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Length of Sessions Affects Demographics of Legislature, Says Policy Center

Lengthier legislative sessions are influencing the demographics of the legislature and who is able to run for the General Assembly, says the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research in its biennial look at legislative trends released today. The Center's report also highlights a trend in how a more competitive, two-party system affects the legislative committee system.

"It's clear that longer sessions are having an impact on what types of people have the time and money to serve in the legislature," says Carolyn Waller, policy analyst at the Center. "The number of retirees is at an all-time high, and the General Assembly is fast becoming the most prestigious retirement community in the state."

Legislative trends highlighted by the Center this year include:

- The number of retirees (38) in the General Assembly is at an all-time high.
- Some legislators now identify their occupation as "full-time legislator," a recent development that is becoming more common with each session.
- More legislators are in occupations with flexible schedules – such as real estate or self-employment.
- Fewer legislators are in less flexible occupations – such as law or farming.

Longer Sessions Change Legislative Demographics

North Carolina may have a part-time citizen legislature, but longer sessions place limits on which citizens can successfully juggle legislative duties with their jobs back home. The legislature traditionally meets from January to July or August in "regular" sessions in odd-numbered years and from May to July in "short" sessions in even-numbered years. But the 1997 and 1998 sessions set records for length, adjourning on August 28 and October 29, respectively.

One group with this much time to devote to legislative duty is retirees. There are now 38 retirees serving in the 1999 General Assembly. In 1975, there were only 7. The number of retirees is at an all-time high, and this is the first time the number of retirees has surpassed the number of

attorneys.

"I'm retired, but I'm a full-time legislator," says Rep. Larry Justus (R-Henderson). "I could have come to the General Assembly when I was 29. But I didn't feel I could run my business, raise my family, and be in Raleigh. It is a full-time operation. We just won't admit it."

Legislators with occupations that afford greater flexibility continue to increase their numbers as well, such as those in real estate and those who are self-employed. By contrast, legislators with jobs that are less flexible – such as attorneys and farmers – are on the decline. In 1971, there were 68 lawyers in the legislature; this session, there are 37. The number of farmers in the legislature is also on the decline, with only 16 farmers in the legislature this year compared with 30 in 1983.

When asked to comment on this trend, House Minority Leader and attorney Leo Daughtry (R-Johnston) points to two factors. "One change is the length of the sessions. It's difficult to be away from your practice for so long. Clients won't stand for it. Secondly, it's nonpaying."

House Majority Leader Phil Baddour (D-Wayne), also an attorney, echoes these comments. "Demands of service [in the General Assembly] are tremendous. It's tough to maintain a law practice and to serve in the General Assembly."

Legislative Committee System Affected by a More Competitive, Two-Party System

The second major trend identified by the Center is the impact of the state's more competitive, two-party system on the legislative committee structure. For three sessions in a row, party control of the state House has depended on less than a 17-vote margin, with Republicans in control from 1995 to 1998 and Democrats with a majority of 12 votes this year. This means a break in party ranks by only six legislators can change policy outcomes.

In order to keep all legislators in step with party positions, the Center says legislative leaders have used these four tools:

- * In the last four years, all but five legislators in the majority party who were not freshmen were given committee chairmanships by Republican leaders in 1997 and by Democratic leaders in 1999.
- * This year, Democratic Speaker Jim Black (D-Mecklenburg) increased the number of committees with multiple chairmen so that 23 committees have more than one chair. Rep. Daughtry says, "The leadership wants to use committee appointments as a way to control the caucus."
- * Both parties have given some chairmanships to the opposition party in the last two sessions in an attempt to court a few more votes. In 1999, for example, Speaker Black awarded committee chairmanships to Republican Representatives Monroe Buchanan (R-Mitchell), Jim Gulley (R-Mecklenburg), and Steve Wood (R-Guilford).

- * The start of this year's session also witnessed the first purge by a party. The Republican Caucus expelled Rep. Wood for continually breaking party ranks. Wood successfully challenged the caucus choice for the post of Speaker Pro-Tem last session and then voted with Democrats for Speaker Black this year.

These and other legislative trends can be found in *Article II: A Guide to the 1999-2000 N.C. Legislature*. Authored by Carolyn Waller, this citizens' guide contains profiles of each of the 170 members of the General Assembly, including photos, business, home and e-mail addresses, telephone and fax numbers, counties in the districts they serve, number of terms served in the legislature, and each legislator's educational and occupational background. For members who served in the previous session, the guide lists five bills they introduced in 1997-98, votes on 15 bills of statewide interest during the 1997-98 session, and a history of rankings of each legislator's effectiveness since 1981. These rankings are based on surveys of all legislators, registered lobbyists based in North Carolina, and the capital news media. The latest set of rankings was released in April 1998. Also included are demographic and occupational trends for the General Assembly since 1981 and a list of the 50 most influential lobbyists.

A pocket-sized supplement to *Article II* contains information a citizen or lobbyist would need, including each legislator's party affiliation, home county, legislative office address and phone number, e-mail address at the General Assembly, seat number, and all committee assignments. The supplement also contains seating charts, committee schedules, and deadlines for introducing various types of bills.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization created to study public issues facing North Carolina and to evaluate state government programs. The Center receives general operating support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem, 14 other foundations, 190 corporate contributors, and almost 1,000 individual and organizational members across the state. In addition to publishing *Article II: A Guide to the 1999-2000 N.C. Legislature*, the Center also publishes *North Carolina Insight* magazine, a textbook for teachers of state and local government, and book-length research reports. The Center recently released a follow-up report on special provisions in budget bills and is currently studying governance of public universities in North Carolina, health care issues affecting Hispanics, and wood chip mills and forestry management. Recent studies also have examined rural economic development, state job training programs, year-round schools, and children with special needs.

Copies of *Article II: A Guide to the 1999-2000 N.C. Legislature* and *A Supplement to Article II* are available for \$25.00 a set. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC, 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or order on the Center's website at: www.ncinsider.com/nccppr.

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