NEW YORK

New year, new jingle

The celebration is sure to be muted, but New York lawmakers are set to get their first pay increase in 20 years. A compensation committee voted unanimously to phase in the raise over three years beginning Jan. 1, when Senate and House members’ annual base pay will rise from $79,500 to $110,000. Salaries increase to $120,000 in January 2020 and $130,000 in January 2021. Although most see the boost as overdue—the panel’s vote was based partly on research of legislator pay in other states—the plan has its critics. Some lawmakers object to panel recommendations that would eliminate most stipends for leadership positions and limit outside income to no more than 15 percent of their state salaries. And the conservative Government Justice Center filed a lawsuit challenging the legality of the panel’s vote, claiming raises must be voted on by the Legislature.
STAY COOL
Incivility is widespread and growing

Ninety-three percent of Americans from both political parties agree that uncivil behavior is rampant and getting worse, according to the eighth installment of the “Civility in America” survey by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate, conducted with KRC Research. The survey found that most agree that incivility is a major societal problem that is hurting our democracy, promoting political gridlock, causing people to disengage from politics and leading to intolerance of free speech. Sixty-nine percent of Democrats and 73 percent of Republicans believe it’s a “major” problem.

TEACHERS CRYING
Civics knowledge weak in new study

A recent Johns Hopkins University survey of adults on their knowledge of state government yielded curious contrasts. As the news site Route Fifty reports, 59 percent of participants said their overall opinion of their state government was “mostly” or “very” favorable, yet more than a third couldn’t name their governor, at least 81 percent couldn’t name their state representative and 72 percent blanked on their state senator. About 80 percent couldn’t identify the “most debated issue” in their legislature last year. “The lack of understanding of state issues and state politics is so deep that we’re concerned that citizenry is precluded from engaging with state government,” one researcher said. Fear not. Other studies have suggested that even if people don’t know names and debate topics, they seem to be aware when state governments are underperforming.

MARSHALL ISLANDS
Trouble in paradise?

With good jobs in short supply—unemployment lingers at about 40 percent—and the threat of climate change looming, a third of the Marshall Islands’ population has moved to the United States, PBS NewsHour reports. The Marshallese benefit from the 1986 Compact of Free Association, which provided economic aid and special rights for the Marshalls, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau, the Pacific island nations used by the U.S. military, including for nuclear tests in the 1940s and ’50s. The law says citizens of these association states are free to live and work in the U.S. without visas or work permits.

OHIO
What’s in your bitcoin wallet?

Bitcoiners took note last fall when Ohio became the first state to accept the cryptocurrency for 23 different business taxes. As the Cincinnati Enquirer explains it, businesses sign up through OhioCrypto.com, enter their tax payment information, then pay through the third-party processor Bitpay, which converts the bitcoins into dollars that are deposited into the state’s accounts. Businesses pay a 1 percent transaction fee, instead of the 2.5 percent assessed when they use credit cards. The payments are recorded in a blockchain, a publicly viewable ledger that cannot be erased. For now, bitcoin is the only cryptocurrency the state is accepting and the service is not yet available to individuals.

NORTH DAKOTA
No more snow-day slacking

Two North Dakota Republicans plan to introduce a bill that would replace make-up days with virtual classrooms when brick-and-mortar schools are closed due to extreme weather or other factors. Representatives Bernie Satrom and James Grueneich say the costs of holding make-up days at the end of the school year adds up. The bill, which would create a pilot program, would have an opt-in, opt-out option for schools that can’t or don’t want to participate in the snow-day alternative. “It should end up saving taxpayer dollars if we don’t have to make up school days,” Grueneich said.