

Leading Wisconsin Good Government Groups Denounce Bill to Destroy Audit Bureau

Written by Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, Matt Rothschild
Tuesday, 09 June 2015 11:01 -



MADISON - Three leading good government groups in Wisconsin today are condemning a proposed bill in the State Assembly that would do away with the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau and the bipartisan Joint Audit Committee.

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin, Common Cause in Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign say that the draft bill, co-sponsored by Rep. David Craig and Rep. Adam Jarchow, would destroy the best watchdog the state has, and for no good reason.

“With all the money in politics lately, the last thing we need is to lose our nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau, which has no bias but simply investigates and reports the facts about how our government agencies and officials function,” said Andrea Kaminski, executive director of the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin.

“This is an obvious and nakedly partisan attempt to eliminate any independent entity that can effectively identify and investigate political corruption in Wisconsin and shield the political party in power from prosecution and even criticism,” said Jay Heck, executive director of Common Cause in Wisconsin.

The proposal’s sponsors acknowledge that “most, if not all, legislators believe the Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) does a tremendous job of executing audits of state agency books.”

So why the need for this bill?

Evidently, because the Legislative Audit Bureau, now in its fiftieth year in existence, is too nonpartisan. “In many instances,” the sponsors wrote, “by the time an audit has occurred, the political will (or new legislative composition) necessary to change a state program has diminished.”

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But we shouldn't want our watchdog to be concerned with "the political will" or the composition of the legislature. All it should be concerned with is waste, fraud, abuse, inefficiencies, and cronyism.

"That may be the problem," said Matt Rothschild, the executive director of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign. "The Legislative Audit Bureau may have done too good a job exposing the waste and cronyism over at WEDC (the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation), so now some legislators want to get rid of it."

The proposal would also disband the Joint Audit Committee and hand over auditing powers to committee chairs in the State Assembly and State Senate, as well as jointly to the Assembly Speaker and Senate Majority Leader. When those positions are held by one party, as they are today, this would give enormous additional power to partisans of that party.

The proposal would also empower the Joint Committee on Legislative Organization, now run by Speaker Robin Vos and Senator Mary Lazich, to appoint an inspector general in each large state agency for a six-year term. This would further consolidate partisan power.

"Does anyone seriously believe that partisan-appointed inspectors general would objectively assess and evaluate agency work directed by their partisan masters? This proposal is ridiculous on its face and ought to be rejected outright by the Assembly Speaker, the State Senate Majority Leader and the Governor immediately," Heck added.

What's more, the inspector general for the Department of Justice would be authorized to audit the records not just of state agencies and programs but also those of "any county, city, village, town, or school district." This could tie up the democratic processes of local governments.

"It's an invitation to a statewide partisan witch hunt," said Rothschild.

The bill would also give the Speaker of the Assembly and the Senate Majority Leader the extraordinary authority to contract out the work of the Department of Justice's inspector general to "some other person or entity" who would "audit the records or the programs of the legislature,

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legislative service agencies, the Office of the Governor, or the courts,” according to the Legislative Reference Bureau.

On top of everything else, the bill would offer enormous power to any single individual who may claim to be bothered by some state agency. “An inspector may review claims by any person that an agency action or order has adversely a substantial interest of the person,” the Legislative Reference Bureau notes. “Under the bill, an inspector general may reverse an agency action...An agency may not appeal a determination of the inspector general.”

“If you thought cronyism was a problem right now, wait until this bill passes,” Rothschild said. “Then every big donor to the party in power will complain to the inspector general about any enforcement action an agency has begun against this person, and the action could be stopped, even if the person was a tax cheat or a major polluter.”

The Legislative Audit Bureau is working very well today. There is no good reason to monkey with it. Its recent audit of the Government Accountability Board, for instance, was thorough and fair, and its recommendations have led to improvements there.

The Legislative Audit Bureau is a pillar of nonpartisanship and good government in Wisconsin. It should not be knocked down.

“We don’t need more partisan politics in our government,” said Kaminski. “We need the objective checks and balances our forebears put into the system to protect us from partisan politics.”