The Exit Interview

Why decent people are

struggling

to serve in public office

FUTURE CAUCUS

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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

For more than a decade, Future Caucus has worked to support a rising generation of lawmakers who believe that public service is a responsibility, not a performance. Across parties and across the country, we have seen young leaders step into elected office with courage, curiosity, and a deep commitment to solving problems for the people they represent.

This report began with a simple question: why are so many of them leaving?

At a moment when state governments are taking on more responsibility than ever—from housing and healthcare to AI and public safety—we cannot afford legislatures that make it possible for only the independently wealthy or the retired to serve. We cannot allow political violence to become a permanent fixture in the lives of public servants. When legislative pay is insufficient to support a family, when schedules are incompatible with caregiving, and when threats and harassment go unaddressed, public service becomes untenable for many Americans who would otherwise be effective, representative leaders.

Across this report, lawmakers point to practical reforms that would make an immediate difference: stronger threat response and security coordination, independent compensation commissions, better staffing and technology, and workplace cultures that recognize lawmakers as whole people with families and lives beyond the chamber. These are not partisan ideas. They are institutional investments—the kind that will encourage passionate, qualified Americans to step up, enable them to remain in office long enough to make a difference, and improve collaboration across the political spectrum.

At Future Caucus, we are committed to advancing this work alongside policymakers, civil society, and anyone who cares about the future of democratic governance. We have identified 24 recommendations for those looking to tackle the growing retention crisis in state legislatures.

If we want representatives to govern proactively and with an eye to the future, we must build institutions that more people can realistically serve in. The next generation of leaders is ready. The question before us is whether our systems are ready for them.

LAYLA ZAIDANE
PRESIDENT & CEO
FUTURE CAUCUS

INTRODUCTION

REED HOWARD
CHIEF STRATEGY & PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER
FUTURE CAUCUS

Imagine the most decent, responsible person you know. Maybe it's the friend who runs your fantasy football league, the volunteer at your church you trust to count the collection, or the cousin juggling four kids' schedules who still remembers your birthday. Now imagine if more of America's elected leaders were people like them.

I have good news and bad news. Every so often, ordinary Americans do win office. They bring common sense, integrity, and a real desire to get sh*t done for their communities. Too many, however, leave before they can achieve what they set out to do—not because they lose heart, but because safety concerns, economic pressure, and inflexible yet unpredictable schedules make it increasingly difficult to stay.

That reality—challenging, but not inevitable—is what inspired The Exit Interview. In 2025, Future Caucus set out to listen closely to the experiences of Gen Z and millennial state legislators. Through interviews and surveys with 89 lawmakers across 31 states, we asked what helps them do their best work and what pushes them out. One participant described these conversations as "exit interviews." What follows is an honest, unfiltered look behind the curtain at the retention crisis among our best leaders.

At its core, this report is about a simple idea: when democratic institutions function well, people from all walks of life can step forward, serve, and make real change. When they don't, even the best among us are held back.

ACROSS THESE CONVERSATIONS, FOUR CONSISTENT FINDINGS EMERGED:

01

Lawmakers fear for their personal safety and their families' well-being.

Limited resources and lack of coordination with law enforcement leave them feeling powerless and vulnerable. This lack of agency erodes resilience.

02

Young lawmakers are struggling to make ends meet.

Legislative pay and benefits are often insufficient to support a family or household, forcing lawmakers—especially younger ones—to make untenable tradeoffs in order to serve their communities.

03

Lawmakers feel stretched thin, ineffective, and unsupported.

Most state legislatures lack the staffing, technology, and administrative infrastructure to support meaningful policy and constituent work.

04

Outdated workplace policies and practices limit the effectiveness of legislatures.

Unpredictable schedules and committee calendars, insufficient orientations, and limited bipartisan engagement make the job unnecessarily difficult and isolating for those who want to serve well.

Taken together, young lawmakers are navigating threats to their safety, financial strain, inadequate institutional support, and outdated workplace systems—conditions that drive talented leaders out of office and make public service unrealistic for too many.

These challenges were thrown into sharp relief in June, when former Minnesota House Speaker Melissa Hortman and her husband were killed in a political assassination that also left Minnesota State Sen. John Hoffman and his wife wounded. The subsequent assassination of Gen Z conservative activist Charlie Kirk—and the vitriolic discourse that followed—further intensified lawmakers' fears about personal safety and raised doubts about the viability of remaining in public service.

Political violence and escalating partisanship have become defining concerns for state legislators. Combined with structural and cultural barriers, they threaten lawmakers' ability to effectively serve their communities. Even as many Future Caucus members view public office as temporary service rather than a long-term career, it is essential that they have a fair opportunity to be productive and impactful.

If we can address the conditions pushing talented young leaders out of public office before they have a chance to drive meaningful change, we can rebuild a democracy that reflects the best of us from all walks of life. Imagine institutions shaped less by career politicians and more by creative problem solvers, bridge builders, and community members whose approach to policymaking is grounded in empathy and integrity.

My hope is that The Exit Interview serves as both a wake-up call and a roadmap. The future of our democracy depends on ensuring that public service is not just an act of sacrifice, but a viable path for the next generation of leaders.

Here's to a brighter tomorrow.

METHODOLOGY

This report is informed by eight focus groups and 34 one-on-one interviews with lawmakers, complemented by a survey of 47 respondents. Six of the listening sessions were conducted virtually to ensure geographic diversity, one was held in person in Vermont, and another in Washington, D.C.

In addition, Future Caucus gathered input from more than two dozen lawmakers through in-person roundtable discussions and a supplemental survey at Future Summit in Washington, D.C., in June.

Because many participants engaged through multiple formats, the total counts include some overlap across these methods.

Together, these engagements provided a nuanced understanding of the challenges facing young state legislators. The findings illustrate how structural, logistical, and cultural barriers can limit their capacity to govern effectively and to deliver for the communities they were elected to serve.

PARTICIPANTS
89 total participants
58 Democrats
30 Republicans
1 Independent
31 states represented

QUICK COMPENSATION FACTS
In the Future Summit town hall survey...
81% of respondents said their legislative pay does not cover the cost of living in their state.[1]
The average (mean) salary for state legislators in 2025 was **$47,904** plus per diems.[2]
Per NCSL, that average does not account for states that pay on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis.
In 2024, the average wage in the United States was **$69,846.57.**[3]

1. Future Summit's 'Town Hall' poll, conducted in person, in June
2. NCSL, 2025
3. National Average Wage Index for 2024, ssa.gov

STATE LEGISLATOR COMPENSATION AND LEGISLATURE TYPE

State	Lawmaker Salary[4]	Type of Legislature[5]	Median Annual Salary[6]
Alabama	$62,212	Hybrid	$71,864
Alaska	$84,000	Full-Time	$60,994
American Samoa	$25,000	Part-Time[7]	$8,425[8]
Arizona	$24,000	Hybrid	$68,484
Arkansas	$45,244	Hybrid	$56,888
California	$132,703	Full-Time	$88,088
Colorado	$47,561	Hybrid	$77,272
Connecticut	$43,600	Hybrid	$80,340
D.C.	$171,547.60	Hybrid[9]	$119,080
Delaware	$51,692	Hybrid	$69,160
Florida	$29,697	Hybrid	$66,352
Georgia	$25,315.32	Hybrid	$67,808
Guam	$55,307	Full-Time[10]	$21,545[11]
Hawaii	$74,160	Full-Time	$67,548
Idaho	$25,000	Part-Time	$58,552
Illinois	$93,712	Full-Time	$72,696
Indiana	$33,032.24	Hybrid	$60,580
Iowa	$25,000	Hybrid	$60,008
Kansas	$43,000	Part-Time	$59,124
Kentucky	$221.94*/day*	Hybrid	$58,708
Louisiana	$22,800	Hybrid	$59,852
Maine	$25,000 *1st session* $20,000 *2nd session*	Part-Time	$61,152
Maryland	$55,526	Hybrid	$76,492
Massachusetts	$82,044.31	Full-Time	$90,272
Michigan	$71,685	Full-Time	$65,832
Minnesota	$51,750	Hybrid	$72,228
Mississippi	$23,500	Part-Time	$49,920
Missouri	$41,770	Hybrid	$62,244
Montana	$128.86*/day*	Part-Time	$58,500

4. NCSL, 2025
5. NCSL, 2021
6. Fidelity, 2025
7. Levin Center for Oversight & Democracy, 2023
8. U.S. Census Bureau, 2020
9. D.C. Council, 2016
10. Levin Center for Oversight & Democracy, 2023
11. U.S. Census Bureau, 2020

STATE LEGISLATOR COMPENSATION AND LEGISLATURE TYPE

State	Lawmaker Salary	Type of Legislature	Median Annual Salary
Nebraska	$12,000	Hybrid	$60,060
Nevada	$130/day	Hybrid	$65,520
New Hampshire	$100	Part-Time	$73,008
New Jersey	$49,000	Hybrid	$78,156
New Mexico	$0	Part-Time	$60,060
New York	$142,000	Full-Time	$87,568
North Carolina	$13,951	Hybrid	$66,300
North Dakota	$592/month	Part-Time	$65,364
Northern Mariana Islands	$32,000	Part-Time[12]	$13,594[13]
Ohio	$72,343	Full-Time	$64,324
Oklahoma	$47,500	Hybrid	$56,940
Oregon	$43,440	Hybrid	$70,356
Pennsylvania	$110,015.54	Full-Time	$69,160
Puerto Rico	$73,775	Full-Time[14]	$18,766[15]
Rhode Island	$19,817	Part-Time	$65,676
South Carolina	$10,400	Hybrid	$59,384
South Dakota	$16,348	Part-Time	$57,304
Tennessee	$33,060	Hybrid	$65,312
Texas	$7,200	Hybrid	$72,592
U.S. Virgin Islands	$85,000	Full-Time[16]	$26,897[17]
Utah	$301/day	Part-Time	$64,896
Vermont	$897.29/week	Part-Time	$61,932
Virginia	$17,640 (*delegates*) $18,000 (*senators*)	Hybrid	$75,088
Washington	$61,997 (*representatives*) $60,191 (senators)	Hybrid	$92,612
West Virginia	$23,000	Part-Time	$56,420
Wisconsin	$60,924	Full-Time	$61,100
Wyoming	$150/day	Part-Time	$61,516

12. Levin Center for Oversight & Democracy, 2023
13. U.S. Census Bureau, 2020
14. Levin Center for Oversight & Democracy, 2023
15. U.S. Census Bureau, 2024
16. Levin Center for Oversight & Democracy, 2023
17. U.S. Census Bureau, 2020

WHY THEY RAN

"My son was two at the time, and it got to the point where **I wanted to do whatever I could to ensure that he could ... thrive."**

REP. SETH BRONKO
CONNECTICUT

"I was working in the healthcare field and just noticed **there were literally no scientists serving in the state legislature** ... So I ran to try to bring that perspective."

REP. LAURIE POHUTSKY | MICHIGAN

"I felt like ... **we really needed nurses at the table, helping guide policy,** being the voice for the people."

REP. TARIK KHAN | PENNSYLVANIA

Before exploring the barriers to retention, Future Caucus asked lawmakers why they chose to run for office. They listed a range of reasons, from needing to combat the affordability crisis to advocating for greater incorporation of community leaders and subject matter experts into the policymaking process in their home states.

Across the board, young legislators described being motivated by personal experience, empathy, and a desire to use their skills to strengthen their communities. Yet once in office, many state lawmakers find that logistical and cultural barriers hinder their ability to fully deliver on that ambition and effect the change they initially set out to achieve.

"My son was two at the time, and it got to the point where I wanted to do whatever I could to ensure that **he could live and grow up in a state that he can thrive** in living, working, education and eventually getting a job."

—

CONNECTICUT STATE REP. **SETH BRONKO**

"I was a microbiologist. I was working in the healthcare field and just noticed there were literally no scientists serving in the state legislature, but **there was a lot of legislation coming out that was science based and probably would have benefited from some questions being asked.** So I ran to try to bring that perspective."

—

MICHIGAN STATE REP. **LAURIE POHUTSKY**

"During the pandemic, **I felt that the federal government certainly did a horrible job helping people get access to Covid testing,** and then also, the city and state government weren't filling in the cracks. And so I felt like — I'm a nurse practitioner, a registered nurse — that we really needed nurses at the table, helping guide policy, being the voice for the people."

—

PENNSYLVANIA STATE REP. **TARIK KHAN**

And yet, a clear asymmetry remains. While training, fundraising, and networking infrastructure exists to help young candidates run for office, far fewer resources are available once they are elected and sworn in as lawmakers.

This imbalance reinforces lawmakers' belief in the need for stronger support networks, advocacy groups, and capacity-building efforts to aid those already serving. Without mechanisms like these, that gap is filled by lobbyists, creating misaligned incentives and often deepening partisan divisions over key issues. Legislators emphasized the importance of establishing external, transparent, and ideally nonpartisan systems to provide meaningful support without the influence–or baggage–of dark money.

BARRIERS TO RETENTION OF YOUNG STATE LEGISLATORS

"We're living in poverty. There's no other way for me to say that."

REP. MARY-KATHERINE STONE
VERMONT

"I didn't start anxiety meds until I had this job."

ANONYMOUS | OKLAHOMA

"We take votes in a fishbowl where people can stand over us with not signs, but guns."

SEN. ERIN MAYE QUADE | MINNESOTA

INTERSECTING CHALLENGES

While each of these barriers presents its own difficulties, their impact is often compounded when they intersect.

Consider, for example, a state legislator in Vermont who is unsure of how she will afford the cost of living for her growing family while also facing threats of political violence that put her child and husband at risk. Her state's capitol offers no support to young mothers in the legislature, leaving her isolated and overwhelmed—combined economic and security pressures that could ultimately force her to step down.

Similarly, a single state legislator in Oklahoma described how low compensation, coupled with the lack of insurance coverage for egg freezing, has taken a toll on her wellbeing. "I didn't start anxiety meds until I had this job," she said.

In Minnesota, State Sen. Erin Maye Quade reflected on the multiple, compounding dimensions of political violence:

> "Being a woman, it's not just the death threats, it's the rape threats."
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> —
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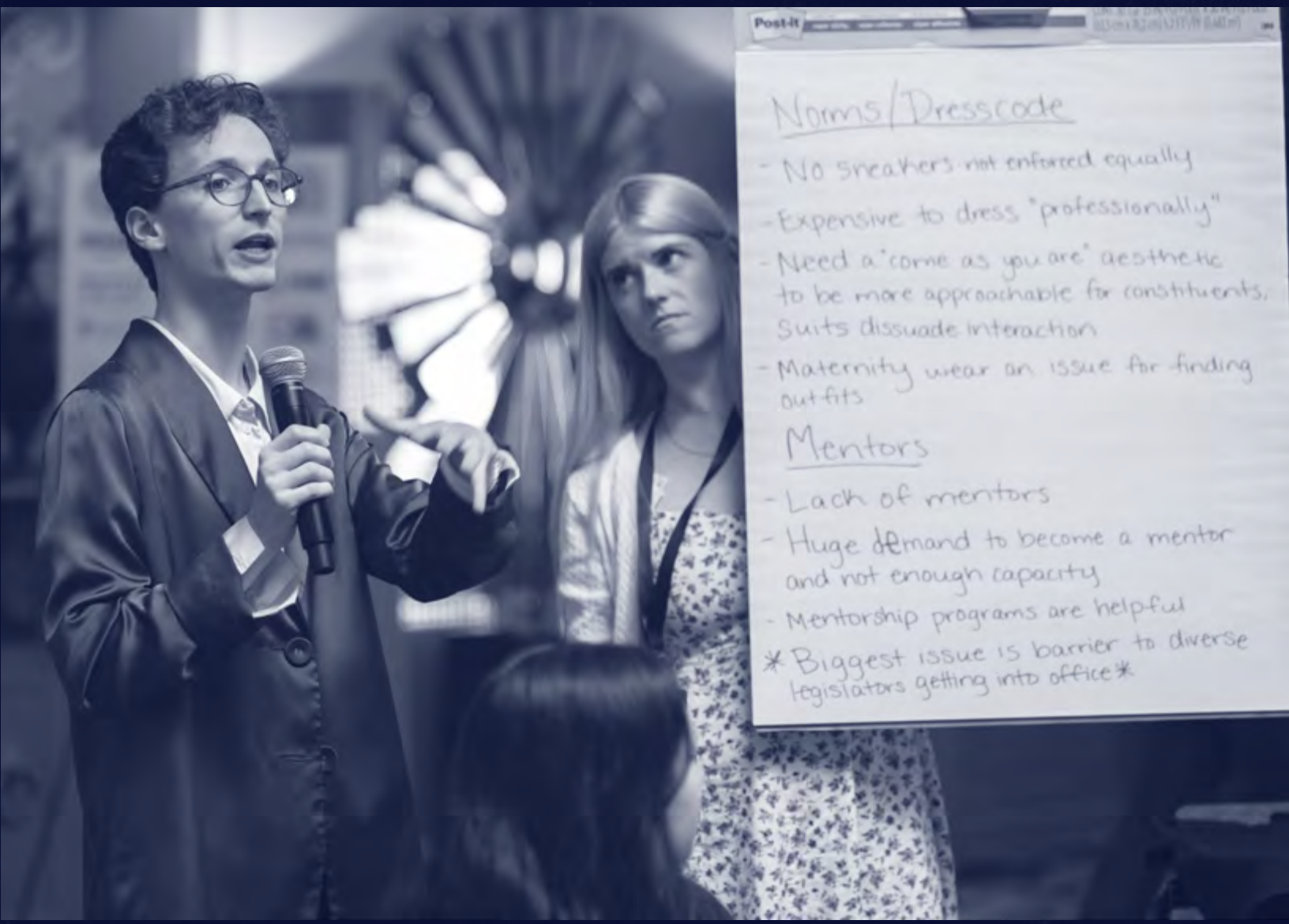
> MINNESOTA STATE SEN. **ERIN MAYE QUADE**

The challenges young lawmakers face rarely occur in a vacuum and the cumulative effect of such barriers as financial strain, safety concerns, family pressures, and inadequate institutional support undermine their ability to serve effectively and sustain long-term public service.


Post-it
Norms/Dresscode
- No sneakers not enforced equally
- Expensive to dress "professionally"
- Need a "come as you are" aesthetic to be more approachable for constituents. Suits dissuade interaction
- Maternity wear an issue for finding outfits
Mentors
- Lack of mentors
- Huge demand to become a mentor and not enough capacity
- Mentorship programs are helpful
* Biggest issue is barrier to diverse legislators getting into office *

"For the sake of my marriage and my own psychological health, **I often wonder if this is the right place for me to be."**

SEN. LÖKI TOBIN | ALASKA

"[My family] did actually want **extra security at our house."**

REP. MEGAN EGBERT
IDAHO

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND TOXIC POLARIZATION

"Unfortunately, social media and some news outlets push **one-sided narratives that fuel division."**

SEN. PAUL CICARELLA
CONNECTICUT

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The rise of political violence nationwide has profoundly affected the lives of young state lawmakers. Threats have persisted for years and many legislators have faced direct intimidation or targeted attacks. Threats of violence have become a serious deterrent to both candidate recruitment and retention. In conversations with Future Caucus, both emphasized that the threat is especially acute for candidates from minority and marginalized communities.

"I haven't decided whether I'm going to run for re-election next year," said one Michigan state representative who has served since 2019. "But this year has made me seriously consider not running again."

Across all listening sessions and focus groups, political violence emerged as one of the most significant barriers to retention. Lawmakers described how threats affect not only their sense of personal safety, but also the security of their families and their long-term willingness to serve.

Pohutsky went to trial after violent threats were made against her and her office. The man who made the threats admitted to them in court, and his defense highlights a broader cultural disdain for politicians—one fueled by polarization, media amplification, and years of normalized hostility toward public servants.

> **"I get two or three really severe rashes of death threats every single year** where we end up having to have police stationed outside. And it was one thing when I was single, and you know, the threat was just myself, but it seems untenable that my family could also be harmed now, especially after what happened in Minnesota. ... so that's kind of been playing into my decision about whether or not I'm going to run again next year."
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> —
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> MICHIGAN STATE REP. **LAURIE POHUTSKY**

"The guy admitted that he did it. His defense was, 'Yeah, like, of course, I threatened to kill her, but who hasn't wanted to kill a politician,' and he was acquitted. And I kind of had a moment then where I was like, 'Oh, okay, this isn't going to get better, unfortunately, until someone dies. Like, no one is going to take this seriously, until something terrible happens.' ... It happened," Pohutsky added.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Hortman's assassination sent shockwaves through state legislatures nationwide, particularly as it became known that the assailant had a list of additional elected officials he intended to target.

Other lawmakers described similarly chilling experiences, including difficult decisions about how to protect their families in the aftermath of political violence.

Together, these accounts illustrate the profound mental and physical toll that threats—and acts—of political violence impose on elected officials. Family safety and personal security have become central concerns for many young legislators, reinforcing how interconnected these barriers to public service truly are.

> **"I was on the hit list.** ... I was a reproductive justice advocate ... and the anti-abortion movement is violent, especially in Minnesota. I'm used to that. There's always been a level of risk in my job, but I had never considered that somebody could come to my home and shoot me and my wife, and like, would my daughter be screaming in her crib? People can carry guns in the Capitol. And the chamber is a circle and the viewing gallery's above it. We take votes in a fishbowl where people can stand over us with not signs, but guns. And I find that terrifying."
>
> —
>
> MINNESOTA STATE SEN. **ERIN MAYE QUADE**

> **"The State Police offered up to all of us, actually, extra surveillance** ... I actually felt okay not having it, but ... this is kind of a family decision. They did actually want extra security at our house for the following few days. And that was a conversation I never thought that I was going to have, you know?"
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> —
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> IDAHO STATE REP. **MEGAN EGBERT**

TOXIC POLARIZATION

Hyperpolarization not only fuels the rise in political violence, but also undermines lawmakers' ability to govern effectively and work across party lines. Legislators noted that, while collaboration is often possible within statehouses, public discourse—particularly on social media—tends to inflame divisions that are far less pronounced among legislators themselves.

When his fellow Future Caucus co-chair on the Democratic side was targeted with death threats and racial slurs for comments made in opposition to ICE, Connecticut State Rep. Seth Bronko released a video condemning the hateful rhetoric. Although he said he disagreed with his co-chair across the aisle on the comments about ICE, he believed it was essential to speak out against the increasingly vitriolic tone of public discourse—a measured, empathetic response that only underscores the disconnect between how everyday Americans perceive partisanship and how many state legislators actually experience it.

This toxic dynamic discourages qualified individuals from running for office and constrains the effectiveness of those who serve.

"We bypass so many people that would be such good public servants, just because they don't want to hop into this public discourse, which is a shame," Bronko said.

The toll of partisanship is often heavier for legislators from marginalized backgrounds. For these lawmakers, partisan hostility frequently intersects with racism, sexism, and other forms of bias. Critics outside the legislature often exploit these identities to inflame tensions online, amplifying hate and fueling harassment.

> "I'm the third Black woman to serve in elected office in the state of Alaska, and also probably one of the most progressive members of the Alaska legislature. And those outside the halls of our capital, I think, are given **a caricature of who I am, and respond pretty vehemently in opposition to that caricature.** They dehumanize me in such a way that I often feel, not only psychologically, but personally threatened, and for the sake of my marriage and my own psychological health, I often wonder if this is the right place for me to be."
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> —
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> ALASKA STATE SEN. **LÖKI TOBIN**

Future Caucus' research also found that Republican legislators serving in predominantly liberal states—such as Rep. Bronko—were particularly attuned to the disconnect between their real experiences and the national narrative about polarization. Many described witnessing firsthand that bipartisanship not only exists but is often the norm within their chambers, even as national media portray it as unattainable. Connecticut State Sen. Paul Cicarella captured this tension and the role of media in perpetuating misunderstanding:

> "Inside the Capitol, we work well together. We have real conversations, even when we disagree. But outside, the first question too often is, 'Are you a Republican or Democrat?' That label shouldn't determine whether someone listens to you or not. Unfortunately, social media and some news outlets push one-sided narratives that fuel division. That kind of atmosphere makes it harder for people to simply live their lives and connect with one another. It's all about bringing people together to get things done, and that is our job at the Capitol. We won't agree on everything, but we must communicate and engage in respectful dialogue. If legislation benefits the majority of residents, I'm going to support it. **Part of my job is to provide residents with tools to have open, constructive conversations."**
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> —
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> CONNECTICUT STATE SEN. **PAUL CICARELLA**

In Republican-led Mississippi, State Sen. Rod Hickman, a Democrat, voiced similar frustrations. Though he frequently disagrees with colleagues across the aisle, he emphasized that most share a commitment to serving their constituents and improving their state.

> **"What we see on TV is mostly DC.** There's no channel, no station, streaming committee meetings at the Mississippi state capitol."
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> —
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> MISSISSIPPI STATE SEN. **ROD HICKMAN**

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

"I had to quit my day job and **take a leap of faith."**

REP. WALTER HUDSON | MINNESOTA

"It's going to reduce the perspectives that we have within the legislature to people that are just doing this really as a career."

ASM. ED RA | NEW YORK

"I have fronted **thousands of dollars** this session."

SEN. GRACIELA GUZMAN | ILLINOIS

"Everyone always says ‘part-time or full-time legislature,’ but ... **if you're doing constituent services correctly, your job is 100% all the time."**

REP. MICHAEL SMITH | DELAWARE

FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Compensation for state legislators varies widely, with some serving in full-time legislatures and others in part-time roles. On average, state lawmakers earn $47,904 annually.[18]

The vast majority of legislators Future Caucus spoke with for *The Exit Interview*—81%, according to a Future Summit town hall poll—said their salaries do not keep pace with the cost of living in their states. While many young professionals across industries share similar concerns, the stakes are especially high for state legislators, who also face threats of political violence and limited support for young families.

Financial barriers to serving in state government are multifaceted. Several lawmakers described having to pay out of pocket for district events or temporary housing near the state capitol—an especially heavy burden for those representing districts located hours away. For legislators without family money or another source of significant disposable income, these expenses can be prohibitive and, in some cases, disqualifying.

"I spend probably over 50% of the amount of money I make from the legislature, **it goes back into my community in a multitude of ways.** ... It makes that very hard ... to afford a good quality way of life, if it was not for my full-time job."

—

MISSISSIPPI STATE REP. **JUSTIS GIBBS**

18. NCSL, 2025

> **"I have fronted thousands of dollars this session.** And it just means that there's no open money for me for anything personal whatsoever. ... It drives a lot of how I can do the work."
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> —
>
> ILLINOIS STATE SEN. **GRACIELA GUZMAN**

New York's consideration of a ban on outside income for legislators illustrates a growing tension nationwide: even in states with full-time legislatures and competitive pay, many lawmakers still rely on other income sources–and struggle to balance that with the demands of public service. Some argue that limiting outside work could narrow who's able to serve in the first place, reducing representation of rising professionals who can't afford to leave their careers or businesses behind for a temporary stint in the legislature.

This issue is not limited to full-time legislatures. Even in states where part-time legislative schedules could accommodate outside employment, lawmakers described the difficulty of maintaining another job while fulfilling their public duties. The unpredictability of session schedules–including emergency sessions, extended debates, and year-round constituent service responsibilities–often makes balancing both impossible in practice. Many legislators noted that, as a result, the distinction between "full-time" and "part-time" legislatures feels largely arbitrary.

> "Somebody who has another career—particularly a business owner or something like that—they're not going to shut everything else down to run for a two-year term in the legislature with no guarantee past that. **... It's going to reduce the perspectives that we have within the legislature to people that are just doing this really as a career."**
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> —
>
> NEW YORK STATE ASM. **ED RA**

"Everyone always says ‘part-time or full-time legislature,’ but I think it's full time regardless, because if you're doing constituent services correctly, your job is 100% all the time. You're multitasking all the time, whether I'm catching up with constituent services, writing legislation, or my real job after the kids go to bed. There's pockets of your life that you're prioritizing daily to just try to figure out how to balance it all. **You're always failing at something."**

—

DELAWARE STATE REP. **MICHAEL SMITH**

"There’s nothing about it that’s part-time. People don’t realize. I tell people all the time," said Mississippi State Sen. Rod Hickman, adding that, compared to the constant demands lawmakers juggle while in-district, attending events and responding to constituent needs at all hours, being in session is "like vacation."

The ‘always-on-call’ nature of legislative service and the unpredictability of scheduling make it difficult to maintain outside employment. Even for those who manage both, the combined demands often amount to holding two full-time jobs. Over time, these pressures can erode lawmakers’ sense of self-worth and effectiveness in their roles.

"I had so many things that I would have to cancel because something came up at work [in the legislature], that by the time I got to my second year, I just decided I can't do this anymore, and so I had to quit my day job and take a leap of faith that I'd be able to figure something out in the next interim. And it's been a challenge."

—

MINNESOTA STATE REP. **WALTER HUDSON**

"It is stressful, because it's not like I take it off. I do my full time job in session, so it's like, 'Okay, get up at four. Answer work emails for four hours, get into the capitol, do that, go home, do more work...' And I'm lucky—because I'm in management, I set the meetings around my schedule."

—

UTAH STATE REP. **JASON KYLE**

And yet, Kyle noted that he would not advocate for a full-time legislature. In states like Utah, he said, the part-time structure brings valuable diversity of talent and professional experience—schoolteachers, police officers, firefighters, real estate agents, ranchers, engineers, and more.

"They do that full time and have to go back to live with the policy they create," Kyle added.

Lawmakers consistently acknowledged that serving in public office is a privilege. Still, the consensus is clear: young lawmakers believe state legislatures are structured in ways that favor those who are already financially secure.

"The reason why most of our legislators are retired [from other careers] is because you have to have an employer who's willing to give you three months off every year, maybe more. We don't even have a set timeline [for when the legislature is in session]. I think that's definitely one of our biggest barriers in recruiting younger people into the legislature."

—

IDAHO STATE REP. **MEGAN EGBERT**

"We had an incredibly nasty primary for the re-election, and my two big ones can read. ... **I made them stop checking the mail."**

REP. ADAM MATHEWS | OHIO

"I'm cognizant of just what the public presence is for children. ... and there's something that doesn't quite fit there."

REP. JONATHAN COOPER
VERMONT

"The waitlist for childcare in Vermont can be **up to two years."**

REP. MARY-KATHERINE STONE | VERMONT

FAMILY AND CAREGIVING BARRIERS

"A lot of people are tired of not being around their younger kids. **You see a lot of people quitting."**

REP. STEPHEN SAINZ | GEORGIA

"You are almost a nonexistent parent ... and that's very difficult."

SEN. ERIN MAYE QUADE | MINNESOTA

FAMILY AND CAREGIVING BARRIERS

Young parents serving in state legislatures face significant cultural and logistical challenges balancing family life with public service. Pregnant lawmakers face unique obstacles both to running for office and to remaining in office—not least because pregnancy is often simultaneously stigmatized and celebrated among women candidates, creating a unique double standard.

Strict rules in some chambers make it nearly impossible for mothers to bring their children or breastfeed, forcing them to plan pregnancies around legislative sessions. Many statehouses also lack dedicated spaces for nursing or childcare. Fathers, too, described bringing children along when childcare fell through—a practice that can help normalize working parenthood but also blurs the boundary between public and private life. Beyond childcare itself, unpredictable hours, after-hours networking events, and constant campaigning add instability and stress for parents of young children. Overall, the culture and structure of most legislatures remain poorly suited to the realities of raising a family, particularly for young mothers.

The data bear this out. According to the Vote Mama Foundation, 85% of American women are mothers by the time they are 45 years old, but in 2022, moms of minor kids only made up 5% of state legislators.[19] By 2024, just 25% of legislators nationwide were female or nonbinary parents.[20] Vote Mama also found that the structural and cultural challenges faced by young mothers have contributed to attrition among lawmakers: of 2,285 women state legislators included in Vote Mama's 2022 *Politics of Parenthood* report, 591 had left office by 2024—80 of them mothers of minor children. As the report concludes, "This amounts to 20% of all moms of minors who served in 2022."[21] The message is clear: state legislatures are not the place for parents of young children.

In Future Caucus' conversations, these patterns were echoed repeatedly. Minnesota State Sen. Erin Maye Quade recounted the experience of caring for her newborn daughter, who was hospitalized shortly after birth, while traveling back and forth between the children's hospital and the statehouse for votes:

> **"You are almost a nonexistent parent—** like, you're not actually there when you're 30 minutes away. I'm not available, and that's very difficult."
>
> MINNESOTA STATE SEN. **ERIN MAYE QUADE**

19. Vote Mama Foundation, 2022
20. Axios, 2024
21. Vote Mama Foundation, 2022

FAMILY AND CAREGIVING BARRIERS

Even under normal circumstances, Maye Quade noted that the cost of childcare can be prohibitive, especially when daycares charge by the minute after standard business hours—a reality that compounds the broader affordability crisis facing young families in public service.

> "The U.S. Air Force is allowing [my husband] 12 weeks of paternity leave, but that's only going to get us through the end of March, and our session goes to the end of May, **and the waitlist for childcare in Vermont can be up to two years."**
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> VERMONT STATE REP. **MARY-KATHERINE STONE**

Meanwhile, in Vermont, state Rep. Mary-Katherine Stone said she was repeatedly asked whether she planned to step down when she had her baby—despite never suggesting such an intention. The assumption that she would resign underscores a persistent stigma toward young mothers in public office. That attitude both reflects and reinforces the logistical challenges faced by parents serving in state legislatures.

Parenting while serving in a state legislature presents significant challenges, regardless of gender. Young fathers, like young mothers, struggle with childcare logistics, unpredictable schedules, and the emotional strain of balancing public service with family life. Even for those not experiencing pregnancy or breastfeeding, the demands of legislative work weigh heavily on parents of young children.

Lawmakers frequently noted that the younger their children are, the harder it becomes to manage both roles. The steep cost of childcare, combined with the unique time demands of caring for infants and toddlers—doctors' appointments, nighttime feedings, and early development milestones—makes it nearly impossible to sustain balance for long.

FAMILY AND CAREGIVING BARRIERS

"A lot of people are tired of not being around their younger kids. **You see a lot of people quitting."**

—

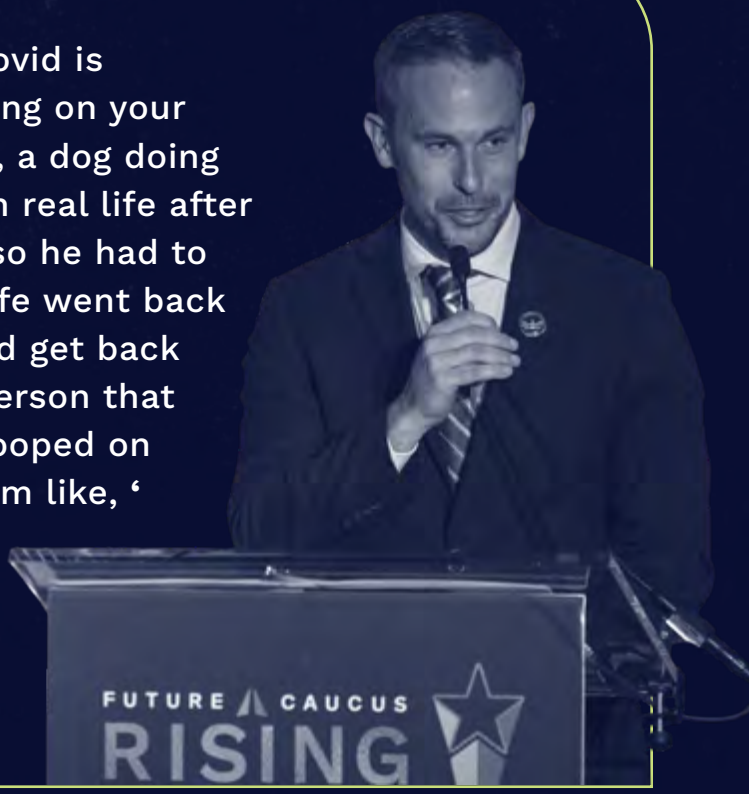
GEORGIA STATE REP. **STEPHEN SAINZ**

Delaware State Rep. Michael Smith, a father with a working spouse, described bringing his children to professional events when childcare fell through, emphasizing that such realities should not be stigmatized. He also noted that the pandemic's work-from-home shift helped normalize the visibility of family life in professional settings.

"One positive thing that came out of Covid is everything was normalized—kids popping on your screen, a cat jumping on your shoulder, a dog doing something crazy. So it kind of helped in real life after that. I mean, my youngest son is four, so he had to come with me everywhere when my wife went back to teaching and my other two finally did get back into school. ... it normalizes you as a person that has real things to do. I remember he pooped on me right in front of our governor, and I'm like, ' **Well, the real world's calling, I've gotta go."**

—

DELAWARE STATE REP. **MICHAEL SMITH**



> "One of the things that is on my mind a lot is that public service is a public act. And **are my kids just my kids when I'm a legislator, or are they like props when I'm a legislator?** And I don't want to feel that tension. I'm cognizant of just what the public presence is for children. ... And while that's a part of the campaign sometimes, it's a part of the legislating sometimes, and there's something that doesn't quite fit there."
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> VERMONT STATE REP. **JONATHAN COOPER**

Ohio State Rep. Adam Mathews, a father of five, spoke candidly about the compounding pressures of partisanship, instability, and the relentless pace of legislative life—all of which intensify the difficulty of being both an effective lawmaker and a present parent.

> **"Part of it is the instability.** You'll have session that starts at two, and you have no idea how long it's going to go. You have committees that may go long ...and that makes it very difficult to get home. And this past time, we had an incredibly nasty primary for the re-election, and my two big ones can read, and it was normally their job to check the mail. I made them stop checking the mail. I am grateful to my family for supporting this important work, even if it means I miss bedtime sometimes."
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> OHIO STATE REP. **ADAM MATHEWS**

Children of state lawmakers gain an unusually close view of American democracy at work—and in dysfunction. Legislatures remain poorly structured to accommodate parents, and the toxicity of modern partisanship extends its reach beyond the chamber, into families' homes and lives.

"If someone with experience is facing challenges, **how is someone like me going to be able to make change?"**

REP. DAVID LEBOEUF
MASSACHUSETTS

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE GOVERNING

"This is how the sausage is made, and **I don't know how to undo what we have done."**

REP. ERIN KOEGEL | MINNESOTA

"At the bottom of the totem pole, **there's not much decision making."**

SEN. ROD HICKMAN | MISSISSIPPI

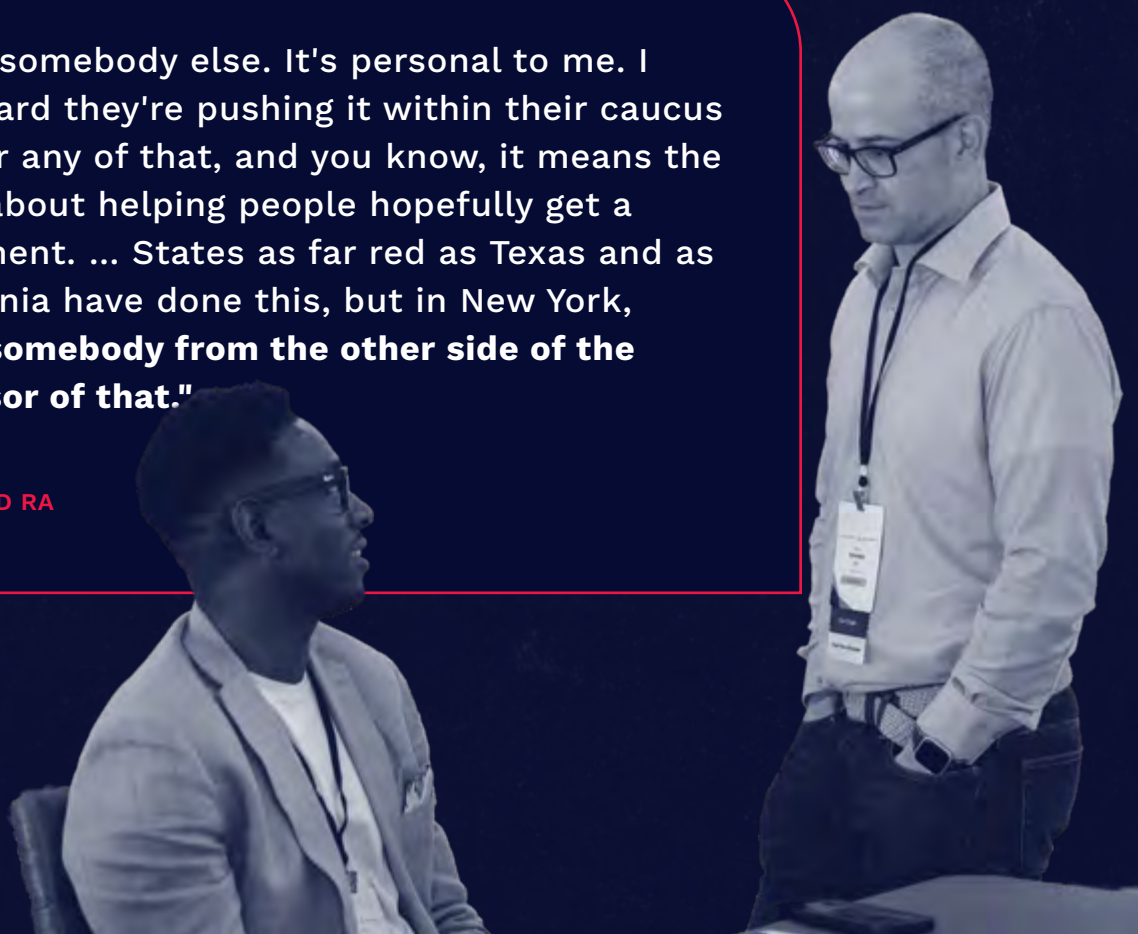
BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE GOVERNING

Across all of Future Caucus' conversations with state lawmakers, the structural and procedural makeup of state legislatures emerged as a central concern. Lawmakers cited challenges stemming from the balance of power between majority and minority parties, bureaucratic red tape, outdated procedural rules, and the varying length and intensity of legislative sessions.

State lawmakers also pointed to chronic understaffing and outdated technology as major barriers to effective governance. Compared with Congress, state legislatures operate with far fewer staff per lawmaker—and many have no staff at all—limiting capacity for research, constituent services, and long-term policy development. Legislative offices and committees often rely on small, overstretched teams, while many statehouse IT departments struggle to recruit and retain skilled workers. As a result, lawmakers described working with aging bill-drafting systems, fragmented data platforms, and administrative tools that have not kept pace with the complexity or volume of modern legislative work. These constraints slow workflows, increase reliance on informal workarounds, and make even basic tasks—like tracking amendments or analyzing fiscal impacts—far more onerous than they could be.

These logistical hurdles frustrate lawmakers across party lines and, for many, feel deeply personal. The systems that govern today's state legislatures were often designed decades (or even centuries) ago, for a political landscape that looked very different. While the balance between majority control and minority input is essential for checks and balances, legislators said those same systems can stifle innovation and delay progress. The pace of work in

> "You're relying on somebody else. It's personal to me. I don't know how hard they're pushing it within their caucus to get it moved, or any of that, and you know, it means the world to me. It's about helping people hopefully get a life- saving treatment. ... States as far red as Texas and as far blue as California have done this, but in New York, **I needed to have somebody from the other side of the aisle be the sponsor of that."**
>
> — NEW YORK STATE ASM. **ED RA**



most statehouses has not kept up with technological or cultural change, leaving many legislatures ill-suited to the requirements of modern leadership.

When it comes to morale, one of the most discouraging aspects of majority-minority rule is its effect on lawmakers' ability to advance legislation. Many young legislators expressed that their lack of power to move bills leaves them questioning their impact. New York State Asm. Ed Ra, a Republican, described passing a bill that allowed New Yorkers to enroll in the bone-marrow registry at the DMV—a measure personally significant to him because his mother was a bone-marrow transplant recipient—but only after relying on a Democratic colleague to whip up their caucus's support for the bill. Beyond the usual challenges of majority-minority policymaking, entrenched seniority systems can discourage younger elected officials from pursuing leadership roles in their party over the long term. Many described feeling unheard, and even when their ideas are acknowledged, bureaucratic procedures stifle momentum and innovation.

> **"It goes back to seniority and loyalty,** and at the bottom of the totem pole, there's not much decision making."
>
> —
>
> MISSISSIPPI STATE SEN. **ROD HICKMAN**

> "This is how the sausage is made, and I don't know how to undo what we have done. By having these budget deals that always run out and then almost go into secret negotiations ... **Three people control every single dollar, and it gets to be a little much."**
>
> —
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> MINNESOTA STATE REP. **ERIN KOEGEL**

> "For many younger lawmakers, especially those of us with an activist background, we ran for office as a response to something in our communities. When you see your more tenured colleagues working on bills for years, it can feel demoralizing. If someone with experience is facing challenges, how is someone like me going to be able to make change? Even when you pass bills you know will have a transformative impact **you never feel truly satisfied that you are doing enough."**
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> MASSACHUSETTS STATE REP. **DAVID LEBOEUF**

WHO ARE STATE LEGISLATURES DESIGNED TO ATTRACT?

The intersection of these barriers raises a fundamental question: who are state legislatures truly set up to attract and retain among their ranks? Across Future Caucus' research, one finding was consistent—state legislatures are structured in ways that favor the already wealthy. Only those with independent income or family resources can realistically afford to serve comfortably and sustainably.

From private security to childcare, housing during session, and the ability to front costs associated with the job, financial flexibility shapes who can participate. Those with established careers, personal wealth, or access to donor networks are far better positioned to absorb these costs. In contrast, early-career professionals—whose peers and partners are often still advancing in their own fields—face a much steeper climb to make legislative service viable.

These disparities are reinforced by a strong lobby culture in many states, which tends to favor individuals with existing connections and more traditional political backgrounds. The result is a system that inadvertently filters out diverse voices and early-career talent, perpetuating a cycle where financial privilege becomes a prerequisite for public service.

> "You see pretty quickly that this place runs on who you know, not what you stand for. The priorities follow the biggest donors, and **if you're not plugged into that network, the odds are stacked against you.** It's a disheartening reality to witness just months into the job."
>
> — OHIO STATE REP. **TRISTAN RADER**

THE PATH FORWARD

As the responsibilities of state governments expand, the demands on lawmakers have become increasingly complex and time-intensive. Yet many legislatures still operate under outdated structures and expectations that fail to support the people doing the work. State legislators remain chronically under-resourced and under-supported by their institutions. As a result, talented, pragmatic lawmakers are burning out of public service. To reverse this trend, states must modernize the legislature as a workplace—creating healthier, more productive, and safer environments that support pragmatic leaders across the political spectrum. A modern legislative workplace strengthens recruitment, retention, and collaboration among lawmakers, ultimately improving governance.

Recognizing these challenges, several states have begun taking concrete steps to improve the quality of life and long-term retention of their lawmakers. One leading example is Kansas, where legislator pay nearly doubled—from $88.66 per day of session—after an independent Legislative Compensation Commission enacted reforms to increase compensation. The nine-person commission, which included no sitting legislators, was tasked with evaluating compensation rates and retirement benefits and will continue to review and issue recommendations every four years. The Kansas model follows similar approaches in other Midwestern states, including Minnesota, that have established independent commissions to regularly assess legislative pay.

Across Future Caucus' research, lawmakers expressed hesitation about voting to raise their own salaries—a dynamic that makes the Kansas model particularly effective. Once the commission submitted its proposal, the legislature was not required to approve it, though they had an opportunity to reject it. When the deadline passed without rejection, the raise took effect automatically, allowing lawmakers to avoid going on record in support of it.

Building on these insights, Future Caucus has identified four strategic areas where civil society and legislative leaders can have the greatest impact in reducing the lawmaker retention crisis. Together, these focus areas form a roadmap for

SAFETY AND SECURITY

Protect lawmakers and their families from escalating threats of political violence.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY

Make public service feasible for people from all socioeconomic backgrounds through independent compensation commissions and related reforms.

STAFFING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Equip lawmakers with adequate staff, technology, and administrative support to deliver results for their communities.

PRO-FAMILY WORKPLACE CULTURE

Modernize legislative calendars, rules, and orientations to enable balance, family life, and cross-partisan collaboration.

WHAT CIVIL SOCIETY CAN DO

ENHANCE LAWMAKER SAFETY AND SECURITY

- Fund coordination between legislators and law enforcement.
- Provide free or low-cost access to legal, cybersecurity, privacy, and home-security support.
- Establish a nonpartisan tipline to monitor threats, advise on risk assessment, and expedite response.
- Create educational resources for legislative leaders outlining successful threat-response models.

SHAPE THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE

- Invest in local journalism to increase public understanding of state legislative work.
- Support and advance narrative-building initiatives, op-eds, and other content that make the case for legislative modernization as essential to democratic renewal.

STRENGTHEN FINANCIAL FEASIBILITY

- Fund research that quantifies the social impact of the lawmaker retention crisis, and encourage studies like Virginia's JLARC review on compensation.
- Educate policymakers and the public on how independent compensation commissions depoliticize and rationalize legislative pay.

INVEST IN LEGISLATIVE CAPACITY AND CULTURE

- Support bipartisan retreats, shared chamber meals, and relationship-building opportunities that foster cross-aisle trust.
- Promote bipartisan, family-friendly workplace reforms with strong cross-party appeal.
- Fund strong, nonpartisan orientations and ongoing learning programs for new lawmakers
- Build partnerships among civic and philanthropic organizations to align structural, cultural, and safety improvement efforts in under-resourced legislatures.

WHAT LEGISLATURES CAN DO

IMPROVE THREAT RESPONSE AND COORDINATION

- Establish a crisis-response "red phone" for immediate coordination with state and local law enforcement.
- Flag legislators' residences with local police and ensure clear communication protocols for emergencies.
- Enforce prosecution for credible threats against public officials.
- Eliminate requirements for candidates or legislators to publicly list their home addresses.

ADVANCE FAIR AND FEASIBLE COMPENSATION

- Pass legislation creating independent pay commissions to address stagnant pay and depoliticize compensation decisions.

STRENGTHEN INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

- Modernize technology and invest in digital tools that improve transparency and efficiency.
- Increase staff capacity and budgets so lawmakers can deliver high-quality constituent services and develop effective policy.

IMPROVE LEGISLATIVE OPERATIONS AND CULTURE

- Standardize calendars and committee schedules to make service compatible with family and professional commitments.
- Reform chamber rules to support caregivers and normalize family-friendly practices.
- Implement or improve rules to prevent sexual harassment of lawmakers, staff and interns.
- Implement structured bipartisan engagement such as alternating seating, joint caucus lunches, and recurring cross-party briefings.
- Provide robust new-member orientations focused on legislative process, bill drafting, and bipartisan relationship building.

These recommendations represent practical steps toward modernizing the institution of state legislatures—making public service more sustainable, more inclusive, and more effective for the diverse generations stepping up to lead.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We also thank the 89 state lawmakers who took part in the focus groups and offered their direct, often vulnerable, perspectives to Future Caucus so that we can better understand the obstacles to effective lawmaking—and better support these extraordinary young leaders in overcoming those obstacles, together.

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