

NEWLY IN CHARGE

With dozens of leaders taking charge in legislative chambers around the country, changes are happening fast.

BY ALAN GREENBLATT

Employers still aren't much in the mood for hiring, and it's unusual to see a lot of new faces around most workplaces.

But state legislatures aren't like most other places.

About a quarter of all state lawmakers are freshmen this year. Combined with the effects of term limits in 15 states and the flood of newcomers who first took office with the elections of 2008 and, especially, 2006, it quickly becomes clear that state capitols these days aren't populated by very many old hands.

For that reason—and because of the sizable number of chambers that switched party control last November, all from Democratic to Republican or to tied—an astonishing number of new leaders are now in charge.

There are 24 new house speakers around the country, or 25 if you count the two co-speakers in Oregon's tied House. The numbers are similarly high in state senates, with 17 new senate majority leaders, eight new senate presidents and 16 new presidents pro tem.

Any way you slice it, going down the ranks from presiding officers to assistant floor leaders, about half the nation's legislative leaders are new to their positions this year.

Politics aside, there's some risk in losing experience. Loss of institutional memory can often lead lawmakers to spend time rehashing old arguments. Less-experienced legislators also are likely to take a back seat to governors when it comes to setting choices about important matters such as crafting the budget.

But there are also positives borne out of having so many newcomers, perhaps particularly in the leadership ranks. People who are new to the game aren't as beholden to the status quo. They certainly won't expend as much energy defending policies of the past.

That might be helpful this year, as states face

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—ARIZONA SENATOR
SCOTT BUNDGAARD, MAJORITY LEADER

what is likely to be the most challenging budget season in living memory because of still-sluggish revenues and the drop-off in federal funds available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. It's certain states are going to rethink their priorities and quite possibly reshape much of their mission over the coming years because of budget pressures.

"Normally, I would say that experience counts a lot," says Alan Rosenthal, an expert on state legislatures at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "But having people who are new at leadership might not be as much of a problem as during normal times. The budget in most states is just so overwhelmingly difficult that the old way of doing things isn't going to work.

BUDGETS AND JOBS

This year's crop of new leaders has at least one thing in common: They all recognize that they were elected on a platform of dealing with the budget and helping to create new jobs among those who don't happen to be state legislators.

"Having our focus on job creation and economic recovery has clarified our purpose in the legislature," says Frank McNulty, Colorado's new House speaker.

Scott Bundgaard, who returned to the Arizona Senate as its new majority leader this year after an eight-year hiatus from office, says his Legislature will spend less time this year on "divisive" social issues than it has in the recent past. "The focus has to be on those bread-and-butter issues," Bundgaard says. "We have a whole lot of work to



HOUSE SPEAKER
FRANK MCNULTY
COLORADO



SENATE MAJORITY
LEADER
SCOTT
BUNDGAARD
ARIZONA

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reinvigorate the economy.”

In addition to trying to find ways to promote job growth—often through business-friendly tax cuts, despite the ongoing budget shortfalls—legislative leaders are on the hunt for ways to save



HOUSE SPEAKER
KIRK ADAMS
ARIZONA

money and streamline government. Kirk Adams, the rookie House speaker in Arizona, has unveiled a package designed to address the state’s pension gap, shifting more of the cost from taxpayers onto state employees.

Similar ideas have been tried in other states. It’s become fashionable for state

officials to talk about zero-based budgets and value-added budgets and “priority of government” budgets. All these different catchphrases are meant to describe the idea that spending should not be based on last year’s budget but on those programs identified as performing most efficiently and best meeting the needs of the state.

“Why can’t we just ask whether we are getting the best return for the dollar?” says Kurt Zellers, Minnesota’s new speaker. “If not, can we do away with the program and shift the money elsewhere?”



HOUSE SPEAKER
KURT ZELLERS
MINNESOTA

FRESHMAN CLASS

In Minnesota, a striking number of freshmen have been introducing high-profile legislation during this session, addressing everything from how agencies budget to teacher pay and abortion funding. Given the fact that 33 of the 72 House Republicans are new, they are making their mark early.

It’s not unusual this year for Republican caucuses to be composed of 30 or 40 or even 50 percent newcomers. In Michigan, 61 of the 110 House members are new, which sounds



HOUSE SPEAKER
JASE BOLGER
MICHIGAN

like an awful lot until you realize that 29 of the 38 state senators are new.

“It’s a clean slate,” says Michigan’s first-time speaker, Jase Bolger. “Everybody is new at the same time, which calls for us to do bold things and not be afraid to take on things because they’re uncomfortable.”

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—ALAN ROSENTHAL,
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Like Bolger and many of his peers, Zellers likes to brag that the newcomers have brought valuable private-sector perspective with them to government. Many are small businessmen who have had to balance their own books and want to do the same thing for the state—without raising taxes.

“Quite honestly, if these guys were to lose their election or had to retire for some other reason, they’d be just as happy to leave as they were to get here,” Zellers says. “They don’t see this as a career; they see it as, they’ve come down here to fix the problem.”

NOT EVERYTHING CHANGES

Not everyone is convinced states are going to be able to fix their budget problems without raising taxes.

“There have been any number of times when people were elected on a platform of not raising taxes, and then in their first year they raised taxes,” says Jon Shure, deputy director of the state fiscal project at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal-leaning group in Washington. “Once you’re the stewards of the state’s economic future, you do what you’ve got to do.”

This may be the key question in state government this year: Can tax increases be avoided? They haven’t gotten any more popular politically, and the enormous class of GOP freshmen elected this year certainly didn’t come into office intending to expand government or raise taxes.

That may create a challenge for the new crop of leaders overseeing huge numbers of new, noncareer legislators who feel they were elected

with a mandate.

“The people who were elected this time are not coming to the capitol to be told what to do,” says Representative Joe Hackney, who lost his post as House speaker in North Carolina when the Democrats lost their majority in November.



REPRESENTATIVE
JOE HACKNEY
NORTH CAROLINA

People used to joke during Vern Riffe’s 20-year reign as speaker that Ohio had a House of Representative, singular, because only his opinion counted. Some long-standing powerhouse chamber leaders remain around the country, but not nearly as many as there used to be.

That may shift some power from the legislature to the governor. Newer leaders are less inclined to stand up to the governor than older leaders who have seen a governor or two come and go and have a different sense of themselves and their position.

“I don’t care who the governor is in Illinois. No one is going to roll over Mike Madigan because he’s been there so long,” says Robert Hertzberg, a former California Assembly speaker. Madigan has been speaker of the Illinois House for all but two of the past 28 years.

But if many of today’s leaders face a challenge in having to grow into the job, perhaps they will be helped by the energy exuded by their comparatively young caucuses. The desire to do things differently may offer leaders leverage, along with occasional frustration. Most of the important decisions in legislatures these days are more apt to be made by the majority caucus, after all, than by committees.

The large cohort of new legislative leaders is likely to pursue what Hackney describes as the “collaborative model”—leading by listening and figuring out where the caucus stands and how much it’s willing to compromise with the other chamber or the governor. Ideally, says Rosenthal, the Rutgers political scientist, you can’t tell where the leader ends and the caucus begins.

“It’s important that all 65 members have their input,” says McNulty, the Colorado speaker, “that their views have a fair hearing and that their input is real and substantive and not just brushed off.”

SL ONLINE

Check out more about legislative leaders and watch videos of leaders talking about the challenges they face at www.ncsl.org/magazine.

NEW PRESIDING OFFICERS

In last November's election, party control changed in 20 chambers in 14 states.

ALABAMA

House Speaker Mike Hubbard (R)



Political career: First elected to the House in 1998.

Occupation: Small business owner

Lieutenant Governor/Senate President Kay Ivey



Political career: Elected state treasurer in 2002; re-elected in 2006. Elected lieutenant governor in 2010.

Occupation: Lieutenant governor

COLORADO

House Speaker Frank McNulty



Political career: First elected to the House in 2006.

Occupation: Attorney

INDIANA

Speaker Brian Bosma



Political career: First elected to the House in 1986; elected speaker 2005-06, 2011.

Occupation: Attorney

IOWA

Speaker Kraig Paulsen



Political career: First elected to the House in 2002.

Occupation: Attorney

MAINE

House Speaker Robert "Bob" Nutting



Political career: First elected to the House in 1998; served through 2006 and then returned to the House in 2008.

Occupation: Pharmacist

Senate President Kevin Raye



Political career: First elected to the Senate in 2004.

Occupation: Small business owner. Previously served as a top aide to U.S. Senator Olympia Snowe.

MICHIGAN

House Speaker James "Jase" Bolger



Political career: First elected to the House in 2008.

Occupation: Small business owner

MINNESOTA

House Speaker Kurt Zellers



Political career: First elected to the House in a 2003 special election

Occupation: Public relations

Senate Majority Leader Amy Koch



Political career: First elected to the Senate in a 2005 special election

Occupation: Small business owner

MONTANA

House Speaker Mike Milburn



Political career: First elected to the House in 2004.

Occupation: Rancher and farmer

(The Montana House shifted from tied to GOP control.)

NEW HAMPSHIRE

House Speaker William "Bill" O'Brien



Political career: First elected to the House in 2006.

Occupation: Attorney

Senate President Peter Bragdon



Political career: Served in the House 2000-02; elected to the Senate in 2004.

Occupation: Operations manager

NEW YORK

Senate Majority Leader and President Pro Tem Dean Skelos



Political career: Elected to the Assembly in 1980; elected to the Senate in 1984.

Occupation: Attorney

NORTH CAROLINA

House Speaker Thom Tillis



Political career: First elected to the House in 2006.

Occupation: Full-time legislator

Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger



Political career: First elected to the Senate in 2000.

Occupation: Attorney

OHIO

House Speaker William "Bill" Batchelder



Political career: First elected to the House in 1968 and served until 1998; ran again and was elected in 2006.

Occupation: Attorney

PENNSYLVANIA

House Speaker Samuel Smith



Political career: First elected to the House in 1986.

Occupation: Full-time legislator

WISCONSIN

Assembly Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald



Political career: First elected to the Assembly in 2000.

Occupation: Small business owner

Senate President Mike Ellis



Political career: Served in the Assembly from 1970-80; first elected to the Senate in 1982.

Occupation: Full-time legislator

Note: The Oregon House shifted from Democratic control to tied and now has co-speakers from each party.