



The North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research

NEWS RELEASE

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LEGISLATURE GETTING OLDER AND YOUNGER

Despite having a sizable group of younger legislators this session, the trend continues for the legislature to have more members of retirement age. Legislators aged 65 and older comprised 57 of the 170 members (33.5 percent) at the beginning of the session this year. This is up from 46 of 170 legislators in the 1999 session, and 37 of 170 in the 1989 session. This is just one of the trends highlighted in the latest citizens' guide to the legislature published today by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research.

The 57 "gray panthers" who are 65 or older outnumber the 18 "young guns" who are 42 or younger. Yet seven of the 23 new legislators were 42 or younger on their first day on the job. Still, even though 15 of 23 new members of the legislature this year are younger than the people they replaced, the average age of the members of the General Assembly was 59 on opening day. In 1999, the average age was 57, and in 1989 it was 54. The five elder statesmen in North Carolina's legislature are Sen. Charlie Dannelly, 84 (D-Mecklenburg), Rep. Dewey Hill, 83 (D-Columbus), Sen. Harris Blake, 79 (R-Moore), Rep. Mickey Michaux, 78 (D-Durham), and Sen. Bill Purcell, 78 (D-Scotland).

The trend in the number of retirees serving in the General Assembly has been edging upwards over the last 20 years. In 1989, retirees comprised 16.5 percent of the legislature. By 1999, retirees made up 22 percent, and by 2009, 28 percent, or 47 legislators who are retirees. The record percentage of legislators who are retirees was set in 2007 at 30 percent.

"The aging of the legislature and the prevalence of retirees is related to the length of legislative sessions and the amount of time required for service in the legislature," says Sam Watts, policy analyst at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. "Legislative sessions now routinely last from January to August in odd-numbered years and from May to August in even-numbered years. Legislators also serve on study commissions between sessions. It's hard for anyone with a full-time job to commit to this level of public service."

North Carolina Legislature Older Than National Average

Nationally, 23 percent of legislators are 65 years of age or older, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). North Carolina's 33.5 percent greatly exceeds this national figure. NCSL says that the increase in the number of retirees in legislatures across the country is the reason for increases in the average age of state legislators. The current average age for legislators nationally is 56 years old, three years younger than North Carolina's average of 59.

In North Carolina, 2.4 percent of General Assembly members were 34 or younger on opening day. According to NCSL, 3 percent of legislators are 34 or younger nationally. The five youngest legislators in the N.C. General Assembly are: Rep. Justin Burr, 23 (R-Stanly), Rep. Tricia Cotham, 30 (D-Mecklenburg), Rep. Bryan Holloway, 31 (R-Stokes), Sen. Andrew Brock, 35 (R-Davie), and Sen. David Rouzer, 37 (R-Johnston).

A majority of states have minimum age requirements for candidates who run for the state legislature. Candidates for the state House in Arizona, Colorado, and Utah must be at least 25 years of age. Candidates for the state Senate in Kentucky and Missouri must be at least 30 years old. North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, and Vermont are the only state legislatures in the nation that do not impose any age requirements on candidates.

“Having the age breakdown skewed toward the older end can make a difference in public policy debates,” says Watts. “Legislators over 65 have a deeper knowledge on issues affecting the state’s growing aging population, but may have less understanding of issues that affect younger North Carolinians. By contrast, legislators under 40 may know more about technology issues such as bills to ban texting or using cell phones while driving.”

A Record Number of African Americans and Women

The 2009 General Assembly also has a record number of African Americans and women members. Thirty legislators, or 18 percent of 170 legislators, are African Americans. In 1968, Henry Frye (D-Guilford) was the first African American elected to the General Assembly since the 19th century. Frye later served as Chief Justice of the N.C. Supreme Court. The longest-serving African American in the 2009 General Assembly is Representative H.M. “Mickey” Michaux (D-Durham), who is serving his 16th term. Michaux is the Senior Chair of the House Appropriations Committee.

Forty-three women serve in the 2009 N.C. General Assembly, tying a record set last session. Lillian Exum Clement of Buncombe County was the first woman to serve in the legislature in 1921, but even as late as 1971, only two legislators were women.

According to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, North Carolina is now 20th highest among the 50 states in the percentage of women in its legislature, with 25.3 percent (43 out of 170 legislators). Nationally, the average is 24.2 percent female legislators, with Colorado the highest at 39 percent. South Carolina is lowest, with women comprising only 10 percent of its 170 legislators. North Carolina leads the South in the percentage of legislators who are women and also has its first female Governor in Beverly Perdue.

Other Trends in the Legislature

The Center notes these additional trends in the legislature:

*Eighteen House members and seven Senators first came to the legislature through appointment to a vacant seat.

*The number of legislators who are lawyers has rebounded. In 1971, 68 of 170 legislators were lawyers. This number declined to 32 in 1995 but increased to 40 lawyers in 2007 and remains at 40 in 2009.

*In addition to law, the leading occupations for legislators are business and sales (32), education (22), and real estate (13).

*Rank and file legislators in North Carolina receive \$13,951 in annual salary, \$559 per month for expenses, and \$104 per diem for days the legislature is in session. The salary was last increased in 1994. Legislators also are reimbursed 29 cents per mile for weekly travel to and from Raleigh.

Survey Results on the Most Powerful Committees

The Center's guide also contains rankings of the "most powerful" committees in the 2007-2008 Legislature to help citizens understand the inner workings of the legislature. Based on surveys of all legislators, registered lobbyists based in North Carolina, and capital news correspondents, the six most powerful Senate committees, in order, are: (1) Appropriations/Base Budget; (2) Finance; (3) Rules and Operations of the Senate; (4) Commerce; (5) Judiciary I; and (6) Agriculture/Environment/Natural Resources. The six most powerful House committees are: (1) Appropriations; (2) Finance; (3) Rules, Calendar, and Operations of the House; (4) Judiciary I; (5) Education; and (6) Health. Watts said the committees viewed as most powerful are very consistent from session to session.

These and other legislative trends are outlined in *Article II: A Guide to the 2009-2010 North Carolina Legislature*. This edition marks the 17th legislative session since 1977 the Center has published a guide to the legislature. Authored by Center policy analyst Sam Watts, this citizens' guide contains profiles and photos of each of the 170 members of the General Assembly; business and home addresses; telephone and fax numbers; counties in their districts; the number of terms they have served in the legislature; and their educational and occupational backgrounds. For members who served in the previous session, the guide lists five bills they introduced in the 2007-2008 session, their votes on 12 bills of statewide interest, and past rankings of each legislator's attendance, roll call voting participation, and effectiveness. The effectiveness rankings are based on surveys of all legislators, registered lobbyists based in North Carolina, and the capital news media. The latest set of legislative effectiveness rankings was released in April 2008. The guide also includes demographic and occupational trends for the General Assembly since 1987 and rankings of the most influential lobbyists in the legislature.

A pocket-sized *Supplement to Article II* contains important information for citizens, lobbyists, and reporters, including all committee assignments and each legislator's political party affiliation, home county, current legislative office address and telephone number, e-mail address at the General Assembly, and legislative seat number. The supplement also contains seating charts, committee meeting schedules, and deadlines for introducing various kinds of bills and resolutions.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization created in 1977 to evaluate state government programs and to study public policy issues facing North Carolina. The Center is supported in part by a grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem, with additional support from nine other private foundations, 137 corporate contributors, and almost 500 individual and organizational members. In addition to publishing *Article II: A Guide to the N.C. Legislature*, the Center also publishes *North Carolina Insight* journal and in-depth research reports. The Center recently has conducted studies on the history of mental health reform in North Carolina, the future of the state's community colleges, governance of North Carolina's public universities, how to prevent high school dropouts, and ways to reduce domestic violence.

A set of the 246-page *Article II: A Guide to the 2009-2010 N.C. Legislature* and the *Supplement* with committee assignments is available for \$25, plus sales tax, postage, and handling. To order, visit the Center's website at www.nccppr.org. If you have any questions, call Tammy Bromley at (919) 832-2839, or email tbromley@nccppr.org.

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