



# Saturday Scoop

Good afternoon,

For those following along on the State House's informal sessions: we might just have a climate bill!

After three extra months of negotiations, House and Senate negotiators [announced last week](#) that they had reached an agreement on the long-awaited climate omnibus bill. However, attempts to pass it through this week highlighted exactly the reasons why relying on informal sessions to pass critical legislation is a dicey move.

If you remember, we've covered this bill in [previous Scoops](#). It centers on updates to Massachusetts' clean energy siting policy, with additional provisions on climate and energy. It's gone through a political rollercoaster of emotions: different versions passed by House and Senate, a dramatic end-of-session near-death, and a nudge on negotiating with inclusion in the governor's supplemental budget.

Senate and House negotiators report they're [happy with the final compromise bill](#), which includes some (but not all) of the broader Senate provisions supported by climate activists, including measures to constrain the growth of natural gas infrastructure.

In another rule-bending move from a rule-bending session, the Senate took [extraordinary measures](#) this week to alter their rules to hold a roll call vote on the bill, which is usually not done in informal session. This prevented individual Republican votes from blocking the bill's passage, which passed 38-2.

The House, on the other hand, saw the passage of the bill delayed after a Republican member doubted the presence of quorum. We'll wait until next week to see if they try to take the vote up again, or take another big step in calling representatives back for a formal session. Regardless, this back-and-forth dance is a reminder that when our electeds leave their work for informal sessions, they empower Republicans.

**State House Scoop**

**“The membership had a lot more debate, a lot more transparency many years ago than we see today.” - Outgoing electeds weigh in**

As advocates of reform at the State House, we at Act on Mass sound the alarm about the disempowerment of rank-and-file representatives, the suppression of meaningful debate (to say little of public debate), and the decline of trust between electeds and constituents.

Yet, as many of you may have learned while organizing for transparency in your own district: when asked about such things, sitting representatives tend to toe the party line and avoid discussing these problems. What? Who, us?! There’s [nothing wrong](#) with our operations.

However, when electeds retire from Beacon Hill and no longer face the risk of retribution from leadership or colleagues, it can result in some interesting first-hand accounts. Reps who have been in office for many years (and with the [least competitive local elections in the country](#)– there are many of them) can also speak to the changes that they’ve seen to the State House throughout their tenure.

These accounts can help to sharpen advocates’ critiques of the current legislative operating procedure. For example, three former legislators (alongside Act on Mass’ own Erin Leahy) contributed to a key 2021 report [The Massachusetts Legislature: Democracy in Decline](#), which investigates problems in the State House and how they compare to our peer legislatures in other states. The testimony from former legislators and staffers was critical to the report’s analysis.

This year, 15 representatives and three senators have decided not to seek re-election. As informal sessions wind down and we begin to look to the new legislative session in January, State House News Service has conducted several interviews with outgoing representatives and senators. Let’s dig into some of their quotes and see what we can learn.

**Current legislature is “[consensus-driven](#)” - Rep. Ruth Balsler, 12th Middlesex**

Representative Ruth Balsler has served communities in Brookline and Newton as representative since 1998, under four different speakers. As the current Third Division Chair of the House, she is a member of House Speaker Mariano’s [leadership team](#).

(An aside: if you find yourself bored on this particular Saturday, take some time to poke around on the House leadership page and ask yourself the mind-boggling questions that ensue.)

For example, with an 80% Democratic supermajority, are 10 leadership positions + the Speaker really necessary to “whip” the caucus into shape? By comparison, the U.S. House– which has 435 representatives to Massachusetts’ 160 and a much more razor-thin margin– has [4 leadership positions](#) for each party, plus the Speaker. It couldn’t be that our State House leadership has a habit of [enlarging the number of roles which receive “leadership” stipends in order to stifle dissent](#), right? Surely not...

And anyway, with 11 leaders in the House to run a well-oiled Democratic machine, why do we keep missing major legislative deadlines?

And moreover, why does the 24-person (!) Republican caucus need 4 (!! ) assistant (!!!) minority leaders? Who each receive an additional leadership stipend of \$47,749 of taxpayer money?! Say, it couldn't be that our State House leadership has a habit of [enlarging the number of roles which receive "leadership" stipends in order to stifle dissent](#), right? Right?!?!)

Anyway, back to Rep. Balser, who with 26 years in the trenches at least did the time to merit her leadership status. Compared to the first two speakers who she served under, she characterizes Speaker Bob DeLeo and current Speaker Ron Mariano as "more moderate, and... [leading] more by consensus."

What does that mean? Well, she mentions that the earliest days of Speaker DeLeo's tenure saw the last "big debates"—over casino development. Then, "after that, **things became much more consensus-driven.**" Speaker DeLeo was elected in 2009. That means the last 15-odd years of lawmaking in Massachusetts have seen a serious lack of debate compared to previous, according to Rep. Balser.

Interestingly, her comments echo those of Senator Jamie Eldridge, the sponsor of the Sunlight Act and a critic of Beacon Hill power structures. Interviewed by the Boston Herald after the end of this year's legislative session, he said:

"I think there is this very strange fear in an overwhelmingly Democratic Legislature that somehow, **unless there is almost unanimous consensus on a bill** that somehow it's too **uncomfortable** for us to take up legislation and just take a vote where there could be some legislators, whether Democrats or Republicans, who are opposed."

As we know, waiting for unanimous consensus can mean waiting forever. Forgive me for being a broken record, guys, but I personally think an 80% supermajority should act like it!

**["I wish we had more debate"](#) - Representative William "Smitty" Pignatelli, 3rd Berkshire**

Representative "Smitty" Pignatelli, a rare House co-sponsor of the Sunlight Act, has served communities in the Berkshires since 2002. Like Rep. Balser, he has served under four different house speakers.

On the subject of debate, his comments align with those of his colleagues Balser and Eldridge: he notes not only a decline in debate, but ventures that it happened "subsequently, with each speaker."

Asked about the legislature's record on transparency, he felt that they do a good job. However, he adds, "I think free and open discussions on the floor would be helpful. The perception of the

people on the outside looking in don't think we do anything. There's a lot of work that goes behind the scenes at the committee level that the public doesn't always see, but we need to let them know when we're in formal sessions that we're having some conversation. **Let's...just have a debate.**"

Rep. Pignatelli is right: when constituents are fully shut out of the process, we have no meaningful way to verify that our legislators are doing the work that they say they are. When reps are never called to take a stand on legislation, we do not know if they are pursuing the priorities we elected them for. And while we at AOM *also* think that the public deserves to know what goes on "behind the scenes" in committee, public debate on the floor would be a great start.

### **"Truth today is a question mark for a lot of constituents" - Sen. Mark Pacheco, 3rd Bristol and Plymouth**

Senator Mark Pacheco has served in the General Court for 36 years— first for two terms as a representative, and since 1992 has represented parts of Bristol and Plymouth counties as senator. Clearly, he's seen some things in those years because he did not hold back in his interview.

Similar to his colleagues, Sen. Pacheco laments a loss in "debate" since his first years in the Legislature. Of those early years, Pacheco says "...we were fully debating issues all the time. You would very often see votes that would be close, maybe within two or three votes, [and] you saw a lot more deliberation and independence in terms of voting."

These days, he says, "you'll see a 39-0 vote over and over. On the House side, you'll see over 150 votes that will be heading in one direction, and maybe several in another direction." This is something that we at Act on Mass highlight in our advocacy: the tendency of disempowered reps in our current system to play "[follow the leader](#)," voting with the Speaker 90-100% of the time.

Pacheco names the root problem explicitly: "**the membership had a lot more debate, a lot more transparency many years ago than we see today.**" He contends that it comes from rank-and-file reps not knowing their power, rather than leadership, although he notes a "trend to centralize power, rather than having it be dispersed among the membership."

Pacheco continues: "My point is that **most of the legislating that takes place actually is taking place behind the scenes**, and I think that's why we need to be careful to actually make a lot more discussions public."

I'll say what we're all thinking: did Senator Mark Pacheco sneak into an Act on Mass Transparency Teach-In?! But no— the call is coming from inside the House. Or rather, just out the back door.

Outgoing reps are clear: what the State House needs is more debate, empowerment of rank-and-file reps, and more public involvement in the legislative process. If leadership won't listen to the voice of the people calling for these things, I hope at least they'll listen to their former colleagues.

---

**Missed a Scoop or two? You can find a full archive of all past Saturday Scoops on our [blog](#).**

---

### Syd's Sprinkles: Graveyard of the 193rd Session — Abortion Access Bill

If you remember our last edition of the Saturday Scoop, then you are probably aware of the state's current record in terms of competitiveness in legislative elections. If you missed that Scoop, then you should be able to easily guess what place Massachusetts ranks in comparison to other states.

If you guessed [dead last](#), then you'd be correct.

There is no question that Massachusetts tends to have trouble when it comes to holding competitive elections. But what if there was something that we could do as a step toward addressing this issue?

One solution could have been the passing of the Campaign Childcare Bill, or An Act Supporting Parents Running for Public Office ([H.669](#), [S.422](#)).



This bill would have:

- Allowed candidates for office to pay for necessary campaign-related childcare expenses from campaign funds
- Caught Massachusetts up with other states that already have similar legislation in place

- This bill is currently sitting in Senate Ways and Means and has been since this past May.

A recent MassINC poll asked voters in Massachusetts about their thoughts on the competitiveness of state elections. Unsurprisingly, [58% of voters](#) said that they'd like to see more candidates running.

Then why aren't there more candidates running for office?

With so many barriers for people seeking to run for office in the state, specifically in terms of finding and affording child care while campaigning in this case, there is a whole population of potential legislators that are unable to run for office.

Candidates can use campaign funds on expensive restaurants, travel expenses, sports events, cigars, and more as long as the funds are not "[primarily for personal use](#)"... whatever that means. As we've seen with our lawmakers, the guidelines for campaign fund usage is easily taken advantage of, with regular spending on coffees or annual attendance at events like the Beanpot Tournament seeing thousands of dollars being used in unproductive ways.

By offering more accessible methods to afford services that already come at such high costs when a person may be cutting back on their time at their jobs in order to run a campaign, more people will be able to run for elections where they may be representative of a broader group of people.

Do you want to see this bill make it out of committee and onto Governor Healey's desk? Contact your legislator!

[CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATOR >>](#)

## Take Action

**EVENT: Behind Closed Doors — What's wrong with our state legislature?**



# **BEHIND CLOSED DOORS**

## **WHAT'S WRONG WITH OUR STATE LEGISLATURE**

**A FREE PUBLIC FORUM**

**with**

**JON HECHT & DANIELLE ALLEN**

**Sunday, October 27th at 3:00pm  
Coolidge School Apartments Auditorium  
319 Arlington Street, Watertown**

**Join us to learn why our State Legislature passes so few bills,  
how to address the lack of transparency at the MA State  
House, and how to advocate for change.**

**Jon Hecht is on the leadership team of Progressive Democrats of  
Massachusetts and is on the steering committee of the Coalition to Reform Our  
Legislature. He served as state representative for Watertown from 2009-2021.**

**Danielle Allen is James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard  
University and Director of the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation at Harvard  
Kennedy School's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation.**

**This forum is sponsored by Progressive Watertown,  
a chapter of Progressive Massachusetts.**

**Canvass or Phonebook for Yes on 2 - multiple locations, multiple dates!**



Our friends with the Yes on 2 campaign are running frequent canvasses and phonebanks at key locations around the state to talk to voters about the ballot question, including some later today! Get plugged in to an event near you by signing up on their [Mobilize](#).

[PITCH IN FOR QUESTION 2 >>](#)

That's all for today folks, have a happy halloween! 🎃

In solidarity,

Scotia

Scotia Hille (she/her)  
Executive Director, Act on Mass