

Legislative Stipend Reform Ballot Question – 9/17/25 – by John Lippitt and Jon Hecht

Background on the need for legislative reform

The Massachusetts Legislature is very dysfunctional. There's almost no discussion or debate of bills in committees or on the floor of the House or Senate. There are very few public, recorded votes in committees or on the floor, making it very difficult for voters to hold legislators accountable. The legislature hasn't passed a budget on time in 15 years. Very few bills get passed except in the mad rush in the last couple weeks of July at the end of each two-year session. The rushed process and lack of scrutiny mean that poorly written bills and policies are frequently passed into law. Furthermore, hundreds of bills with strong and broad public support that would bring real benefits to Massachusetts residents are filed year after year after year but never pass because the small number of people in control don't have the time, interest, or incentive to bring them to a vote.

Legislative committees, where the serious work of policy making and bill crafting is supposed to happen, never meet except for the mandatory public hearing on each bill, which is largely just for show. All significant decisions and negotiations on bills and policies happen behind closed doors and involve only a small handful of legislators. This means that lobbyists and special interests with back-channel access to this small group of legislators have more influence on legislation than the committee members themselves, let alone members of the public.

Therefore, most legislators are disempowered and their constituents, we the voters, are as well. Moreover, if a legislator doesn't go along with the bills and policies of the power brokers in the House and Senate (I hate to call them "leaders" or "leadership" because they don't lead in the way elected officials should lead in a democracy), he or she will probably not get earmarks in the budget (i.e., funding for local projects), the committee assignments they would like, good office space, or much staff. All these things, and the flow of all bills, are controlled by the power brokers, i.e., the House Speaker, the Senate President, the chairs of the Ways and Means Committee (i.e., the budget committee) in each chamber, and a few others. **There is a high level of frustration among the public with the lack of responsiveness, transparency, and accountability of the legislature.**

This legislative dysfunction can be traced in large part to the fact that lawmaking in the Massachusetts legislature is tightly controlled by a small number of legislative power brokers. A key source of their power is the way legislators get paid.

The compensation system for MA legislators gives "leadership" coercive power over them

Massachusetts legislators get paid in two ways: all 200 senators and representatives receive the same base salary, currently \$82,000 a year. However, legislators who are appointed by the House Speaker or Senate President to various positions within the legislature receive stipends that add \$8,000 to \$112,000 to their annual pay. Almost all of these appointments to "leadership" positions and as committee chairs and vice-chairs are made at the sole discretion of the Senate President or the Speaker of the House; a small number are made by the minority party leaders in each chamber.

The number of these stipended positions has more than doubled in the last 30 years. In 1995, there were 38 such positions in the Senate and 40 in the House; today there are 74 in the Senate and 109 in the House. This reflects a proliferation of committees with stipends for chairs and vice-chairs. In 1995, the legislature had 34 committees; now it has 53. Many of these committees are what the Boston Globe called "no-heavy-lifting" committees because they have no bills assigned to them and do no work. "Leadership" positions have proliferated too. Democrats in the Senate and House had four floor "leaders" until the late 1990s. Now, they have eight and ten "leaders," respectively, each receiving a stipend of \$45,000 to \$75,000 a year.

The amount of extra pay in stipends the "leadership" controls is now \$5.4 million. No other legislature in the country lets legislative leaders give anywhere near this much money in extra pay to favored legislators. And in no other legislature in the country do legislators receive anywhere near this large a share of their pay at the sole discretion of their chamber leader. **The total amount of stipend pay these leaders control has quadrupled in just the last 10 years.**

It's not hard to see how this stipend system contributes to the problems in our legislature. **These stipends create a conflict of interest for legislators between their duty to represent their constituents and their need to stay in the good graces of their legislative "leaders" who have power over a significant portion of their pay.**

Legislators are financially dependent on chamber "leaders" and this dependency breeds deference; legislators wait quietly to be told what to do; acting openly and independently risks losing out on a significant boost in income (as well as other perks). Committee chairs are rewarded for keeping work on bills behind closed doors, where "leadership" can shape and control them.

Reform of the stipend system

Advocates for stipend reform, the [Coalition to Reform Our Legislature](#) (CROL), which filed a bill to reform the stipend system ¹, and the [Legislative and Accountability Partnership](#) (LEAP), which has filed a ballot question law to make the same reforms, **believe in paying legislators reasonable compensation.** Legislators have important work to do. And we do not want to make it possible only for the wealthy to serve in the legislature or to force our legislators to spend significant time on second jobs.

But we should not have a system of legislative compensation that breeds deference, pays extra for no work, rewards lawmaking behind closed doors, and disempowers most of our legislators. We should have a system of legislative compensation that pays for performance, allows all legislators to participate actively and effectively, and incentivizes lawmaking that is democratic, responsive, transparent, and accountable.

The stipend reform ballot question law would reduce top-down control, incentivize more transparency in lawmaking, and empower every one of our legislators. It would change the way legislators are paid with the goal of strengthening democracy and improving lawmaking. It would achieve these goals by:

- **Significantly reducing the number and size of stipends and eliminating stipends for no-work committees and other positions that don't merit extra pay.** This would reduce legislators' financial dependence on Senate and House "leaders" and free them to represent their constituents actively and independently.
- **Incentivizing transparency and curtailing lawmaking behind closed doors** by conditioning the payment of stipends on committees holding public debates and public votes on every bill by specified deadlines.
- **Shifting a portion of the funds saved by eliminating unjustified stipends to provide additional compensation for rank-and-file members of joint committees** to recognize their active participation in the essential committee work of formulating bills and policies in a democratic and responsive process.

The stipend reform ballot question law proposes a rational, reasonable legislative pay system that promotes the representation, responsiveness, transparency, and accountability that underlie a strong democracy. It's supported by the bipartisan LEAP coalition. The ballot committee is chaired by John Lippitt, a Democrat, and Treasurer of his local Democratic Town Committee and a member of the Leadership Team of Progressive Democrats of Massachusetts. The committee's Treasurer is Jennifer Nassour, a Republican, the Finance Chair of the Massachusetts Republican Party, and former Chair of the MA Republican Party.

The ballot question committee will drive the collection of over 75,000 certified signatures between mid-September and mid-November 2025. The legislature will then have an opportunity to pass the law. If it doesn't, then the committee will collect the few thousand more signatures required to put the stipend reform ballot question law on the ballot in November 2026.

We need your help in collecting 100,000 signatures to put this on the ballot. If you have any questions, would like to sign the petition, or would like to help collect signatures please contact me at jlippitt@verizon.net or 781-315-3564. You can also learn more and donate to the effort at [the LEAP website](#). There's a one page description of the ballot question [here](#).

¹ No legislator would agree to formally file CROL's stipend reform bill, even as a citizen request that they did not sponsor. This is something legislators routinely do and is a constitutional right of citizens in Massachusetts. Therefore, the bill did not get a bill number, did not get assigned to a committee, and did not have a public hearing. This is indicative of the tight and coercive control that legislative power brokers have over every legislator.