

# SiX Principles for Transforming State Legislatures

Our state legislatures should be by the people, for the people, and of the people. State legislatures should be institutions where we all have an equal say in the crucial decisions that shape our lives, but for too long, they have been in the hands of the wealthy few. It's time to return state legislatures to the hands of the people and to find new ways of governing in which our legislators hold power *with* the people who elect them. We must seek a transformation that envisions a model of governance that centers people, especially the people who have been excluded from and exploited by public policy.

We are far from the first to call for changes to how state legislatures operate. [Calls for legislative reform](#) have sporadically been made by scholars, legislative associations, and civic organizations over time. But thus far, reform efforts and the incremental improvements undertaken in some states have been insufficient in preventing a decades-long march that allowed antidemocratic interests to hijack state legislatures across the country.

## About the SiX Principles

The SiX Principles for Transforming State Legislatures is a values-based framework for transforming our state legislatures into more democratic institutions where more people – particularly those with the lived experience necessary to inform critical policy decisions – are empowered to participate in the legislative process, as lawmakers, legislative staffers, or as members of the public.

Instead of a specific set of policy recommendations, we adopt a framework driven by a set of principles, because every state and legislature is unique. This model of governance requires new ideas and innovation, and in the following sections, we offer examples of how some state legislatures have worked to shift the balance of power as a starting point. No single set of policy recommendations will achieve the same transformation across all states, and these principles are not mutually exclusive (many of the examples included in this section advance multiple principles), but rather, mutually reinforcing.

Importantly, the SiX Principles for Transforming State Legislatures are not a universal cure for the alarming rise in extremism, anti-democratic ideas, theocratic rule, or authoritarianism. They represent a critical piece of a much larger movement that is beyond the scope of this publication to reimagine American governance at all levels and put power back in the hands of the people.



**INCLUSIVE**

*Legislatures are representative governments and inclusive institutions.*

State legislators have demanding jobs, and the work that they do has far-reaching impacts on all of us. In many states, legislator compensation is an insurmountable barrier for many people to public office because few people, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, can afford to work at a job where they are not paid enough to support their families. [Dozens of state lawmakers across the country](#) have announced in recent years that they would retire or not seek re-election, oftentimes citing the unsustainability of the [low pay and long hours required of them](#).

Legislators should be paid fairly for the work that they do to ensure that legislatures are representative of all people. To avoid a conflict of interest, some states have contemplated an approach – [already in effect in at least 21 states](#) – that would empower an independent third party to determine legislative pay regularly, like a New Mexico bill ([2022 NM HJR 10](#)) that would establish a Public Officer Salary Commission to establish and limit salaries for legislators and other public officials every two years. Other states tie legislator compensation to a regularly updated measure, like median income or annual inflation, to ensure that compensation increases automatically. A bill introduced in Oregon ([2022 OR SB 1566](#)), where compensation is currently tied to a salary schedule for state employees, would adjust legislator salary annually according to the state’s annual average wage, in addition to establishing a monthly \$1,000 child care reimbursement for state legislators with children or dependents under age 13 during the legislative session.

Running for elective office is time-consuming and costly, and oftentimes, success is predetermined by how wealthy or well-connected candidates are. Campaign finance reforms can lower barriers to running for state legislative office for people who have historically been underrepresented in state legislatures. [Public campaign financing programs](#), for example, have the potential to help more candidates successfully run for office without independent wealth or connections to wealthy donors by matching small-dollar contributions with public matching funds. Jurisdictions with public campaign financing programs paved the way to victory for women candidates and candidates of color, while also reporting [increased participation](#) from new and more diverse campaign donors. State campaign finance laws can also be amended to allow for the [use of campaign funds to pay for the child care that caregivers need](#) to run for office.



## **ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT**

*Legislatures have public trust as an institution that upholds democratic and ethical standards of governance and is accountable to the communities they represent, especially those most affected by policy decisions.*

Meaningful public participation in state policymaking processes requires that state legislative institutions are accountable to the people they serve and to their oaths of office. Strong ethics laws and ethics enforcement agencies can [protect the integrity of legislative institutions](#) through oversight over [financial disclosure](#), [protections against sexual harassment in the legislature](#), and [anticorruption](#), in addition to related issues like [lobbying regulations](#) and [campaign finance reforms](#) that [limit the influence of moneyed interests in politics](#).

Well-funded corporate interests have had outsized influence in state legislatures for generations to the detriment of public interests. In addition to prohibiting or limiting

[corporate contributions to political candidates](#), states can consider reforms that rein in corporate lobbying to ensure that lawmakers remain accountable to the public. In New York, where lobbyists – mostly business-related clients – spent [\\$292 million in 2021](#), lawmakers introduced a bill ([2022 NY A 8463](#)) that would impose a tax on corporate lobbying expenditures. Under the bill, corporate lobbying would be subject to marginal tax rates, beginning with a 35% rate for expenditures in excess of \$100,000 and increasing to 15% on amounts in excess of \$1,000,000 for a top effective tax rate of 75%.

Transparency in the legislative process promotes public confidence and trust in state legislatures and is an essential building block to a more participatory democracy. [Principles of open government](#), applied to legislative proceedings and other legislative information, ensure that members of the public can monitor legislative activity and that other stakeholders, like journalists, government watchdogs, and advocates, can bring important information to public attention.

In Massachusetts, advocates pushed for a series of amendments to the Massachusetts House rules ([Amendment 8 to 2021 MA Order H 68](#)) that would have required committee meetings to be open to the public, made committee votes public and available online, required one week’s notice for committee hearings, and made committee testimony publicly available online. Under the current process, House committees frequently block legislation on key issues in secrecy, and a lack of transparency prevents constituents from holding legislators accountable for their votes. Although the amendment failed, advocates have launched a [campaign](#) to put some transparency reforms on the ballot later this year.



## **RESPONSIVE AND EFFECTIVE**

*Legislatures are responsive to community needs and effective as policymaking institutions.*

Legislatures should be adequately equipped to do the important work of the people; legislative staff provides the capacity and expertise that lawmakers rely on to be deliberative about policymaking, provide the necessary oversight to other branches of government, respond to constituent concerns, and keep their constituents informed.

In all but 11 states, the [legislative sessions](#) are limited to a maximum number of days or are required to adjourn by a specific date. [Four state legislatures](#) (Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, and Texas) additionally only meet every other year. State legislative sessions should allow for adequate time for meaningful public input and thorough deliberation and debate, but restrictive session length limits prevent many state legislators from being responsive to urgent policy issues.

In Connecticut, where the General Assembly is required to adjourn by a certain date in June during odd-numbered years and by May in even-numbered years, the Government Administration and Elections Committee recently proposed a constitutional amendment ([2019 CT HJ 34](#)) “to make the General Assembly a full-time legislature, in regular session throughout the year except for recesses comparable to that of the United States Congress, and that members of the General Assembly receive a salary and benefits commensurate with a full-time position.”

Legislators in Minnesota recently introduced a constitutional amendment ([2022 MN SF 4557/HF 4840](#)) that would eliminate the state’s session limits, which currently require the legislature to meet for 120 days or less in each biennium and to adjourn in May each year.

## Mentoring New Leaders in the Nevada Legislature

Recognizing the importance of mentorship and leadership development, several members of the Nevada Legislature created a mentorship program connecting new legislators with more experienced colleagues. New legislators were matched with 11 senior legislators trained as mentors in a structured, 6-month mentorship program. In addition to regular, one-on-one mentorship, mentees have access to training, a network of former legislators, and other resources designed to help new legislators learn the ropes of the legislature on topics like constituent contact or stakeholder engagement.

For [Assemblymember Rochelle Nguyen](#) (District 10), a member of the Leadership Development Committee that oversees the mentorship program, mentorship is critical to the individual success of new legislators, who can turn to a trusted and experienced colleague for questions big and small. In addition to supporting new leaders in the legislature, the mentorship program also fosters broader collaboration within the legislature during the hectic and demanding session.

“The most difficult part is that for 18 months you are working as an individual and then you head into session and are automatically supposed to work as a team,” said Asm. Nguyen. “However, you haven’t spent the last 18 months building those relationships and establishing trust. The mentorship program will allow people to develop the relationships and communication to make the process during session run more efficiently.”

While each individual mentorship relationship can depend on the needs and skills of both the mentor and mentee, Asm. Nguyen stressed the importance of a structured mentorship program for lawmakers in other states interested in designing a program of their own. “There must be structure and the process of building the mentor/mentee relationship must have guidance,” said Asm. Nguyen. Lawmakers can turn to [mentorship best practices](#) in developing a structure that best supports mentorship in their own states.

Particularly in underresourced legislatures with limited staff capacity, lawmakers can explore ways to increase legislative staff size and capacity. Wisconsin lawmakers introduced a bill ([2021 WI AB 1175](#)) that establishes a paid internship program for low-income college students and allocates funds to support a \$15 hourly wage for one intern in each assembly office and two interns in each senate office. In Virginia, legislators considered a bill ([2021 VA HB 1978](#)) to establish a professional development fund for legislative staff, funded by increasing the annual registration fee for lobbyists for for-profit entities.

Boosting legislative staff compensation and benefits can ensure that legislatures attract and retain staff with the expertise, lived experience, and skills necessary to support state lawmakers. Spurred by a [staff-led survey](#) that revealed the troubling financial precarity of many legislative staff, Massachusetts lawmakers recently proposed a slate of bills that would set a minimum salary of \$55,000 for legislative employees ([2021 MA HD 4386](#)), provide for annual cost-of-living salary adjustments ([2021 MA HD 4388](#)), and ensure that staff can receive health insurance coverage on their first day of employment ([2021 MA HD 4389](#)).

Legislatures can also ensure that legislative staff can join together in a union to advocate for fair wages, a safe workplace environment, and practices to attract, support, and retain a diverse legislative workforce. The Oregon Legislature recently enacted a bill ([2021 OR SB 759](#)) that paved the way for its staff to exercise their

collective bargaining rights to become the [first unionized legislature](#) in the nation. Similar unionization efforts are also underway in [California](#), [Colorado](#), [Massachusetts](#), [New York](#), and [Washington](#).



## ACCESSIBLE AND COLLABORATIVE

*Legislatures are accessible to the public and share power with communities, especially communities that have been historically excluded from the policymaking process.*

People should have access to the information they need to understand the work of their state legislatures, and state legislatures should provide meaningful opportunities for legislators to collaborate with their constituents. At a minimum, state legislatures should ensure that [legislative proceedings](#) are available live and on demand, and expand opportunities for [remote participation in committees](#).

The [pandemic has accelerated the use of technology](#) within state legislatures. While [broadcasts of floor proceedings and committee hearings](#) are relatively common, [online public participation](#) through videoconferencing and other related technology has necessarily advanced due to limitations with in-person meetings over the last couple of years. For state legislatures to model innovation, these technological tools for public participation should be continued and further advanced, even as in-person meetings become fully the norm.

For years, the Nevada Legislature has operated an online [opinion poll](#), where constituents can share their comments on specific legislation. Though the comments are not made public, legislators can access the comments and contact those who submitted them. Additionally, members of the public can access [aggregated opinion poll data](#), sorted by district, ZIP code, or city, on any bill. In 2021, over 61,000 opinions were registered online.

In Washington state, legislators introduced a bill ([2021 WA HB 1566](#)) that would require the chief clerk of the House and the secretary of the Senate to identify barriers to accessing and meaningfully participating in legislative processes for people with disabilities and to develop training and guidance to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities in legislative events and proceedings.

Language barriers to participating in the legislative process or state government broadly exist in many states. Some states are trying to address this by requiring websites and documents to be translated into the common languages of the residents in the state. For example, a law passed in New York last year ([2021 NY SB 4716/AB 6215](#)) requires the state office of information technology to advise all state agencies in the implementation of language translation technology, specifically around COVID-19 information. This requires the use of translation technology for “at least the twelve most common non-English languages spoken by individuals with limited-English proficiency in the state of New York, based on United States Census data.”

A more ambitious piece of legislation in New Jersey ([2022 NJ SB 2459/AB 3837](#)) would require state agencies to provide vital public documents and translation services for the [15 most commonly spoken languages beyond English](#). In New Jersey,

these are Spanish, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Korean, Portuguese, Gujarati, Arabic, Polish, Haitian, Russian, Hindi, Tagalog, Italian, Vietnamese, Urdu, and French (including Cajun).

While these bill examples are limited to the executive branch, there's no reason that the legislative branch cannot reduce language barriers. For example, a legislature could translate documents such as "how a bill becomes a law" into multiple common languages, as well as bill summaries and information on public participation. Language translation technology could also be used for video and audio archives of session or committee hearing recordings. Innovation can and must be used to expand access to civic participation.

Many state governments rely on an array of commissions, committees, and task forces to gather public input and expertise, but in reality, these advisory bodies are often composed of people who are already well connected to the political process and exclude constituents who cannot participate because of their jobs or a lack of child care or transportation. Compensation for members of advisory bodies to the legislature can help to remove barriers to participation for the average constituent. Washington recently enacted a bill ([2021 WA SB 5793](#)) that would establish a stipend of up to \$200 per day for members of part-time boards, commissions, councils, committees, or other groups established by the state government for people who are low income or have direct personal experience in the subject matter of the advisory body.

Legislators can also draw inspiration from models of governance that put decision-making or deliberative power directly into the hands of people, like [participatory budgeting](#) or a [citizens' assembly](#). Several local governments have used participatory budgeting processes, [empowering constituents to fund public projects](#) like bike lanes, community gardens, and transitional housing, in their local communities.

A bill introduced in Ohio ([2017 OH HB 653](#)) would have appropriated \$1 million to each House district per year to be used for county-level public improvement projects selected through participatory budgeting processes. In Vermont, legislators considered a bill ([2021 VT H 292](#)) to develop a Regenerative Economy Roadmap, or a plan to transition the state to an economic system that works to regenerate natural and human resources. The plan would be developed by regional Peoples' Assemblies, each responsible for developing regional priorities to inform the state Roadmap. Participation in the Peoples' Assembly would be open to anyone in the region, with requirements for the provision of food and child care, scheduling outside of business hours, and inclusive accessibility.



## **EQUITY FOCUSED**

*Legislatures dismantle systems of oppression and advance policies that center communities that have historically been marginalized by policy.*

For centuries, state legislatures have been misused by the wealthy and white few to take away the freedoms and dignity of the many. State legislatures must directly address the many racist and exploitative harms that public policy has inflicted upon marginalized communities, especially Black and Indigenous communities, and seek

to center these communities in policymaking moving forward.

At least [nine states](#) require the preparation of a racial impact statement to evaluate the disparate impact of proposed legislation on racial and ethnic groups that have historically been disproportionately harmed by public policy. Although many racial impact statement requirements are limited to legislation related to the criminal legal system, legislators in some states have expanded the use of the tool to include other issue areas.

Connecticut legislators enacted a bill ([2018 CT SB 256](#)) that expanded the scope of racial impact statements, striking the requirement that the statement be developed only if a bill or amendment could “increase or decrease the pretrial or sentenced population of the correctional facilities in this state” to allow any member of the General Assembly to request a racial impact statement. Maine enacted legislation ([2021 ME LD 2/Chapter 21](#)) that requires a state agency to provide “data, analysis and other information within the agency’s possession necessary for the Legislature to prepare a racial impact statement....” The law also required the state’s legislative council to implement a racial impact statement process pilot, which is described in a [December 2021 report](#).

States can also adopt a more expansive tool for equity-focused policy evaluation, such as the [Black Women Best Scorecard](#), which is a [framework](#) that centers Black women – who have long been the most excluded and exploited by policies – in policymaking to ensure prosperity for all. A bill ([2022 RI H 7736](#)) introduced in Rhode Island would require a Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Disability Impact Statement that would apply to a broad range of legislative topics, including human services, health care, disability services, housing, education, employment and labor, land use and transportation, criminal justice, and legislation with economic or environmental impacts on communities.

In 2020, the California Legislature passed a bill ([2020 CA AB 3121](#)) establishing the Task Force to Study and Develop Reparations for African Americans, becoming the first state to seriously consider reparations for formerly enslaved people. The task force [recently released a report](#) on its key findings, detailing the harms that governments have inflicted upon Black Americans beginning with slavery and extending into other areas of public policy like the criminal/legal system, housing, education, and health care. Among the task force’s preliminary recommendations are the establishment of a California African American Freedmen Affairs Agency to implement recommendations, a program for reparations, and a slate of public policies designed to address racial disparities across multiple sectors.



## **INNOVATIVE**

*Legislatures advance policies that improve people's lives and strengthen communities.*

State legislatures should be forces of forward progress for their states by advancing policies that improve people’s lives and innovating new policies that build a better future for all. Particularly in contrast to congressional gridlock and dysfunction, state lawmakers are uniquely positioned to support growth in our collective understanding of what public policy can do to improve peoples’ lives by enacting

innovative policies, evaluating the impact of those policies, and sharing lessons learned with other states.

## Policy Feedback Loops

**Policy feedback loops** are an approach to policy design and implementation that asks a key question: “[Does this policy build political power in ways that deepen political and economic democracy?](#)” Policies that create policy feedback loops are policies that:

1. Shift the political views or actions of the mass public;
2. Change the capacities of government agencies; and
3. Help interest groups, movements, and businesses gain material or political clout.

Leveraging policy to support organized movements in particular has the potential to empower historically marginalized groups, as was in the case of New York’s Excluded Worker Fund. Lawmakers can adopt the Roosevelt Institute’s [Checklist for Progressive Policy Feedback Loops](#) in designing and implementing policy initiatives:

- How visible, traceable, and meaningful are a policy’s costs/benefits, and how easily can individuals connect the policy back to government? In particular, is the program delivered or administered in ways that make government’s role clear to individuals?
- Are there trusted and accurate sources of information about the program, either from the government itself or intermediary groups?
- Will the policy’s design and implementation convey respect or stigma toward targeted groups?
- Do government agencies have the capacity necessary to implement the program, including financial resources, talent, and political clout? What does the program do to build linkages between civil society and government administrators?
- How does the program foster supportive organized groups, like businesses, social movement organizations, or civic groups? Are those organized groups facilitating other feedback loops in turn?
- How does the program address its opponents, especially private-sector businesses? Does it include mechanisms to help neutralize or convert those opponents into supporters? If necessary, does it include mechanisms for putting market pressure on private-sector opponents?
- Above all, does the policy deepen political, social, and economic inclusion for historically marginalized groups?

*For more information on policy feedback loops, see “[How Policymakers Can Craft Measures that Endure and Build Political Power](#)” from the Roosevelt Institute.*



During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, [organizers and community activists](#) sprang into action to establish state programs for workers who were excluded from the government aid, including millions of undocumented workers, cash economy workers, domestic workers, and returning citizens. Legislators in New York established relief programs for excluded workers who were ineligible for unemployment assistance programs and federal stimulus payments through the state's [2021-22 budget](#) (originally introduced as [2021 NY S 4543/A 5421](#)). The Excluded Workers Fund, won after a [26-day hunger strike by activists](#), distributed [\\$2.1 billion in aid to over 128,000 New Yorkers](#). Similar funds were established through executive action and community organizations in [California](#), [Colorado](#), [DC](#), and [Washington](#). The [many successes and lessons learned](#) from excluded worker funds illustrate how state lawmakers can lead by filling critical gaps in the safety net that leave the most vulnerable communities behind.

The Excluded Workers Fund delivered meaningful, though temporary, financial relief to [people facing hunger, debt, and eviction](#) and through its success [built a sense of social inclusion](#) among immigrant communities that have historically been harmed by governments. It also included key features of [policy feedback loops](#) that laid the groundwork for continued progress by building economic and political power among New Yorkers who have long been shut out of the benefits of public policy. [Hundreds of protestors](#), bolstered by [community-based organizations](#) - including some that received [state grants to conduct EWF outreach and assistance](#) - demonstrated in support of the creation of a permanent unemployment insurance program for excluded workers.

Legislators can also explore opportunities to build cross-state efficiencies in policy design and implementation. Colorado ([2019 CO SB 173](#)) and New Mexico ([2020 NM HB 44](#)) legislators recently enacted legislation to join nine other states in establishing a state-sponsored retirement savings plan for private sector workers without an employer-sponsored plan. Through these plans, workers at eligible employers are automatically enrolled in state-sponsored individual retirement accounts (auto-IRAs), filling a critical gap for low-wage workers and Latinx, Black, and Asian workers, who are [least likely to have a retirement plan](#) through their employer. In 2021, leaders from both states announced a first-in-the-nation [multistate auto-IRA program](#) that would result in cost savings and reduced fees for consumers.

The new partnership serves as a model for collaboration that delivers benefits and cost savings to the public by sharing resources across states. Many states already pool their resources to negotiate lower prescription drug prices through [multistate purchasing agreements](#). Similarly, lawmakers in [15 states](#) introduced legislation in 2021 to join an [interstate compact](#) that would bring a cease-fire to the corporate welfare arms race in which state and local governments are pitted against each other to incentivize corporations to locate in their jurisdictions with massive tax breaks that are both [ineffective for economic development](#) and have [little to no bearing](#) on a firm's decision to relocate.