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## Article Title: Nebraska's Fifth Unicameral

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Article Summary: The Fifth Unicameral produced 272 bills in an 89-day legislative session, disposing of all the problems brought before the session through the action of the main body. A good combination of experienced and new members and the supportive work of a Legislative Council and Research Director made the term so successful.

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## Nebraska's Fifth Unicameral

The regular session of Nebraska's Fifth Unicameral Legislature ended May 9. The session set an enviable record for state legislatures. In eighty-nine legislative days it passed 272 bills and 260 of these were signed by the chief executive. The shortest unicameral session among the five thus far held, it passed more measures than any of its predecessors. The number of bills passed can hardly be a test of the success of the legislature. The character of the measures and the soundness of the procedure are more severe tests for such a body. In these two respects also, members of this session of the legislature have no reason to be apologetic.

The 1945 session met in troubled times, with war and changing economic conditions producing an unsettled situation within the state. The conditions were reflected in the problems brought before the legislature. The factor of most general concern was the growing inflationary trend which called for adjustments in many directions. The members of the legislative body not only felt the impact of these numerous demands but frankly faced the problems and, at least momentarily, rendered seemingly adequate solutions. Not only the business that was brought before it but the procedure within the legislature seems to have been highly satisfactory to the state constituency. All the problems brought before the session were disposed of by the action of the main body.

In view of the recent adoption of the unicameral system, and the fact that it is unique among state legislatures in this country it becomes highly interesting to speculate upon the causes for the success of this last Nebraska session. Fifty-five years ago Albert Watkins in addressing a meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society remarked, "I think a strong case may be made against a legislative house being divided against itself." He then explained that there was no valid reason for two houses of the legislature being chosen by practically the same voting constituency. This was the first gun in a long campaign to establish a unicameral legislature in

Nebraska. Almost exactly forty-seven years elapsed before the first unicameral body met in Lincoln. The history of five sessions of such a legislature offers many reasons to justify the views that Watkins had at that time presented.

The arguments in behalf of a unicameral system have been presented often in this state. The size, non-partisan character, and pay of state senators are still items of controversy, both within and without the Nebraska Legislature. It may be interesting to recall that the membership of the Federal Constitutional Convention was almost identical in size with the forty-three senators composing the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature. The final work of the constitutional convention was signed by thirty-nine members and three who were present refused to sign. A few had found it necessary to leave the convention previous to the completion of its work. In view of the remarkable success of the Philadelphia Convention one might assume that a deliberative body of forty to fifty delegates constitutes a very workable size for debate and consultative action. As a chance observer at a few sessions of the unicameral the writer was impressed by the ease of addressing the body, the opportunity offered for complete expression of divergent opinions and the semi-formality with which business was conducted. The good judgment of those who fixed the size of the present legislative body was amply justified by the splendid adaptation of this house to its functions.

The non-partisan character of the state legislature has both opponents and advocates. Persons of strong partisan outlook generally condemn the non-partisan character of the organization. While individuals who are hostile to strong party organizations see great advantages in the present non-partisan arrangement. Both groups can point to splendid authority for their support. George Washington, in his farewell address, warned his fellow countrymen against the grave dangers of party spirit. Woodrow Wilson used the party caucus to pass his progressive legislative program. Perhaps it should be remembered that our great political alignments are formed in

response to national problems. Party names and divisions with supporting organizations may be carried over into the state contests with little consideration for completely different state issues.

The matter of pay of state legislators quite naturally arises at a time when adjustments of remuneration for services in all lines of activity are being made. The services of legislators seem to stand in a unique position. In most activities the salary attached to the position is indicative of the caliber of official that will be secured. However, a few services are regarded as honors and the quality of the incumbent is in no way indicated by the compensation received. In fact, a number of important positions carry no salary. The American legislator seems to stand in a midway position. This office is sought in part because of the honor and in part because of the remuneration. The services of the men who have served in the Nebraska Unicameral could not be obtained for the remuneration offered. Their services to the state has meant a considerable personal sacrifice in most cases. They have served in part because of the honor and opportunity inherent in the legislative post. Thus it can hardly be argued that increasing the pay of senators would enhance the quality of that body. However, it is likely that the majority of Nebraska voters would be willing to see some additional remuneration assigned to these men. The rise in prices since 1935 has cut in half the purchasing value of the pay that the senators received ten years ago.

The success of the past session may in part be explained by a fortunate composition of experienced and new members. Fourteen members, or one-third, were serving their first term. Exactly an equal number had served a previous term. The remaining fifteen members had served two or more terms. The five star veteran of the senate is Senator Tvrdik whose services have been continuous since the establishment of the unicameral. The four-term senators are Garber, Mekota, Mueller, Norman and Sorrell. The men who have now served

three terms are Brodahl, Carmody, Crossland, Doyle, Hanna, Klaver, Peterson, Raecke, Schultz and Weborg. These more experienced men have served as chairmen of many of the committees and have supplied able leadership in much of the work.

Happy as the body seems to be, it is unlikely that the success of this institution would have attained its present distinction without the supplementary device of its Legislative Council and Research Director. Most legislative bodies are devoid of the unity and initiative necessary for well organized and coordinated action. Most important of all, they lack the comprehensive over-view and prepared information that enables them to start their work promptly and logically when they convene to carry out a legislative program. The Nebraska set-up with its Legislative Council, which holds inter-session meetings and assigns research work to its staff, has played a very large role in preparing the way for successful legislative sessions. There is little doubt that the legislative procedure may be further refined and yet students of the legislative process regard the Nebraska experiment as the outstanding advance in state government within this century. The state and members of the Unicameral Legislature can well take pride in the achievements thus far recorded.