

# In the Massachusetts Legislature, nearly everyone is a leader. Just look at their paychecks.

Lawmakers have expanded the ranks of leadership, while concentrating more power than ever in the hands of the House speaker and Senate president.

By [Emma Platoff](#) and [Laura Crimaldi](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 5, 2024, 5:58 a.m.



The Massachusetts State House in Boston. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

**I**n the Massachusetts Legislature, nearly everyone is a leader. And 149 of them have the paychecks to prove it.

Legislators write their own compensation into law on Beacon Hill, where every member of the Massachusetts Senate and the vast majority of the Massachusetts House receives an additional stipend known as leadership pay — a practice that both stretches the definition of “leadership” and puts the Massachusetts Legislature far out of step with its peers. The extra pay is for roles as influential as Senate president and as modest as vice chair of little-known committees, and in some cases is generous enough to double lawmakers’ salaries.

The rationale for leadership pay is simple: Lawmakers taking on more work should earn more money. But in the Massachusetts Legislature, a Globe investigation found, leadership pay has become the rule, not the exception. In 2013, 62 members of the 160-seat Massachusetts House earned an extra stipend for taking on leadership roles such as committee chair or majority leader. By 2023, that tally had nearly doubled to 109 — about two-thirds of the chamber.

“Crikey, it’s up to 109?” exclaimed Denise Provost, a former state representative from Somerville.

Over the last several decades, with little public scrutiny, the Legislature has dramatically increased both the number of paid leadership positions and the stipends for them. They range from \$7,096 to \$109,163, and come on top of the roughly \$74,000 base pay that all lawmakers earned last year. Sure, the chair of the House’s busy budget-writing Ways and Means Committee earns extra pay, currently \$88,695, but so too does the committee’s assistant ranking minority member — \$20,468. Other less prominent positions pay well, too: The second and third assistant leaders in both parties get \$47,759.

The result of this expansion has been to inflate the ranks of leadership, while, somewhat conversely, concentrating more power than ever in the hands of the House speaker and Senate president. Because they dole out the leadership stipends to Democrats, those two leaders can effectively determine the salaries of most of their colleagues — and, critics say, expect loyalty in return.

As its leaders grow their own ranks and boost their own pay, the Legislature's productivity has declined, and its [dysfunction has left critical issues unaddressed](#). For months this year, lawmakers left a number of their top priorities — including legislation on clean energy, hospital oversight, and economic development — unresolved and then adjourned last week without passing them, saying [they could not reach agreement](#).

Provost, who left the House in 2021 after 15 years, said the legislative process changed dramatically during her time there, as the speaker accumulated more power to set his colleagues' salaries. The shift was particularly notable, Provost said, when the number of paid leadership positions for Democrats crept past 80 — a threshold at which the speaker



On average, \$1 in every \$5 Massachusetts lawmakers earned in salary last year came from leadership pay, a Globe analysis found. No other full-time state legislature relied so heavily on leadership stipends to compensate its members or gave out as many stipends of such generous size. All told, since 2013, the state has quadrupled the amount of taxpayer money spent on leadership pay, from \$1.2 million to \$4.9 million.

Last year, in the overwhelmingly Democratic Massachusetts Legislature, House Speaker Ronald Mariano doled out \$2.3 million in extra pay among 134 Democrats, and Senate President Karen Spilka distributed \$1.9 million among 37 Democrats.

Critics, including some who served in the Legislature, say the system forces lawmakers to choose between their own financial interests and what's best for the people who elected them.

"If you have [a stipend], and you don't respond properly to what leadership is expecting people to do, you risk losing it," said Jonathan Hecht, a former Democratic state representative from Watertown. "This is literally about people's livelihoods. The knowledge that your salary is going to depend on how you manage your relationship with leadership is a very, very powerful influence on how people conduct themselves."

Keeping your extra pay means "not questioning the decisions that leadership makes, not speaking out," Hecht continued. "It means having to prioritize leadership's decisions and the direction the leadership wants to take over what you know in your heart of hearts is best for your constituents."

Spilka and Mariano both declined to be interviewed. Each earned \$203,142 last year, more than half from the \$109,163 stipend that comes with each chamber's top job. Excluding office and travel stipends, Spilka and Mariano each earned more than the presiding officers of every full-time legislature except for New York. By contrast, US House Speaker Mike Johnson earns an extra \$49,500 for his leadership role, bringing his total pay to \$223,500.

Spilka's office offered a one-sentence reply to a list of detailed questions from the Globe: "The Senate makes decisions about committee leadership based on individual members' unique experience, knowledge, and interest."

In his statement, Mariano noted that public sector salaries lag behind private sector pay and lawmakers may have to serve for multiple terms to gain the experience necessary to serve in leadership.

For some leadership roles, though, it's unclear what additional responsibilities Massachusetts lawmakers perform in exchange for their additional pay. The Globe reported earlier this year [that 12 committees — more than one in five — have not held a hearing or considered a single bill this session](#), though some committee leaders are paid as much as \$40,936 extra to head the panels.

State Senator William Brownsberger, a Democrat who last year earned \$182,674, including stipends for two leadership posts, defended the system as a way to retain good lawmakers and reward experience.

"People who are around longer, who do shoulder additional responsibilities, should make more," Brownsberger said in an interview earlier this year. "Nobody's getting rich here, but people are making money that allows them to support a family."

One of the Legislature's highest paid members, Brownsberger earns \$68,227 for helping lead the Senate as president pro tempore and \$20,468 as chair of the Senate Committee on the Census, which is among the dozen committees that have not done any legislating this session. Asked about his compensation for that post, Brownsberger pointed to his leadership on other issues, including efforts on redistricting in past sessions. He said it's a mistake to look at just one part of the picture.

"The compensation package overall is definitely fair," he said.

**'A literal transfer of cash'**

In 2017, after four years as a vice chair of a legislative committee, Democratic state Representative Russell Holmes of Boston abruptly lost his leadership position. The speaker at the time, Democrat Robert DeLeo, called it a routine shakeup. Holmes, who had recently made remarks seen as challenging House leadership, had another theory: retribution.

“It happened only because of my comments last week,” Holmes told the Globe at the time. “You really have to pledge your loyalty to leadership in order to be promoted.”

Holmes later regained a vice chair title under Mariano. But his story, still shared in the halls of the State House, is emblematic of the Legislature’s hierarchical culture, current and former lawmakers say — and such tales are common. Hecht said he himself lost his position as vice chair after he took a public position contrary to House leadership, though his role was not compensated at the time.

Particularly in the House, where a leadership stipend is not guaranteed, there are haves and have-nots. Most House Democrats earn a stipend. Of the roughly 50 state representatives who do not, most are in their first few terms.

Among the others: experienced lawmakers who don’t defer to leadership.

Democratic Representative Mike Connolly of Cambridge, for example, is often a thorn in the side of Democratic leadership, and his progressive views put him out of step with his colleagues; he was the [only state representative to vote against](#) Healey’s [tax cut package](#) last year. Though he is in his fourth term, Connolly has never been given a leadership stipend. He declined to comment.

Current and former lawmakers were hesitant to speak on the record about the stipends for fear of offending their colleagues or angering leadership. In private, however, several criticized what they called a system of intense control by House and Senate leaders, under which one’s livelihood is directly tied to one’s loyalty to those in power.

One current Democratic lawmaker, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, likened the House's leadership pay structure to an escalator: Climb on as a freshman legislator, and you can expect to ascend to committee vice chair and eventually a more lucrative chairmanship. But it's easy to get knocked off the escalator, the lawmaker said, listing a few common missteps: Criticize the speaker. Force a vote on a divisive issue, or vote "off" from Democratic leadership on a major bill. Speak to the media without permission.

Leadership stipends are just part of the structure of "carrots and sticks" that "keep this system in place," the lawmaker said, citing also leadership's power over office assignments and staff allocations. "And I think this one is particularly egregious because it's a literal transfer of cash."

Peverill Squire, a University of Missouri expert on state legislatures, noted the base pay of Massachusetts legislators is low compared to the rate in other expensive states.

The Legislature here, Squire said, seems to use widespread leadership pay as "a route to sort of narrow that gap and to compensate members at a level that's probably more appropriate."

There are better ways to ensure attractive, fair compensation, Squire said, such as raising the base pay.

"My preference would be to be more transparent, more upfront of what's being paid to members — hide less of it," Squire added.

In California, for example, the base pay for legislators is roughly \$50,000 higher than the rate in Massachusetts. Far fewer members of that legislature received extra leadership pay.

In 2018, [New York legislators voted to boost their base pay by \\$50,000](#), but dramatically slash the number of positions that carried supplemental pay. In New York,



all lawmakers earned \$142,000 in base pay in 2023, but only 7 percent of members received extra pay for leadership jobs, the Globe found.

In Massachusetts, legislative base pay is enshrined in the state constitution, which includes a provision for adjustments every two years, making it complicated for lawmakers to alter. It's easier to boost salaries by creating leadership stipends and increasing their value, legislative observers and former officials said.

Most other full-time legislatures do not give out nearly as many leadership stipends as Massachusetts; in some states, committee chairs are not paid any additional money. Last year, just two other full-time legislatures distributed supplemental leadership pay as widely as Massachusetts, the Globe found. The additional pay in those states made up a far smaller share of legislators' average salaries: about \$1 in \$10 in Illinois and \$1 in \$8 in Ohio, according to Globe estimates. And the stipends are far more modest. In Ohio, most committee chairs earned an additional \$10,000 last year, whereas in Massachusetts, those roles fetched \$20,468 or \$40,936, depending on the committee.

### **New speaker, new salary**

Even some lawmakers who have ended up on the losing end of the stipend system defend it.

State Representative Alan Silvia, a Democrat from Fall River who was elected 12 years ago, served as vice chairperson of two different committees from 2015 to 2020 but lost his leadership role when Mariano became speaker.

Silvia said he "wasn't happy" to lose the position — and the annual stipend of more than \$5,600 — but defended the compensation system and praised Mariano's performance as speaker.

"I'm not complaining," he said. "I may be appointed in the next session to hold a leadership position. I don't hold any animosity toward the speaker."

While legislators' salaries are a matter of public record in Massachusetts, it can be hard for constituents to determine how much their representatives make in stipends, because the categories of leadership pay and travel stipends are combined in data published by the comptroller. It took the Globe roughly two months to obtain accurate data from the treasurer's office breaking out the individual payments.

By contrast, [California](#), [Alaska](#), and [Wisconsin](#) published annual compensation with details about leadership pay annually online.

# How much did your lawmaker earn in 2023 in base pay, travel stipends, and leadership stipends?

Use the dropdown to look up your state lawmaker by name or city/town.

Search by:

Lawmaker name

Sort by:

Total Pay (descending)

Base pay    Travel stipends    Leadership stipends



**D Ronald Mariano**

**Chamber:** House    **District:** 3rd Norfolk    **Hometown:** Quincy    **Total pay:** \$203,142.38

\$73,511.23

\$109,163.07

\$20,468.08



**D Karen Spilka**

**Chamber:** Senate    **District:** Middlesex and Norfolk    **Hometown:** Ashland

**Total pay:** \$203,142.38

\$73,511.23

\$109,163.07

\$20,468.08



**D Michael J. Rodrigues**

**Chamber:** Senate    **District:** 1st Bristol and Plymouth    **Hometown:** Westport

**Total pay:** \$196,592.59

\$73,511.23

\$95,790.59

\$27,290.77



**D Cynthia S. Creem**

**Chamber:** Senate    **District:** Norfolk and Middlesex    **Hometown:** Newton

**Total pay:** \$196,319.69

\$73,511.23

\$102,340.38

\$20,468.08

## A major expansion of the ranks

Massachusetts did not always do it this way.

In 1998, voters approved a constitutional amendment proposed by lawmakers to adjust legislators' base pay every two years based on the median household income in Massachusetts. At that time, some top leaders received stipends, but far fewer than today.

In 2014, a group of experts recommended raising the pay of several top state officeholders and said "reasonable adjustments" to other leadership stipends were justified. Their state-commissioned report did not suggest creating more legislative stipends.

Citing that report, in 2017, the Legislature passed an \$18 million package to boost stipend payments along with the salaries of judges, the governor, and other top officials. When former Republican governor Charlie Baker [vetoed the bill](#), the Democratic Legislature [passed it over his objection](#). [Spilka and Mariano voted for the pay increases](#).

The new law made existing leadership stipends even bigger, and it ensured they would increase every two years as long as Massachusetts incomes did. Lawmakers would not have to cast public votes to get raises.

It also bestowed for the first time stipends to all lawmakers serving as vice chairs of committees — increasing the number of House lawmakers receiving stipends from 66 in 2015 to 102 in 2017. That number has only grown since, particularly as the Legislature [creates new committees, whose leaders earn extra pay](#).

Michael Widmer, a longtime fiscal watchdog who helped write the 2014 report, was dismayed to learn the Massachusetts Legislature has warped the panel's modest recommendations. The commission did recommend increasing pay for some top officeholders, he said — but nothing like this.

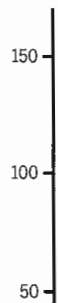
"Broad base stipends simply as a means to increase pay for many more legislators and to help secure alliance to the leadership is in my mind not justified and certainly a

perversion of anything we recommended,” said Widmer, the former longtime president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, a nonpartisan public policy research organization.

## Leadership stipends have continued to expand in the Massachusetts House

The number of paid leadership positions in the Massachusetts House has dramatically expanded since 2007, with a particular increase in 2017 after lawmakers passed a package of raises.

Lawmakers receiving stipends



Source: Massachusetts State Treasurer data, Globe research • \*At the beginning of the 2017 session, lawmakers passed a law expanding leadership pay.  
JOHN HANCOCK/GLOBE STAFF

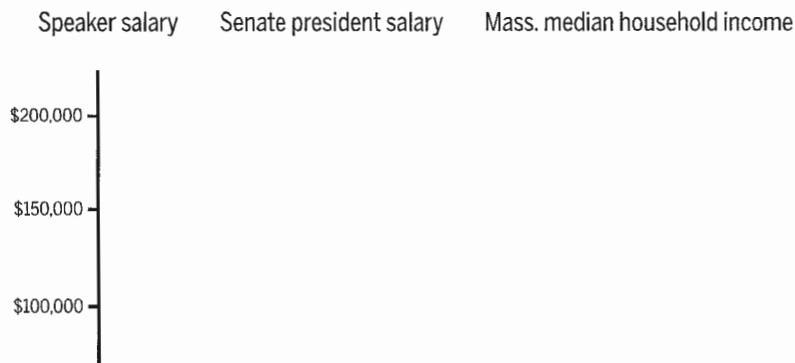
✿ A Flourish chart

The 2017 legislation created the biggest annual stipends for the House speaker and Senate president, hiking the amount nearly 130 percent, from \$35,000 to \$80,000. The stipend grew last year to \$109,163. The \$203,142 paid last year to Spilka and Mariano is about double what their predecessors received in 2007.

Over roughly the same time period, from 2007 to 2022, the [median household income in Massachusetts](#) increased just 60 percent, from \$58,460 to \$93,550.

## House Speaker, Senate president pay has doubled since 2007

Thanks to big boosts in leadership stipends, the growth in top leaders' pay has outpaced the increase in median household income in the state.



Source: Massachusetts State Treasurer data, Globe research, Median household income from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis • \*At the beginning of the 2017 session, lawmakers passed a law expanding leadership pay, Median household income through 2022.  
JOHN HANCOCK/GLOBE STAFF

✿ A Flourish chart

The leadership stipends stand in contrast to what lawmakers' own aides are paid. Compensation for the lowest-paid legislative aides starts at just over \$50,000, less than many lawmakers' leadership stipends. State House aides have been organizing for years to form a union and receive better benefits, with [some successes](#). But unlike elected leaders, State House staff are not guaranteed wage adjustments every two years.

“Lawmakers should be paid well for their public service. However, for every legislator, there are staff who do the behind-the-scenes work for which their boss is publicly credited,” said Andrew Epifanio, a House staffer and State House Employee Union organizer. “State House staff need living wages that reflect both our hard work and expertise.”

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Emma Platoff can be reached at [emma.platoff@globe.com](mailto:emma.platoff@globe.com). Follow her [@emmaplatoff](#). Laura Crimaldi can be reached at [laura.criminaldi@globe.com](mailto:laura.criminaldi@globe.com). Follow her [@lauracriminaldi](#).

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