ANNIVERSARIES

The ‘Most-of-the-Time’ Governments

Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of “The Sometime Governments.” The study, produced as a book by the Citizens Conference on State Legislatures, found that legislatures were largely ineffective and poorly resourced. They were far from being coequal branches of government and woefully ill-equipped to play a meaningful role in federalism.

The report even ranked legislatures—a controversial approach that identified states where governors were dominant and legislatures were failing to fulfill their role. In the early 1960s, only 19 legislatures met annually, and seven of those had limited authority during even-numbered years. Legislatures were sparsely staffed in the vast majority of states, and most worked only during session. The average legislative salary was less than $4,000 a year. A handful of lobbyists worked for a narrow band of top industries.

Legislatures have changed dramatically over the past half-century and barely resemble the institutions that were cataloged in “The Sometime Governments.” They have evolved into policymaking powerhouses and, in most states, are fully realized coequal branches of government. At a time when problem-solving seems to be nearly impossible for the federal government, legislators are aggressively innovating and working to confront the most challenging issues of our time.

Lobbyists focused solely on state issues number in the thousands. Today, more than 26,000 staffers serve in legislatures, many in the 67 staff agencies that were created during the 1960s and early ’70s. Now, 46 states meet annually. Most states have robust committees that meet year-round and are active in the interim.

But from what I hear, many legislators work full time in what are still thought of as part-time jobs. I suspect that the women and men serving in statehouses nationwide might believe that legislatures have become “most-of-the-time” governments. Yet, what hasn’t changed much in many states is legislative pay. Fifteen states have not raised lawmakers’ pay in more than 20 years. Although the average now tops $35,000 in the 41 states that pay annual salaries, that has not kept pace with inflation.

NCSL was formed in 1975 during the movement to modernize legislative operations. I believe that NCSL has been a rocket engine powering the legislative revolution that’s happened over the last 50 years.

There’s still plenty of room for legislatures to improve the ways they solve problems and serve the people of their states, however. I hope the anniversary of “The Sometime Governments” will inspire us to reflect on what needs to happen next to make legislatures even stronger so they can continue to fulfill their destiny as laboratories of democracy and full partners in federalism. Our dedication to legislatures, and the people who serve in them, means that we are constantly thinking about how these bodies can be more effective and efficient. It’s our passion.

— Tim Storey,
Executive Director