



Nebraska Speaker Galen Hadley

Top leader in unique unicameral system puts emphasis on helping new members and forging legislative compromise

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

For many years, some of the people closest to Galen Hadley had been a part of Nebraska's unique legislative branch.

His father-in-law, Kenneth Bowen, had once served as speaker of the Unicameral, and his wife, Marilyn, had been a legislative page.

But a life in politics didn't necessarily appeal to Hadley himself, a professor and higher education administrator at the University of Nebraska-Kearney.

"I really had considered myself apolitical," he recalls.

Hadley, though, was also committed to helping and being involved in his community. So when a seat opened on the Kearney City Council, he decided to run. That turned into a stint as the town's mayor, and when the state's term-limits law opened up a seat in the Legislature, Hadley took the first steps toward following in his father-in-law's political footsteps.

"I was retired and I had the time to do it," Hadley recalls about his initial decision to run for the Legislature in 2008. "And I have really come to enjoy debating the issues and learning more about them."

As the first certified public accountant to serve in the Unicameral Legislature, Hadley soon found a comfortable policy fit on the Revenue Committee — first as a member and later as its chair — taking a lead role on many of the state's recent changes in economic development and tax policy (including hundreds of millions of dollars in tax cuts).

Now, six years after being elected, and only two years before he will be term-limited out of office, Hadley is serving as the 33rd speaker in the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature's 78-year history.

It has meant a big change in not only what he does inside the Capitol, but what he doesn't do.

"Over the last two years, I carried 35 bills and got 26 of them signed into law," he says. "This year I have about four. My job is not to push any particular policy issue."

The speakership position in Nebraska leadership is unlike any other in U.S. state governments, and also one that fits well with Hadley's personable style and an approach to politics that values compromise over partisanship.

"I have none of the powers that most of the speakers have in the 49 other state legislatures," he notes.

Nebraska's nonpartisan Unicameral Legislature has no party caucuses. Committee chairs are chosen not by leadership, but by a secret ballot of the full body.

The membership of those committees also falls outside of Hadley's control, and every bill introduced by an individual senator must get a hearing in committee. Each senator, too, is able to assign one "priority bill" that gets heard by the full Legislature. (Each committee can assign two priority bills, and as speaker, Hadley can have up to 25.)

So what is the role of the speaker of the Nebraska Unicameral?

Hadley sets the session calendar, works with the governor and serves as the "public face" for the legislative branch. But above all else, especially as the end of session nears, he is prioritizing one particular duty as speaker: "Make sure we get things done."

"Part of that is setting the schedule," he says, "but it also means trying to find compromise, focusing on how to get people to work together."

In his first year as speaker, the Nebraska Unicameral is considering some important issues with wide-ranging policy implications — for example, Medicaid expansion, a bill on nondiscrimination in the workplace, and a series of measures to reform the state's criminal justice system. (On that latter issue, The Council of State Governments Justice Center helped lawmakers develop many of this year's recommendations.)

When compromise on these and other legislative proposals is needed, Hadley will likely take a lead role in trying to find it. CSG Midwest recently interviewed Speaker Hadley about this year's session and his role as Nebraska's top legislative leader. Here are excerpts.

A different kind of speaker: A look at this leadership role in Nebraska's unicameral system

- ✓ Chosen by secret-ballot vote of entire Legislature
- ✓ Does not lead a party caucus; Nebraska Unicameral Legislature is nonpartisan
- ✓ Does not appoint committee chairs or members of committees
- ✓ Sets session calendar and daily agenda, but individual senators can assign one priority bill each to be heard by full Legislature; committees can assign two priority bills to be heard by full Legislature
- ✓ Able to assign 25 priority bills

Q: What are some of the things that you've decided to focus on in your first few months as speaker?

A: A third of our legislative body — 18 out of the 49 senators — are new this year. So I've tried to work a lot with them [on learning the legislative process, rules and procedures].

That is something that has become really important with term limits. A few years from now, we're going to have something like 34 of the 49 senators with two years or less of experience.

Q: What is your view of the term-limits law in Nebraska, which restricts senators to two four-year terms?

A: I think term limits are good, but ours are too short — especially with our unicameral model where members can't switch

Bio-sketch: Speaker Hadley

- ✓ first elected to Nebraska Legislature in 2008
- ✓ served as chair of Revenue Committee
- ✓ serving first year as speaker of Unicameral Legislature
- ✓ former mayor and member of Kearney City Council in Nebraska
- ✓ former professor, higher education administrator at University of Nebraska-Kearney
- ✓ member of U.S. Marine Corps reserve from 1960 to 1966
- ✓ a 2009 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development

from one house to the other. I think it would be better to have a maximum of 12 years.

Right now, you just aren't able to learn everything you need to learn to be an effective legislator, and what happens is it gives much more power to the lobbyists and to the bureaucrats, the executive branch, because they've been around. They understand the system better than the senators do.

Q: You've talked about finding compromise as being an essential leadership role for the speaker. How do you try to forge compromise in the Unicameral?

A: It's very similar in some ways to being a dean or a vice chancellor [at the University of Nebraska-Kearney], where I couldn't order faculty to do things. In the same way, I can't order senators to do anything. So that leaves you with compromise as the way to get things done. You get people together, try to find the areas you agree on, and you work from there."

Q: What kind of impact does the strong belief and support in Nebraska for the unicameral system have on the legislative process?

A: A lot of times, people will come here with at least a little bit of a partisan [mindset], but it isn't very long before most of them buy into the nonpartisan, unicameral model. And the reason is that it takes 25 out of 49 legislators to move a bill, and the coalition that you need to build to get to 25 may be different on every bill.

I think it's absolutely the greatest way to go. I understand why other legislatures aren't going to change, but for us, this system just works really well, and we are well aware of how unique it is. ★