nonpartisan bureau to do in-depth research and analysis essential to producing high-quality, effective laws and budgets. Massachusetts is one of the only states in the country without such a bureau. The other strategy is to promote a more open, participatory legislative process, with a focus on the work of committees. The Coalition is pushing for legislative committees to discuss, revise, and vote on bills in public and for reform of the legislative pay system to address current disincentives to legislators' active, independent participation.

Related web links:

Progressive Democrats of Massachusetts: <https://www.progressivedemsofmass.org/>

Coalition to Reform Our Legislature: <https://www.malegreform.org/>

The Massachusetts Legislature: Democracy in Decline report:

https://www.progressivedemsofmass.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/PDM_democracy_in_decline_final.pdf

Report release press conference (41 minutes):

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1O9MXx33hDiKtnFS-EHhTg2dqh4FZWfFO/view?usp=sharing>

Commonwealth Magazine article on the report:

<https://commonwealthmagazine.org/politics/progressive-group-slams-house-for-lack-of-professionalism-transparency/>

MassLive / State House News Service story on the report:

<https://www.masslive.com/politics/2021/11/report-massachusetts-lawmakers-faulted-for-lack-of-transparency-in-dependence.html>

Coalition op-ed in Boston Globe:

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/01/25/opinion/open-state-house-legislators-votes-committee-proceedings/>

Coalition LTE in Boston Globe:

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/05/26/opinion/letters-to-the-editor-legislature-works-behind-closed-doors/>

Globe articles on budget process:

https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/05/16/opinion/house-leaders-lard-up-state-budget-with-side-pork/?p1=BGS_earch_Overlay_Results;

https://www.bostonglobe.com/2024/05/17/metro/massachusetts-senate-budget-earmarks-karen-spilka-michael-rodriques/?p1=BGS_earch_Overlay_Results