



A Proposal to Build Trust in Government: Let Lawmakers Vote from Home

Summary

If legislators could vote from their home districts, they might spend more time with the people they represent — and be more responsive to them rather than to lobbyists.

Main text word count: 759

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A version of this was first published by The Detroit News on June 29, 2017.

Declining trust in government produces attempts to transform and restructure it. One new idea could reverse the erosion of confidence: We should amend the state constitution to permit lawmakers to cast legislative votes from their home districts, not just from inside the Capitol building.

There's been no end to ideas for shaking things up. Voters approved legislative term limits in nearly half the states. Michigan did so in the 1990s. One thing the limits did not do here was increase trust in the Legislature. Public support for limiting lawmakers' terms remains strong even as Lansing insiders occasionally float the idea of eliminating or extending them.

A 2008 initiative called Reform Michigan Government Now would have imposed sweeping reforms to all three branches of state government. Support for it collapsed after a secret slide presentation was discovered that labeled the measure "Changing the rules of politics in Michigan to help Democrats."

A few organizations recently have spent millions of dollars advocating a "Convention of States" or an "Article V Convention," rarely or never-used processes to amend the U. S. Constitution. Their aim is to restrain Congress, but they face long odds.

Lt. Gov. Brian Calley announced a campaign in May to make the Michigan Legislature a part-time body. Others have linked that concept to more generous term limits.

None of these ideas has attracted a critical mass of support.

Donald Trump was elected amid a promise to "drain the swamp," which voters took to mean he would break up cozy cabals of lawmakers, bureaucrats and lobbyists in Washington who aren't putting the people first. Many voters suspect that a tightly knit and dimly lit culture among the governing class is more effective at keeping itself happy than it is at representing regular people.

The same sentiment rings familiar at the state level, but on a smaller scale.

Allowing lawmakers to vote from their home districts could restore trust in government. House and Senate rules, not law, require legislators to vote in the Capitol just like in horse-and-buggy days. The process has not changed much, although electricity now allows lawmakers to vote via green or red buttons at their desks.



Trust in Michigan government may increase if legislators spent less time in Lansing.

Requiring legislators to be in Lansing to vote on thousands of bills, amendments, and procedures every session means they must spend a great deal of time far from the people they represent. It also means they spend a lot of time close to people paid full-time to twist arms.

There is a reason every major interest group in the state has a permanent building in Lansing, and it's usually not to represent the broader interests of the people. A Lansing lobbying guide devotes 289 pages to the names and photos of local, professional lobbyists. Beer and wine wholesalers famously supplied a bar for campaign fundraisers within walking distance of the Capitol.

Three things would happen immediately if lawmakers could vote from their districts. First, every campaign would likely include promises to spend more time in the district. Challengers would promise to split their time between Lansing and the district more wisely than the incumbent, and the incumbent would argue he or she already has the right mix.

Second, the relationships between lawmakers and constituents would change. More direct contact with the people leads to more opportunities to hear them out, explain past votes, and describe future plans.

Lastly, the dynamic between lawmakers and lobbyists would change. It's convenient for lobbyists that the lawmakers come to them. Lobbyists would prioritize things differently if they had to visit lawmakers on their home turf surrounded by their own voters.

No lawmaker would have to cast a single vote from the district. Legislators could still spend as much time in Lansing as they wished — to work with other lawmakers or officials, attend hearings and briefings, or consult lobbyists and experts. Lansing news media would report on who votes the most from the Capitol while local media would have far more access to lawmakers. The Open Meetings Act and legislative rules would be amended to comport with the constitutional change that would make in-district voting hard to undo. Communications technology would be updated and secured to ensure integrity.

Allowing legislators to cast votes from the home district is not guaranteed to restore trust in government. But it is the only proposal that creates a strong incentive for lawmakers to spend more time with those they are pledged to represent and less time near the concentrated power of lobbyists and interest groups. If the idea works in Michigan, perhaps in time we could export it to Washington.

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