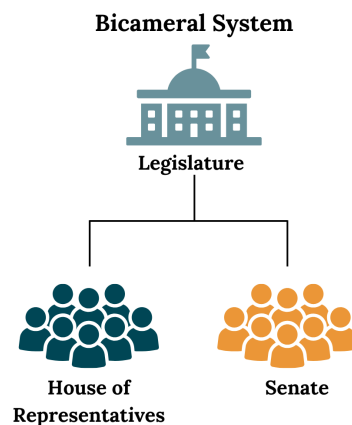


# Would you have voted to create the Nebraska Unicameral?

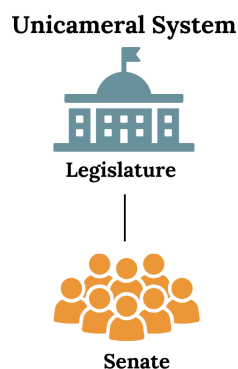
## Contextual Essay

On November 6th, 1934, Nebraskan voters went to the polls to vote. It was not a presidential election, but Nebraskans still had important issues to decide. One of these issues was an amendment to change the Nebraska **legislature**, the branch of government that makes laws. In 1934, Nebraskan voters had to decide: did they want a one-house or two-house legislature?

Originally, Nebraska had a **bicameral**, or two-house, legislature. This bicameral was divided into a House of Representatives and a Senate like the United States Congress. There were 33 Senators and 100 Representatives who made laws for Nebraska.



Some Nebraskans thought the state legislature was too large. They wanted a **unicameral**, or one-house, legislature. One advocate for the unicameral system was Senator **George W. Norris**. Norris was a well-known and highly respected politician from McCook, Nebraska. Norris wanted a unicameral with just a Senate. Norris felt having fewer lawmakers would create more accountability. It would be easier for Nebraskans to see how each senator



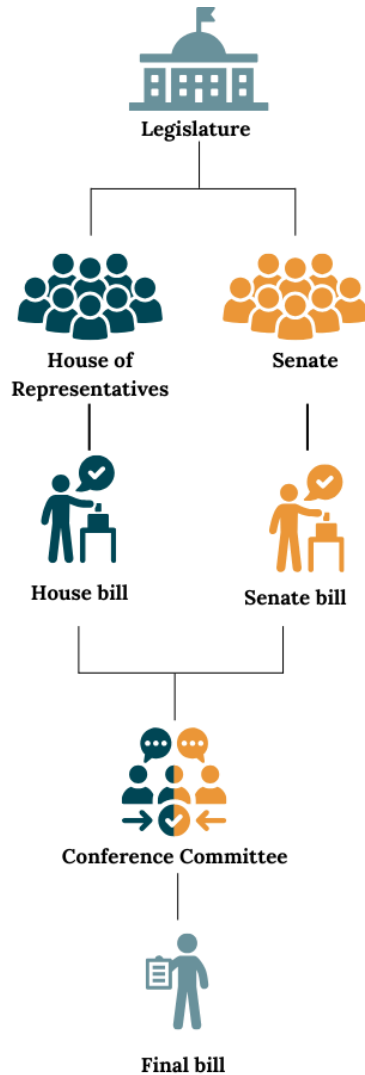
voted on bills. This would help voters make more informed decisions during elections. Opponents of the unicameral argued that senators would decrease accountability. With fewer lawmakers, lobbyists and special interests could easily persuade and influence senators.

Norris and other supporters of the unicameral believed it would be an economic advantage. The **Great Depression**, a global financial crisis, led to bank collapses, unemployment, and falling wages in the 1930s. Supporters of the unicameral believed taxpayers would spend less money on legislative sessions with only one house. There would be few lawmakers, which meant paying less on salaries for legislators and their staff, printing, and travel expenses. Opponents of the unicameral argued that with fewer lawmakers, it would be easier for politicians to vote to give themselves a raise and to increase taxes on ordinary Nebraskans.

Other Nebraskans saw the unicameral as unfair. Opponents of the unicameral feared rural communities and farmers would be overpowered by large cities in the new system. They argued that rural districts would span many counties, making it difficult for senators to hear concerns from their constituents. Supporters of the unicameral pointed out that representation would be based on population. All Nebraskans could be represented equally.

Norris felt the unicameral was more democratic. In the bicameral, conference committees made many important decisions. For a bill to become

law, both the House of Representatives and Senate need to vote on the bill. Both houses often pass slightly different bills. Conference committees are made up of members of the House and Senate. Their job is to look at all the differences in bills and make compromises. Then, both houses vote on the conference committee's bill. Norris argued that conference committees had too much power and made decisions without the voter's knowledge. In the unicameral, all votes would be public. Opponents of the unicameral argued that conference committees are a necessary part of democracy. Voters could choose not to re-elect senators and representatives.



Opponents were also concerned the unicameral was undemocratic. In the 1930s some European countries, such as Spain, Italy, and Germany turned to **fascism**. Fascism is a type of ultra-nationalist, totalitarian government. Some Nebraskans feared the unicameral was a step towards fascism.

With so much at stake, Nebraskan voters had an important decision to make. **Would you have voted to create the Nebraska Unicameral?**

## Contextual Essay Questions

1. Define each of the following vocabulary terms:
  - a. Legislature
  - b. Bicameral
  - c. Unicameral
  - d. George W. Norris
  - e. Great Depression
  - f. Conference Committee
  - g. Fascism
2. What issue were Nebraskans voting on in the 1934 election?
3. Who was a strong supporter of the unicameral system?
4. What is one reason some Nebraskans supported the unicameral system?
5. What is one reason some Nebraskans opposed the unicameral system?

## Document A

Adoption of the one-house Legislature proposal will result in the following advantages:

I. The jealousy, friction, and rivalry between the two houses, which often results in deadlocks and the defeat of constructive legislation, will be eliminated by a one-house legislature.

II. A one-house legislature will make possible the definite fixing of responsibility for action taken on all bills introduced; where two bodies of persons are involved it is hard to fix blame.

It will not be possible as now to shift blame from one house to another. Public attention will be focused upon a single body, permitting close scrutiny of all legislative proceedings while laws are in the process of enactment. Each member of a one-house legislature will be more important and therefore more conspicuous. The public will be enabled to watch his acts and reward or punish him accordingly.

III. A one-house legislature will decrease greatly the opportunity for corruption; special interests desiring to kill proposed legislation find their way twice as easy when it is necessary to control or corrupt only one of two houses.

IV. Legislation by conference committees will be abolished.

V. The tax burden of the state will be reduced by the adoption of the one-house legislature proposal.

VI. By providing that the members shall be nominated and elected on a nonpartisan ballot, the one-house legislature will be divorced from partisan politics.

Honest men may disagree on the NRA, tariff, and League of Nations, but the Legislature of Nebraska has nothing to do with those questions and its members should neither be elected nor defeated on those issues. The best qualified men and women should be elected to the Legislature regardless of their views on national issues.

Source: Excerpts from: Brochure, "Vote for One-House Legislature," courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [9173-672](#)

1. Why does the author believe a unicameral system will improve government accountability?
2. The author believes that Nebraska legislators should be non-partisan or not elected based on their political party. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
3. Does this document support the creation of the Unicameral? Why or why not?
4. What is the most persuasive piece of evidence in this document?

## Document B

**A Few Reasons Why the Dangerous Unicameral Amendment Should Be Defeated**

***The Unicameral Amendment Threatens to:***

- Centralize government in a few hands.
- Increase appropriations and cost of government.
- Necessitate higher taxes.
- Deprive the agricultural classes of their present adequate per-centage of legislative members.
- Deprive entire rural communities of the direct representation they now enjoy.
- Deprive the people of 75% of their representatives.
- Deprive the people of "safety in numbers" in the law making body.
- Swings too much power of electing representatives to the populous centers and cities.
- Gives the political bosses additional power to elect representatives.
- Threatens to subject the legislature to the control of political machines.
- Destroys the effective checks and balances of the two party system.
- Permits speedy passage of laws without the checks and safeguards afforded by the two house system.

Will encourage the passage of too many laws.  
Produces unofficial blocs, cliques and machines, wholly independent of statutory regulation, which will dominate our elections.  
Destroys the "American" system of government and substitutes the "European."  
Destroys those elements of caution and deliberation which should dominate the proceedings of every legislature that is dealing with the lives, property and liberties of the people.  
Reinstates a one house legislative plan which was junked by all the American States that tried it, after they found it was impracticable and destructive of the liberties of the people.  
Shuts the door of the legislature to thousands of qualified farmers, women and young people who are anxious to participate in state government and improve our conditions.  
Substitutes professional politicians for a large number of honest, hard working, patriotic men and women in our law making body.  
Gives to the selfish interests, political machines, gangs and greedy bureaucracies a strangle hold on our law making branch of government.  
Destroys the independence of the law makers.  
Destroys that control which the people now have over their representatives.

Source: Excerpts from: Brochure: Representative Government Defense Association, "Reasons Why the Dangerous Un-American Unicameral Amendment Should Be Defeated By the Citizens of Nebraska," courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [323.3 R20r](#)

1. What impact does the author believe a unicameral legislature have on rural and urban communities?
2. How does the author believe the unicameral will impact Nebraskan's participation in government?
3. Does this document support the creation of the Unicameral? Why or why not?
4. What is the most persuasive piece of evidence in this document?

## Document C

*Additional Statistics*

(Bicameral Sessions)			(Unicameral Sessions)		
	Bills introduced	Bills passed		Bills introduced	Bills passed
1933 .....	1082	163	1937 .....	581	214
1935 .....	1056	192	1939 .....	523	138
1935 (Special).....	54	35	1940 (Special).....	8	6

**\*COST**

1933 (99 days).....	\$173,023.98	1937 (98 days).....	\$103,445.38
1935 (110 days).....	202,593.49	1939 (111 days).....	100,678.33
1935 Special (24 days).....	30,769.52	1940 Special (11 days)**.....	3,676.72

**SALARY OF MEMBERS**

Biennium .....	\$106,400.00	Biennium .....	\$75,000.00
Special session (1935)	13,300.00	Special session (1940) .....	No additional

\*Figures from State Auditor's office.  
\*\*Includes cost of printing Permanent Legislative Journal and Session Laws, which item is not included in other reports above set out.

Source: Hugo F. Srb, Brochure, "Comparison of Unicameral and Bicameral Legislative Systems in Nebraska," March 8, 1940, courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [9173-674](#)

1. What percentage of bills introduced in the 1933 Nebraska Legislature (bicameral) were passed? In 1937?
2. What is the cost difference between the 1935 (bicameral) and the 1939 (unicameral) sessions?
3. Does this document support the creation of the Unicameral? Why or why not?
4. What is the most persuasive piece of evidence in this document?

## Document D

**Note:** Samuel R. McKelvie was the governor of Nebraska from 1919 to 1923. During McKelvie's term, there was a Constitutional Convention to amend Nebraska's state constitution. The Convention proposed adopting a unicameral legislature, but the amendment was never sent to voters.

“

...The influence of an executive over the legislative branch, his tremendous power of publicity and public appeal joined with possible ulterior or selfish motives may easily result in the worst elements of an outright dictatorship. The elder statesman often adverted to this and usually they called it “tyranny”...

... An elective despotism was not the government we fought for; but one which should not only be founded on free principles, but in which the powers of government should be so divided and balanced among several bodies of magistracy, as that no one could transcend their legal limits without being effectually checked and restrained by the others.

Who cannot readily see that a one-house body with a fraction of the members of a two-house system is more susceptible to undue executive influence? With dictatorships bursting forth through the world - - events threatening our own shores, surely a people who cherish their liberties above all else should be alert to the hazards of autocracy that lurk in a less representative system...”

”

Source: Excerpts from: “Unicameral Legislative System” an address by Sam R. McKelvie at the Student Forum at Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana on December 4, 1937, courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society,

1. The author mentions “dictatorships” several times in this speech. What is a dictatorship?
2. Why does the author believe a unicameral legislature will lead to “tyranny” or a dictatorship?
3. Does this document support the creation of the Unicameral? Why or why not?
4. What is the most persuasive piece of evidence in this document?

# Would you have voted to create the Nebraska Unicameral?

**Directions** | Write a short essay answering the question: would you have voted to create the Nebraska Unicameral? For each body paragraph, include the following:

- One reason to support your answer
- Textual evidence to support your answer
- An explanation of what the textual evidence means
- Why this evidence is important or persuasive



## Document A

Source: Excerpts from: Brochure, "Vote for One-House Legislature," courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [9173-672](#)

### Document transcript:

Adoption of the one-house Legislature proposal will result in the following advantages:

- I. **The jealousy, friction, and rivalry between two houses, which often results in deadlocks and the defeat of constructive legislation, will be eliminated by a one-house legislature.**
- II. **A one-house legislature will make possible the definite fixing of responsibility for action taken on all bills introduced ; where two bodies of persons are involved it is hard to fix blame.**  
It will not be possible as now to shift blame from one house to another. Public attention will be focused upon a single body, permitting close scrutiny of all legislative proceedings while laws are in the process of enactment. Each member of a one-house legislature will be more important and therefore more conspicuous. The public will be enabled to watch his acts and reward or punish him accordingly.
- III. **A one-house legislature will decrease greatly the opportunity for corruption ; special interests desiring to kill proposed legislation find their way twice as easy when it is necessary to control or corrupt only one of two houses.**
- IV. **Legislation by conference committees will be abolished.**
- V. **The tax burden of the state will be reduced by the adoption of the one-house legislature proposal.**
- VI. **By providing that the members shall be nominated and elected on a nonpartisan ballot, the one-house legislature will be divorced from partisan politics.**  
Honest men may disagree on the NRA, tariff, and League of Nations, but the Legislature of Nebraska has nothing to do with those questions and its members should neither be elected nor defeated on those issues. The best qualified men and women should be elected to the Legislature regardless of their views on national issues.

## **Document B**

Source: Excerpts from: Brochure: Representative Government Defense Association, "Reasons Why the Dangerous Un-American Unicameral Amendment Should Be Defeated By the Citizens of Nebraska," courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [323.3 R20r](#)

### **Document transcript:**

#### **A Few Reasons Why the Dangerous Unicameral Amendment Should Be Defeated**

##### **The Unicameral Amendment Threatens to:**

Centralize government in a few hands.

Increase appropriations and cost of government.

Necessitate higher taxes.

Deprive the agricultural classes of their present adequate per-centage of legislative members.

Deprive entire rural communities of the direct representation they now enjoy.

Deprive the people of 75% of their representatives.

Deprive the people of "safety in numbers" in the law making body.

Swings too much power of electing representatives to the populous centers and cities.

Gives the political bosses additional power to elect representatives

Threatens to subject the legislature to the control of political machines.

Destroys the effective checks and balances of the two party system.

Permits speedy passage of laws without the checks and safeguards afforded by the two house system.

Will encourage the passage of too many laws.

Produces unofficial blocs, cliques and machines, wholly independent of statutory regulation, which will dominate our elections.

Destroys the "American" system of government and substitutes the "European."

Destroys those elements of caution and deliberation which should dominate the proceedings of every legislature that is dealing with the lives, property and liberties of the people.

Reinstates a one house legislative plan which was junked by all the American States that tried it, after they found it was impracticable and destructive of the liberties of the people.

Shuts the door of the legislature to thousands of qualified farmers, women and young people who are anxious to participate in state government and improve our condition.

Substitutes professional politicians for a large number of honest, hard working, patriotic men and women in our law making body.

Gives to the selfish interests, political machines, gangs and greedy bureaucracies a strangle hold on our law making branch of government.

Destroys the independence of the law makers.

Destroys that control which the people now have over their representatives.

**Document C**

Source: Hugo F. Srb, Brochure, "Comparision of Unicameral and Bicameral Legislative Systems in Nebraska," March 8, 1940, courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [9173-674](#)

**Document transcript:**

*Additional Statistics*

(Bicameral Sessions)			(Unicameral Sessions)		
	Bills introduced	Bills passed		Bills introduced	Bills passed
1933.....	1082	163	1937.....	581	214
1935.....	1056	192	1939.....	523	138
1935 (Special)	54	35	1940 (Special)	8	8

*\*COST*

1933 (99 days).....	\$173,023.98	1937 (98 days).....	\$103,445.38
1935 (110 days).....	202,593.49	1939 (111 days).....	100,678.33
1935 Special (24 days)	30,769.52	1940 Special (11 days)**.....	3,676.72

*SALARY OF MEMBERS*

Biennium.....	\$106,4000.00	Biennium.....	\$75,000.00
Special session (1935).....	13,300.00	Special session (1940).....	No additional

\*Figures from State Auditor's office.

\*\*Includes cost of printing Permanent Legislative Journal and Session Laws, which is not included in other reports above set out.

## Contextual Essay Questions - ANSWER KEY

1. Define each of the following vocabulary terms:
  - a. Legislature  
The branch or part of government that makes laws.
  - b. Bicameral  
A legislature with two houses or parts.
  - c. Unicameral  
A legislature with one house or part.
  - d. George W. Norris  
A highly respected senator.  
A senator who supported the creation of the Nebraska Unicameral.
  - e. Great Depression  
A global financial crisis in the 1930s.
  - f. Conference Committee  
A small group made up of senators and representatives who create a compromise bill.
  - g. Fascism  
A type of ultra-nationalist, totalitarian government.
2. What issue were Nebraskans voting on in the 1934 election?  
Nebraskans were voting on having a bicameral or unicameral legislature.
3. Who was a strong supporter of the unicameral system?  
Senator George Norris
4. What is one reason some Nebraskans supported the unicameral system?
  - The bicameral was too large
  - More government accountability
  - Easier for voters to tell which lawmakers support each bill
  - Cheaper to operate
  - Eliminate conference committees
5. What is one reason some Nebraskans opposed the unicameral system?
  - Unicameral would make it easier for lobbyists to influence senators
  - Easier for politicians to give themselves raises
  - Easier to raise taxes
  - Rural communities would lose power
  - Undemocratic/step towards fascism

## Document A-ANSWER KEY

Adoption of the one-house Legislature proposal will result in the following advantages:

I. The jealousy, friction, and rivalry between the two houses, which often results in deadlocks and the defeat of constructive legislation, will be eliminated by a one-house legislature.

II. A one-house legislature will make possible the definite fixing of responsibility for action taken on all bills introduced; where two bodies of persons are involved it is hard to fix blame.

It will not be possible as now to shift blame from one house to another. Public attention will be focused upon a single body, permitting close scrutiny of all legislative proceedings while laws are in the process of enactment. Each member of a one-house legislature will be more important and therefore more conspicuous. The public will be enabled to watch his acts and reward or punish him accordingly.

III. A one-house legislature will decrease greatly the opportunity for corruption; special interests desiring to kill proposed legislation find their way twice as easy when it is necessary to control or corrupt only one of two houses.

IV. Legislation by conference committees will be abolished.

V. The tax burden of the state will be reduced by the adoption of the one-house legislature proposal.

VI. By providing that the members shall be nominated and elected on a nonpartisan ballot, the one-house legislature will be divorced from partisan politics.

Honest men may disagree on the NRA, tariff, and League of Nations, but the Legislature of Nebraska has nothing to do with those questions and its members should neither be elected nor defeated on those issues. The best qualified men and women should be elected to the Legislature regardless of their views on national issues.

Source: Excerpts from: Brochure, "Vote for One-House Legislature," courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [9173-672](#)

1. Why does the author believe a unicameral system will improve government accountability?  
It will be easier for voters to see which lawmakers support each bill.  
Politicians cannot blame the other house for laws.
2. The author believes that Nebraska legislators should be non-partisan or not elected based on their political party. Do you agree or disagree? Why?  
Answers will vary.
3. Does this document support the creation of the Unicameral? Why or why not?  
Supports the Unicameral  
Answers will vary
4. What is the most persuasive piece of evidence in this document?  
Answers will vary

## Document B-ANSWER KEY

### A Few Reasons Why the Dangerous Unicameral Amendment Should Be Defeated

#### The Unicameral Amendment Threatens to:

Centralize government in a few hands.  
Increase appropriations and cost of government.  
Necessitate higher taxes.  
Deprive the agricultural classes of their present adequate per-centage of legislative members.  
Deprive entire rural communities of the direct representation they now enjoy.  
Deprive the people of 75% of their representatives.  
Deprive the people of "safety in numbers" in the law making body.  
Swings too much power of electing representatives to the populous centers and cities.  
Gives the political bosses additional power to elect representatives.  
Threatens to subject the legislature to the control of political machines.  
Destroys the effective checks and balances of the two party system.  
Permits speedy passage of laws without the checks and safeguards afforded by the two house system.  
Will encourage the passage of too many laws.

Produces unofficial blocs, cliques and machines, wholly independent of statutory regulation, which will dominate our elections.

Destroys the "American" system of government and substitutes the "European."

Destroys those elements of caution and deliberation which should dominate the proceedings of every legislature that is dealing with the lives, property and liberties of the people.

Reinstates a one house legislative plan which was junked by all the American States that tried it, after they found it was impracticable and destructive of the liberties of the people.

Shuts the door of the legislature to thousands of qualified farmers, women and young people who are anxious to participate in state government and improve our conditions.

Substitutes professional politicians for a large number of honest, hard working, patriotic men and women in our law making body.

Gives to the selfish interests, political machines, gangs and greedy bureaucracies a strangle hold on our law making branch of government.

Destroys the independence of the law makers.

Destroys that control which the people now have over their representatives.

Source: Excerpts from: Brochure: Representative Government Defense Association, "Reasons Why the Dangerous Un-American Unicameral Amendment Should Be Defeated By the Citizens of Nebraska," courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [323.3 R20r](#)

1. What impact does the author believe a unicameral legislature have on rural and urban communities?

Too much power will be given to cities. Rural communities will have little power.

2. How does the author believe the unicameral will impact Nebraskan's participation in government?

Answers will vary

3. Does this document support the creation of the Unicameral? Why or why not?

Does not support the Unicameral

Answers will vary

4. What is the most persuasive piece of evidence in this document?

Answers will vary

## Document C-ANSWER KEY

*Additional Statistics*

(Bicameral Sessions)			(Unicameral Sessions)		
	Bills introduced	Bills passed		Bills introduced	Bills passed
1933 .....	1082	163	1937 .....	581	214
1935 .....	1056	192	1939 .....	523	138
1935 (Special).....	54	35	1940 (Special).....	8	6

\*COST

1933 (99 days).....	\$173,023.98	1937 (98 days).....	\$103,445.38
1935 (110 days).....	202,593.49	1939 (111 days).....	100,678.33
1935 Special (24 days).....	30,769.52	1940 Special (11 days)**.....	3,676.72

SALARY OF MEMBERS

Biennium .....	\$106,400.00	Biennium .....	\$75,000.00
Special session (1935)	13,300.00	Special session (1940) .....	No additional

\*Figures from State Auditor's office.

\*\*Includes cost of printing Permanent Legislative Journal and Session Laws, which item is not included in other reports above set out.

Source: Hugo F. Srb, Brochure, "Comparison of Unicameral and Bicameral Legislative Systems in Nebraska," March 8, 1940, courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, [9173-674](#)

1. What percentage of bills introduced in the 1933 Nebraska Legislature (bicameral) were passed? In 1937?  
1933- 15%  
19370 -37%
2. What is the cost difference between the 1935 (bicameral) and the 1939 (unicameral) sessions?  
\$101,915.16  
Half as expensive
3. Does this document support the creation of the Unicameral? Why or why not?  
Supports the Unicameral  
Answers will vary
4. What is the most persuasive piece of evidence in this document?  
Answers will vary

## Document D-ANSWER KEY

**Note:** Samuel R. McKelvie was the governor of Nebraska from 1919 to 1923. During McKelvie's term, there was a Constitutional Convention to amend Nebraska's state constitution. The Convention proposed adopting a unicameral legislature, but the amendment was never sent to voters.

“

...The influence of an executive over the legislative branch, his tremendous power of publicity and public appeal joined with possible ulterior or selfish motives may easily result in the worst elements of an outright dictatorship. The elder statesman often adverted to this and usually they called it “tyranny”...

... An elective despotism was not the government we fought for; but one which should not only be founded on free principles, but in which the powers of government should be so divided and balanced among several bodies of magistracy, as that no one could transcend their legal limits without being effectually checked and restrained by the others.

Who cannot readily see that a one-house body with a fraction of the members of a two-house system is more susceptible to undue executive influence? With dictatorships bursting forth through the world - - events threatening our own shores, surely a people who cherish their liberties above all else should be alert to the hazards of autocracy that lurk in a less representative system...”

”

Source: Excerpts from: “Unicameral Legislative System” an address by Sam R. McKelvie at the Student Forum at Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana on December 4, 1937, courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society,

1. The author mentions “dictatorships” several times in this speech. What is a dictatorship?  
A dictatorship is a cruel or unjust government where one person or a small group have absolute power.
2. Why does the author believe a unicameral legislature will lead to “tyranny” or a dictatorship?  
There are no checks and balances in the legislative branch.  
There is a small group of lawmakers who might be controlled by the governor or executive.
3. Does this document support the creation of the Unicameral? Why or why not?  
Does not support the Unicameral.  
Answers will vary
4. What is the most persuasive piece of evidence in this document?  
Answers will vary



# Would you have voted to create the Nebraska Unicameral?

**Directions** | Write a short essay answering the question: would you have voted to create the Nebraska Unicameral? For each body paragraph, include the following:

- One reason to support your answer
- Textual evidence to support your answer
- An explanation of what the textual evidence means
- Why this evidence is important or persuasive

Answers will vary