



Factors to Consider in Raising Legislative Salaries

Among the many choices Nebraska voters will make when they vote on November 6th, one will be an amendment to the state constitution raising state senator salaries from \$12,000 to \$22,500 annually.[\[1\]](#)

Since the current salary was set in 1988, there have been several recent attempts to increase Nebraska legislator salaries. In 2006, a similar amendment that would have increased salaries to \$21,000 a year along with a built-in cost of living increase was added on the primary ballot and voted down by 52 percent of Nebraskans.[\[2\]](#) Another amendment that would have increased salaries to \$22,000 was passed by the Legislature in 2007 but was not placed on the 2008 ballot. When the Legislature attempted to put it on the 2010 ballot, it was removed by Nebraska Secretary of State John Gale because the Legislature had acted unconstitutionally in postponing the issue for so long.[\[3\]](#)

While some states pay their legislators on a per diem basis, among the states that do give annual salaries, Nebraska's salary is on the low end of the spectrum, but not the lowest: Texas pays legislators \$7,200 a year, and Mississippi and South Carolina pay about \$10,000 a year; New Mexico does not pay legislators any salary, providing only a pre-set per day voucher for travel and other expenses.[\[4\]](#) Nebraska is also one of the few states that do not provide legislators with any pensions.[\[5\]](#)

Such small compensation for lawmakers usually requires legislators to have another job or maintain another source of income. While such an arrangement adheres to the principles of a citizen legislature and helps ensure legislators do not become too removed from the people who must live with the laws they make, it can also prevent people from having the option to serve as legislators. The small salary does not match the time demands of legislators, who must attend session for 60 or 90 days a year and attend hearings and interim studies during the rest of the year. People who cannot leave their jobs for such a length of time are unable to serve, limiting not just would-be elected officials, but also the options for voters.[\[6\]](#)

However, arguments have been made against the increase in salary. The increase from \$12,000 to \$22,500 would cost taxpayers over \$1.1 million a year, whereas the current salaries only cost taxpayers \$588,000 annually. Finding that extra money when the state budget already appears stretched to the brink would be difficult, and the burden may be forced upon taxpayers or from

cutting programs.

Another issue is whether now is the right time to increase salaries. Although Nebraska's unemployment rate is well below the national average at 4 percent, [7] personal income has taken a hit from the recession, with per capita income dropping nearly a thousand dollars between 2008 and 2009, and only increasing by 0.7 percent in 2010. [8] With the average Nebraskan likely seeing little to no pay increase, it may not be right to increase the pay of public servants 87.5 percent as this amendment would do.

While there are substantive arguments on both sides of this issue, voters will decide: does the current salary allow qualified individuals to become legislators? Is it fiscally responsible to raise salaries, and thereby state spending? Is it right to increase the salaries of elected officials when regular people are not seeing increases in their salaries? These are the questions voters must grapple with on November 6th, and their decision will have long lasting complications on both the state budget and the Legislature itself.

[1] Nebraska Secretary of State, "Proposed Amendments, 2012." Available at <http://www.sos.state.ne.us/elec/2012/pdf/proposed-amendments.pdf>, accessed October 12, 2012.

[2] Ballotpedia, "Nebraska Legislature Salary Increase, Amendment 1 (May 2006)." Available at [http://www.ballotpedia.org/wiki/index.php/Nebraska_Legislature_Salary_Increase,_Amendment_1_\(May_2006\)](http://www.ballotpedia.org/wiki/index.php/Nebraska_Legislature_Salary_Increase,_Amendment_1_(May_2006)), accessed October 16, 2012.

[3] Paul Hammel, "Pay raise taken off ballot," *Omaha World Herald*, February 5, 2010. Available at <http://www.omaha.com/article/20100205/NEWS01/100209751>, accessed October 16, 2012.

[4] National Conference of State Legislatures, "2011 NCSL Legislator Compensation Table." Available at <http://www.ncsl.org/legislatures-elections/legisdata/2011-ncsl-legislator-compensation-table.aspx>, accessed October 15, 2012.

[5] *USA Today*, "State-by-state: Benefits available to state legislators," September 23, 2011. Available at [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-10-11/state-legislators-pensions-records/50523328/1?csp=34news&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+usatoday-NewsTopStories+\(News+-+Top+Stories\)](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-10-11/state-legislators-pensions-records/50523328/1?csp=34news&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+usatoday-NewsTopStories+(News+-+Top+Stories)), accessed October 15, 2012.

[6] *Omaha World Herald*, "Salary hike reasonable," October 2, 2012. Available at <http://www.omaha.com/article/20121002/NEWS0802/710029955/1677>, accessed October 16, 2012.

[7] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Local Area Unemployment Statistics: Unemployment Rates for States, August 2012" United States Department of Labor, September 21, 2012. Available at <http://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm>, accessed October 16, 2012.

[8] Nebraska Department of Economic Development, "Recent Trends in Selected Nebraska Economic Numbers," September 12, 2012. Available at <http://www.neded.org/files/research/trends/trends.pdf>, accessed October 16, 2012.



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