

New Year, New Chance for Transparency

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On Thursday, Gov.-elect Charlie Baker and Lt. Gov.-elect Karyn Polito will be formally inaugurated, a day after the 200 members of the new state House of Representatives and state Senate are sworn in. One of the most important parts of our state's democratic processes, though often overlooked, is fast approaching.

At the beginning of each legislative session, both chambers of the Legislature must agree upon the rules governing all aspects of procedure for the next two years. After electing leadership, the first dozen votes lawmakers will cast will pertain to these rules for how they are to conduct the "people's business."

While Massachusetts earns high marks in a number of categories in national studies, we fall well below the national average for transparency in state government. According to the Sunlight Foundation, Massachusetts' state government was one of five states to earn an "F" for lack of transparency. Their report details the numerous problems that combine to make Beacon Hill one of the least transparent state governments in America.

Some of these roadblocks can be traced back to missed opportunities in early 2013 (and before) when a majority in the state House of Representatives voted against allowing the public to view legislative committee votes. Despite efforts by some who wanted to open up the process to public view, the Speaker and more than 100 members opposed allowing the public access to legislative committee votes.

If a member of the public wants a better understanding of the committee process, particularly the bills discussed at a given hearing or the votes taken on them, it's nearly impossible without driving to Boston, since committee hearings are very seldom televised as full sessions of the House and Senate are. Good luck finding a parking spot, and don't expect WiFi — or a room with windows — when you come.

If, however, you come for a full session of the House or Senate, you face other obstacles, such as the antiquated House rule that no pictures and video may be taken during session — in part, surely, because very few legislators can ever be bothered to attend debates, except while roll call votes are in progress. In the age of social media, it is definitely time to end this prohibition.

Occasionally, small steps forward are taken. During the most recent rules debate two years ago, Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr, R-Gloucester, successfully pushed to adopt a rule requiring roll call votes to be made available to the public within 48 hours after they are taken. Previously, members of the public sometimes had to wait weeks to see how their lawmakers had voted, an unacceptable delay and a detriment to accountability.

Let's hope that legislative leaders embrace transparency, and rank-and-file lawmakers break from the practices of the past. As Massachusetts ushers in a new governor and lieutenant governor, now is the time for the Legislature to turn a page and adopt meaningful transparency in how it handles our affairs.

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