

Who are our legislators?

Second in a series
By Margaret Neubacher
staff writer

WANTED: Part-time legislator, to work January-May. Experience preferred but not required. Salary \$15,000 plus some benefits.

Opinions are mixed as to who might answer such a classified ad.

"More and better" people would run for the legislature, contends state Rep. Thomas Powers, R-Traverse City. Powers has organized a petition drive for a part-time legislature (PTL).

"The full-time job of a legislator eliminates a lot of potential candidates who can't get away from their jobs," Powers said.

"YOU'D FIND more businessmen, lawyers and farmers in a PTL," argued Roger Marx, political science professor at Oakland University. Marx opposes a PTL because he believes it would attract a narrower range of older people who could afford to leave their jobs.

With the exception of 1965-66, Michigan had a part-time legislature until 1969. A study of the occupations of former part-time legislators provides some clues as to the kind of persons elected to a PTL.

They listed their occupations for the Michigan Manual, a biennial reference book issued by the state.

IN JANUARY 1953, 32 senators and 100 representatives met in Lansing for the start of the 67th Legislature during the administration of Democratic Gov. G. Mennen Williams. Of them:

- 110 — or 83 percent — made their livings in the private sector of the economy. There were 24 farmers, 25 professionals (24 lawyers and one accountant), 25 in industry and 36 from small retail and service businesses.

- The other 22 — or 17 percent — came from government or non-profit agencies or had no occupation at the time of their election. This group included teachers, union representatives, ministers, housewives and those employed by a governmental agency.

In 1981, nearly three decades later, 38 senators and 110 representatives met in Lansing for the start of the 81st Legislature. William G. Milliken, a Republican, was governor. Of the 148 legislators:

- 58 — or 39 percent — were from the private sector.

- 93 — or 61 percent — came from government or non-profit occupations, or else listed no other occupation. The biggest gains were in the number of educators and government-political employees.

In 1953, there was one educator; in 1981, there were 21. In 1953, there were 10 government-political professionals; in 1981, there were 41.

In 1981, 10 legislators had come from small businesses, 17 from industrial companies. There were 18 professionals (13 lawyers, one doctor, two accountants, one psychologist, one musician) and 13 farmers.

COMPARING the occupations of the legislators in '53 and '81 is difficult. In the modern Legislature, many lawmakers didn't list previous occupations or, if professional persons, failed to list the kinds of clients they worked for.

Nevertheless, it was clear that more part-time legislators were involved in business while more full-time politicians tended to come from government or non-profit occupations.

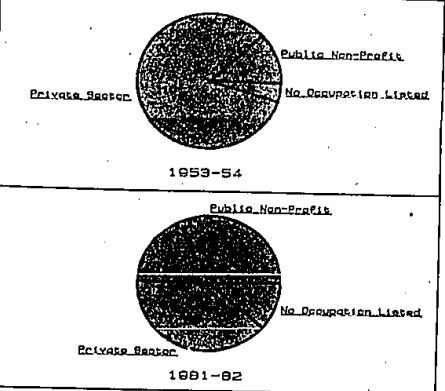
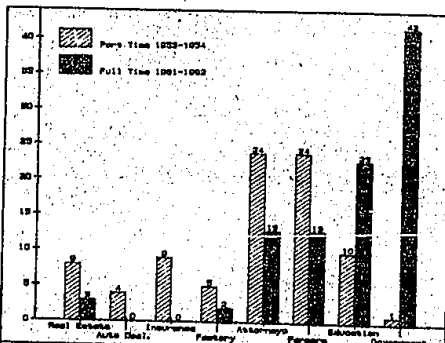
William Ryan, who started his career in a part-time legislature and was speaker of the House when it became full time, called the part-timers "captive legislators."

"Captive legislators were encouraged to run by the companies they worked for. We had a lot of attorneys and insurance agents then," Ryan said.

GERALD FAYE, Oakland Community College economics and political science instructor, said he would rather have full-time legislators.

"Not someone who could have a conflict of interest. I don't want to see Ford or UAW operating on the floor of the Senate. I like accountability. If you don't like a representative, vote him out."

Next: Can the job be done by a part-time legislature?



The part-time Legislature of 30 years ago had more members from business and industry than the last Legislature, which was dominated by former teachers, government employees and political professionals.

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