Kansas Rep. Tom Sawyer

With time in office dating back to 1987, minority leader says some keys to legislative success remain the same: Be pragmatic, seek bipartisanship

by Laura Kleece (lkleece@rg.org)

A
s a young man, Tom Sawyer hadn’t thought much about the work of the legislature in his home state of Kansas. But then a job at the local clerk’s office—where he was tasked with keeping track of state statutes affecting the county—opened his eyes, and changed his life. “It showed me the importance of state government,” he recalls, “and the effect that the legislature has on people.” Sawyer soon ran for a House seat (only two years out of college), and what’s followed is a remarkable legislative career—26 non-consecutive years in office, including one stint as majority leader and two stints as minority leader, the legislative position that he currently holds.

Over the years, he has left legislative service three times, sometimes figuring he wouldn’t come back. In the late 1990s, Sawyer ran for governor and, after losing that race, became chair of the Kansas Democratic Party.

But when the House seat in his Wichita district opened up in 2002, Sawyer decided to run for office again and won, ultimately serving until 2009, when he was appointed to the State Parole Board.

Three years later, with his service on the Parole Board done, Sawyer was out of state government and politics. And as the candidate filing deadline approached in 2012, he discovered some old campaign signs in his garage and thought about getting rid of them.

“But then I said, ‘Ah, you never know, I’ll throw them in the attic,’” Sawyer recalls.

As it turns out, he would need those signs sooner rather than later, because the state’s new political maps had drawn the sitting Democratic candidate out of his legislative district. Party leaders needed someone else to run, and there was one obvious choice.

“When they tried to recruit me to run again, I was on a ladder painting my house,” Sawyer recalls.

That marked the start of Sawyer’s third return to his home away from home—the Kansas House of Representatives. In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Rep. Sawyer reflected on his time in the Kansas Legislature and his approach to leadership.

Q: Thinking about the last time you served as minority leader, in the 1990s and now, how has it been different for you?

A: I think the biggest difference is all the change in communication. When I was minority leader before, we didn’t have emails, we didn’t have texting…So, it was a very different world, communication-wise. We relied more on the press and newspapers and TV.

Now, oh my gosh, I’ll say something in the mic and will sit down and someone will text or email me right away. It’s immediate. And people are spreading the word on Facebook and on Twitter…We rely much less on newspapers and TV.

Q: What about any changes in the policy issues in Kansas?

A: Some have changed, but a lot have stayed the same. We still have some of the same concerns about privacy that we had back then. The budget and the funding of schools is always going to be an issue. When I ran back in 1986, one of my issues was eliminating the sales tax on food, and we still have that tax. It’s funny how some of the issues have remained the same over the years.

Q: This is your first year back as minority leader, and Kansas also has a Democrat in the governor’s office for the first time in a while. Have you noticed any changes this session as a result of having a Democrat as governor?

A: Of the 84 Republicans currently in the House, only five have served under a Democratic governor, even though the last one was only eight years ago. None of the Republican leadership of our House has served under a Democratic governor, so it’s kind of a whole new role for them.

You still have the responsibility to govern, but you now have to figure out how to cast yourself in response to the governor of a whole different party. This session was very different in that it started off very slow. Everyone was kind of trying to feel out their new role. It took a little time, but people came together, and we got a bipartisan school finance bill passed.

Q: Overall, during your years in the Legislature, what would you say have been some of your biggest legislative accomplishments?

A: We passed a school finance bill in 1992 when I was majority leader. The school finance formula in that bill has basically stood the test of time. The basic formula we passed is still constitutional; it’s just not been funded. It’s sound, the formula itself. There have been a lot of attempts over the years to change that, but it never happens. It’s still basically an intact formula.

Secondly, what we did in 2017, undoing the Brownback tax experiment [of making cuts in state income and business taxes]. And that was great, too, because it was bipartisan, and we actually had to override the governor’s veto, both the House and Senate. That was an amazing accomplishment, to get that kind of strong support to override the governor. It took all sessions, and it was a lot of work.

Q: As far as your leadership style, I have heard colleagues describe you as having “incredible pragmatism.” Do you agree with that assessment?

A: I do. I think even during the time I was in the majority, it was a 63-62 majority. So you pretty much had to work with Republicans. We didn’t have any margin. So early on, I had good relations with Republicans and got used to working with Republicans to solve problems. And you can do that in the minority. When I first became minority leader, my first four years, we had a Democrat as governor, but my last four, Bill Graves, a moderate Republican, was the governor. We talked virtually every day even though we were from different parties because we had about 30 moderate Republicans and 44 Democrats. In a lot of ways, under Governor Graves, it felt almost like I was majority leader again, because we were able to pass so many things with a bipartisan coalition.

So I’m used to working across the party lines. I think the people want us to come here and solve problems, and that’s what I try to do. I’ll work with anybody who wants to do that. It’s worked well over the years.

“Bio-sketch of Rep. Tom Sawyer

- selected House minority leader in early 2019; has previously served as House majority leader (1991-’92) and minority leader (1993-’98)
- served as member of Kansas Parole Board
- once worked as Sedgwick County clerk
- lives in Wichita with his 22-year-old nephew, whom he helped raise
- works as an accountant; has degree in business administration from Wichita State University

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