

RG6135.MI: Nebraska for the People [1974]

Part 1: Legislative

Narrated by Floyd Kalber

[An overview of the history, structure, and procedures of the Unicameral (one-house) legislature of Nebraska.]

The Narrator, standing the steps of the Capitol, asks: “How much do you know about Nebraska State government? Do you know how it works? What do you think of when you think of State government?”

These questions are then presented to a random selection of citizens on the street. The responses suggest that “State government” means, for example, the financing of schools, the legislative body itself, taxes, “not into it at all,” and local issues, issues having more to do with the people.

Nebraska’s first government came into existence when Congress established the sprawling Territory of Nebraska between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains (May 30, 1854). The institutions of government came with Territorial status (governor, two-house legislative assembly, and a court system).

Photo of Francis Burt (of South Carolina), the first Territorial governor; Burt died the day after he arrived in Nebraska. Following the Civil War, Nebraska became the 37th State on March 1, 1867.

Narrator: “If you want to examine Nebraska State government, the place to start is with the Legislature.” The current Constitution of Nebraska requires that the members of the Legislature be elected on a non-partisan basis. The Legislature can have as few as thirty members and as many as fifty; currently there are forty-nine members (known as “Senators”).

Map of Nebraska: Senators are elected from districts with approximately equal population. Because of population density, most of the Senators come from the eastern part of the State (especially Douglas, Sarpy, and Lancaster counties). The legislators are elected for four-year terms.

View of the Legislative chamber in the Capitol. The Legislature meets annually, alternating between 60-day and 90-day sessions. Committees are also active between the annual sessions, studying and researching issues that may come before the Legislature subsequently. The committees regularly invite citizen participation.

View of the Judiciary Committee hearing citizens’ comments related to Nebraska’s Indian tribes.

About a month before the Legislature convenes for its regular session, members gather for the Legislative Council meeting, where (for example) the study committees report their findings; the rules of the Legislature are reviewed (and/or amended); and lobbyists attempt to influence individual Senators to introduce bills on behalf of special interest groups they represent. An informal meeting between a lobbyist and a Senator is profiled: the issue under discussion is a proposal for a pension plan for employees of villages and towns.

The Legislative Council meeting also involves the election of the Speaker of the Legislature. A "lobbying" effort by Senator Richard Proud is profiled.

The ceremonial opening of the Legislative session occurs at noon on the first Tuesday in January. The Chief Justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court administers oaths of office for newly elected Senators. On this day, final votes are held for the Speaker of the Legislature, the Chairman of the Legislative Council, and the chairmen of the various standing committees. In addition, the rules are adopted, and the results of the preceding general election are certified.

The election of the Speaker and committee chairmen is by secret ballot. Seniority does not play a major role in these elections; rather, there appears to be a desire to insure geographic representation among the chairmen. The Committee on Committees then determines the membership of all standing committees, with every Senator getting his or her first choice.

As the work of the Legislature gets underway, the Governor comes in to offer his traditional welcome, and bills that are ready are introduced. The text of each bill is entered into a computer, and all subsequent changes and amendments are recorded. The bills are printed in the Capitol and made available to the Senators and to anyone else who requests a copy. To prevent the hasty passage of bills, at least seven legislative days must intervene between the introduction of a bill and its passage; further, a printed copy of every bill must be on each Senator's desk at least 24 hours before the final vote.

The Narrator then returns to the process which moves a bill from introduction to final passage: following its introduction, the bill is referred to a committee; the committee then announces a public hearing open to all citizens and appropriate government officials; following the public hearing, the bill can be killed, or amended, or advanced to the full Legislature. An actual floor debate is highlighted.

Away from the Legislative chamber, working in the privacy of their offices, individual Senators respond to mail and phone messages, prepare for speeches, schedule meetings, and meet with constituents.

The final steps in the passage of a bill involve advancement from "General File" to "Select File" (the second point of debate), and then to the final reading. To be enacted, a bill must gain 25 votes, a clear majority. The Governor can then sign the

bill or veto it. The Legislature can override the veto with 30 votes, a three-fifths majority. One such attempt to override the Governor's veto is highlighted: the override fails with only 29 votes. In most instances, bills take effect three months plus one day after the conclusion of the Legislative session.

After all pending legislative business has been addressed, the Governor is invited to make closing remarks. At this point, a motion to adjourn is introduced and adopted.

In his closing remarks, the Narrator (Floyd Kalber) notes that this overview of the legislative process was paid for with tax money, appropriated by the Legislature, in an effort to educate the public about the operations of their State government. Urging everyone to take an active role in the legislative process, he refers to the words above the north entrance of the Capitol: "THE SALVATION OF THE STATE IS WATCHFULNESS IN THE CITIZEN."

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Photos courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society

Produced with the [cooperation] of the Public Officials and [unclear] in Nebraska State Government

Pursuant to LB [unclear]
Eighty-second Legislature
1972 Session of the State of Nebraska

A Public Affairs Presentation of the Nebraska ETV Network