



Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, Inc.

## Should Our Legislators Be Paid More?

By

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The proposed legislative budget for 1994-95 included both a five percent raise in legislators' base-pay and a 22% increase in per diem. The base-pay raise was quickly removed during the legislative process. However, the per diem increase was "hidden" behind language proposing it be paid "at the rate allowable for per diem deduction under Section 162(h) of Title 26 of the U.S. Code." Once this language was deciphered, debate raged and the budget amended to remove the increase.

Many legislators feel under-compensated by the current base-salary of \$16,800 and per diem of \$75 for each day spent in session, committee meetings or conferences. Currently, their salary ranks 21st nationally and their per diem ties five other states for a 17th place ranking. Legislators still argue they deserve a raise because their salary and per diem have been unchanged since 1980.

Based on such beliefs, the Legislature created the Special Legislative Compensation Committee to "examine fully" legislative compensation and benefits, as well as the compensation of all statewide-elected officials. The committee is to make interstate comparisons and report its findings and recommendations to the Legislature.

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In addition to salary and per diem, the committee should compare legislators' expense accounts (vouchered and unvouchered), office allowances, salary for legislative assistants, retirement and insurance benefits, as well as the length of legislative sessions and ability to hold outside employment. The base-salary and per diem paid Louisiana legislators, excluding all the other benefits, for a full four-year term is much greater than that of our neighboring states. Legislators in Louisiana receive \$86,700, Mississippi \$72,390, Arkansas \$59,840 and Texas \$54,000.

Comparisons also show that a **part-time** legislator in Louisiana receives an average base-pay (\$21,675) almost equivalent to that of Louisiana's average **full-time** state employee (\$22,644) and civilian worker (\$21,501).

If the study committee fully examines and compares all legislative compensation, benefits and workloads, pay raises for Louisiana's legislators would seem difficult to justify. The study might show that our legislators are overpaid!

Another issued is raised by this debate. Do we want our legislators to be more like those of California and Illinois--highly paid, full-time politicians--or like New Hampshire's citizen legislator who is low-paid but views the job as a public service?