

# Virtual Capitol Lessons

## How a Bill Becomes a Law

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Grade Level	Fourth
Class Period(s)	3-4

This lesson is designed to precede or follow a field trip to Lincoln or a virtual field trip (<http://nebraskavirtualcapitol.org>) to the Nebraska Capitol.

### Nebraska Social Studies Standards

**SS 4.1.1 Synthesize and justify the structure and function of Nebraska's government.**

SS 4.1.1.b Analyze the origin, structure, and function of Nebraska's state government.

SS 4.1.1.c Communicate how a bill becomes a law in the Nebraska unicameral.

SS 4.1.1.d Investigate and summarize the roles that leaders and other citizens serve in Nebraska to equitably represent all residents in the state.

**SS 3.2.1 Explain that people choose and decide what services they ask their local and state government to provide and pay for.**

SS 3.2.1.a Identify goods and services funded through state or local taxes.

### Nebraska Language Arts Standards

**LA 4.1.5 Vocabulary: Students will build and use conversational, academic, and content-specific grade level vocabulary.**

LA 4.1.5.c Acquire new academic and content-specific grade-level vocabulary, relate to prior knowledge, and apply in new situations.

**LA 4.2.1 Writing Process: Students will apply the writing process to plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish writing using correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other conventions of standard English appropriate for grade- level.**

**LA 4.2.2 Writing Modes: Students will write in multiple modes for a variety of purposes and audiences across disciplines.**

LA 4.2.2.a Communicate information and ideas effectively in analytic, descriptive, informative, narrative, poetic, persuasive, and reflective modes to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats.

### Overview

This series of lessons includes a brief comparison activity for students to understand the efficiency of Nebraska's Unicameral versus the House and Senate system. Students then learn how a bill becomes a law and participate in an activity to simulate the process. Their understanding of government processes will prepare them to be participants in the community.

### Key Vocabulary

**Bicameral**-Elected representatives who work to make laws in two separate areas, the House of Representatives and the Senate, which together is known as Congress at the federal level.

**Bill**-a written idea for a law

**Governor**-the elected leader of a state

**Senator**-an elected representative of the people in a particular region. In Nebraska, Senators work in the capitol building for only part of the year.

**Law**-a rule that must be obeyed; Consequences are given for violations.



# Virtual Capitol Lessons

**Unicameral**-elected representatives of the people who work together in one house (group) to make laws

## Materials

Nebraska's Unicameral Legislative Process Poster OR  
How Laws are Made in the Unicameral Poster  
*The Nebraska Adventure* by Jean A. Lukesh (optional)  
*Student Atlas of Nebraska* by Dr. Randy Bertolas  
Unicam Kids (optional)

## Procedures

### SESSION ONE

1. Ask students to define the word “bill.” Students are probably familiar with the homographs meaning the beak of a bird, paper currency, or a statement of money owed. Now define “bill” as it is used in the context of government.
2. If available, read and discuss pages 244-245 in *The Nebraska Adventure* by Jean A. Lukesh for a brief overview of the legislative branch and the lawmaking process. The activities that follow will provide more information so it is not necessary to go in-depth at this time.
3. Explain to students that they will participate in a simulation by playing the roles of senators and representatives in a **bicameral**. Students will choose to fix or purchase something important to them. Their job will be to decide on the law that will settle on the dollar amount they are willing to allocate for the repair or purchase. Suggestions include buying land for a state park, repairing state highways, or purchasing new vehicles for the state patrol.
  - Divide class into two groups across the room from each other.
  - Make one the House and one the Senate.
  - Each group chooses a spokesperson who will be the messenger.

The House decides on an issue for debate so they can create a law to collect a certain amount of money in taxes. The messenger tells the Senate what issue they will be working on. The teacher quietly tells the Senate that they must disagree by at least \$20.

The House decides on a reasonable amount. The messenger informs the Senate. Informed to agree upon an amount, the teacher guides both groups to gradually come to an agreement.

### SESSION TWO

1. Have students gather into one group (a **unicameral**) and instruct them to work to come to a simple majority about the amount of taxes to charge for a different project. This activity should take less time without the messengers.
2. Remind students that they read about George W. Norris's idea for having one decision-making body because it would save time during discussions about whether bills should become laws. Saving time would mean saving money for the people working in the Legislature. Nebraskans agreed, and we began using that system in 1937. The annual sessions are made shorter and people are able to get back to their personal lives, jobs, and farms. Nebraska is the only state that has a unicameral. Use “Unicam Kids!” which is a downloadable booklet where George W. Norris explains the function of the unicameral.

<http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/about/unicamkids.pdf>

# Virtual Capitol Lessons

View the bust of George W. Norris in the Hall of Fame. It is located in the Foyer.

<http://nebraskavirtualcapitol.org/>

This History Nebraska link has more information about George Norris's life and accomplishments.

<https://history.nebraska.gov/visit/senator-george-norris-state-historic-site>

Next, go to virtual tour to see the Norris Chamber (unicameral) <http://nebraskavirtualcapitol.org/>

When Nebraska had a bicameral system, the room across the rotunda, the Warner Chamber, was also used by the Legislature.

3. Divide students into small groups and have them suggest ideas for new laws that would help Nebraskans. Allow time for groups to share their thoughts.

## SESSION THREE

1. Review the reasons that Nebraska has a unicameral instead of a bicameral legislature.  
(More efficient-saving time and cost of governing, more cooperative discussion with the idea that senators are working together on behalf of all Nebraskans - a nonpartisan body)
2. Visit <http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/feature/teach.php> to show how the public can view the legislative calendar and read bills. Go to the "Senators" tab, and choose Find your Senator. Key in the address of your school to find the senator who represents that area and visit his/her web page.
3. Distribute or display "Nebraska's Unicameral Legislative Process" poster OR "How Laws are Made in the Unicameral" poster. (Optional: Teachers might use the page found at <http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/about/lawmaking.php> to guide students through the diagram.) Also, you may go to the Unicam Kids site at <http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/uk/?page=home> for video clips that have state senators explaining the process. Choose "Lawmaking", then "Committees" and "Floor Debate" for brief narratives. The senators who speak in the video clips may not be current legislators but the information is still accurate.

Go to <http://netnebraska.org/basic-page/television/live-demand-state-government> to watch the legislative process on NET.

4. Final discussion question:  
If a Governor is supposed to be the leader of the state, how can you justify letting state senators override a Governor's veto of a bill?

## SESSION FOUR

1. This day the students will elect a governor. All others will be senators and submit suggestions for a bill that they would like to see become a law. One or a few suggested bills can be offered by different committees depending on teacher's choice and time. The class can discuss the bill. They will work together to make it become a law if they feel it will be in the state's best interest.

Students role-play with researched facts (if time and resources allow) or fictional "facts" if the time and resources for research are not available. All students have the *Nebraska's Unicameral Legislative Process* handout and follow the process all the way through by introducing, researching, amending, discussing, and voting on the bill's worth. It may be a good idea is for the "Governor" to veto at least one version. Then calculate the numbers of "Senators" needed to vote to override the "Governor" (30/49 or about 60% in the Nebraska legislature) according to the class size.

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## Assessment

Quick write: Is it better to have a unicameral or bicameral system of government? Why?

OR

Ask students to write about the process of a bill becoming a law through an expository essay.

OR

Ask students to research an actual bill that is being considered and report their findings.

## Extensions

None

## Sources/Resources

Virtual Capitol Tour Website

<http://nebraskavirtualcapitol.org/>

*Student Atlas of Nebraska* by Dr. Randy Bertolas

Page 48 has a map of Legislative Districts and page 46 shows Congressional Districts

"Unicam Kids!" is a downloadable booklet where George W. Norris explains the function of the unicameral.

<http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/about/unicamkids.pdf>

The Unicam Kids site is an interactive experience to teach students about the legislature and the legislative process. It includes information on how to contact senators, diagrams, and coloring pages.

<http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/uk/?page=home>

<http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/feature/teach.php>

Teacher background information and activities for student use

<http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/about/lawmaking.php>

Teacher background information about how a bill becomes a law

[http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/about/history\\_unicameral.php](http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/about/history_unicameral.php)

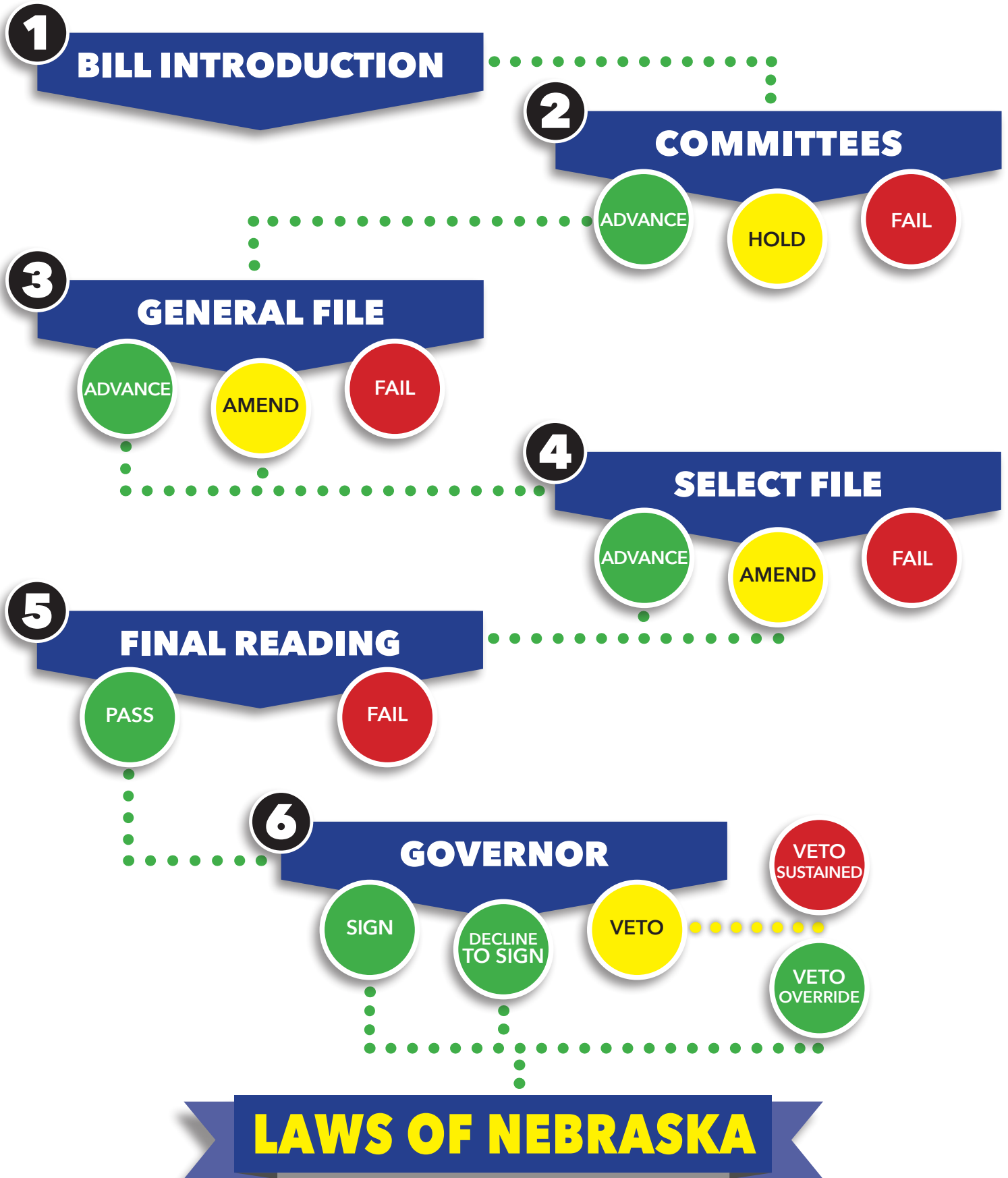
"Rubber and Glass Diplomacy," is a 10 minute documentary produced by Nebraska students Justin Myers and Will Scheopner. It tells the story of George Norris' efforts to bring unicameralism to Nebraska.

<https://history.nebraska.gov/visit/senator-george-norris-state-historic-site>

This History Nebraska link has more information about George Norris's life and accomplishments.



# HOW LAWS ARE MADE IN THE UNICAMERAL



# Nebraska's Unicameral Legislative Process

A senator addresses a problem that might be solved by creating a new law. The senator and staff will do research prior to the legislative season.

Specialists write a draft and estimate the cost if it becomes law. They name it (e.g. LB123) and introduce it as a bill in the first 10 days of the legislative session.

Committees research and provide opportunities for citizens to express opinions about the introduced bill. The committee votes whether or not to advance the bill to the General File.

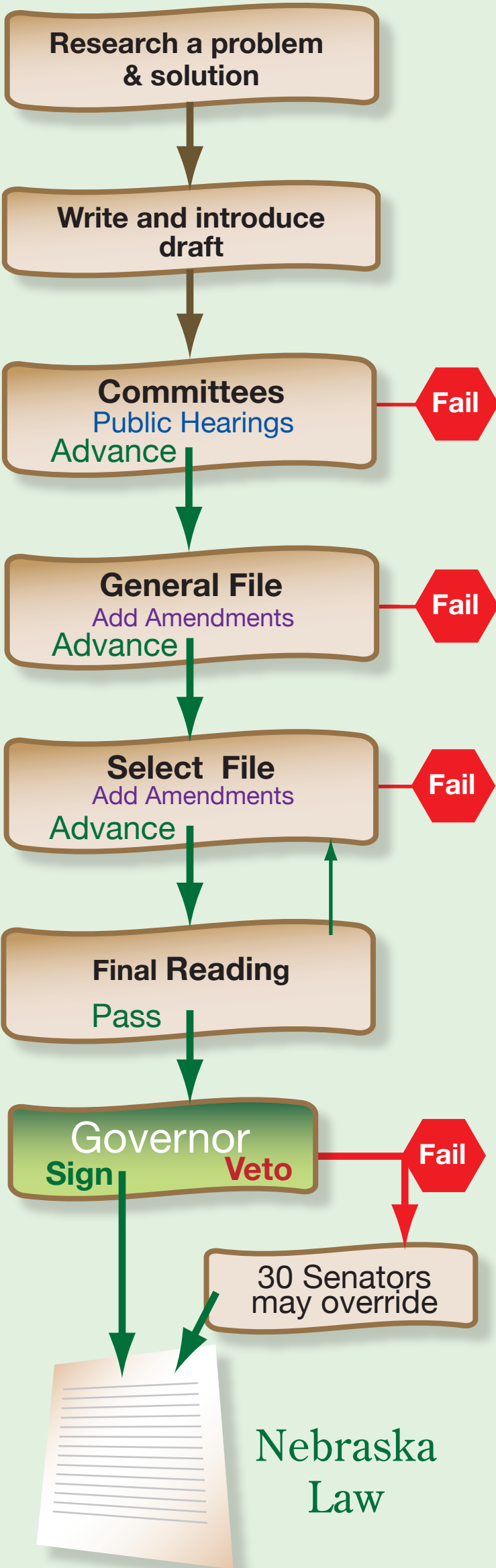
The full legislature debates whether or not to advance the bill. They may amend it. A vote of 25 or more is required for advancement.

This step allows senators more time to evaluate and possibly amend the bill again. A vote of 25 or more is required for advancement.

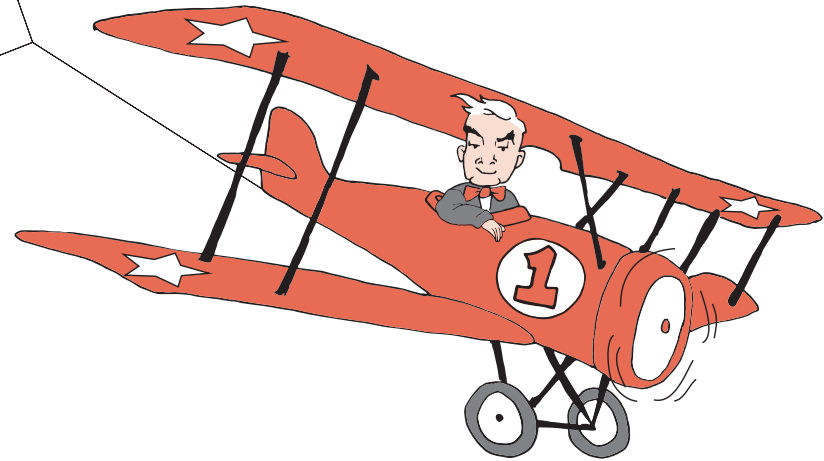
The bill must be read aloud unless 30 senators vote to waive that rule. The bill may not be amended or debated, but can be sent back to Select File if changes are desired. Senators vote to pass it into law.

The Governor has five days, excluding Sundays, to act on the bill. If he signs it or does nothing with it, it becomes law. If he disapproves, he can veto it.

Most bills passed become law three months after the legislature adjourns. Some may take effect sooner on a specific date or if it is considered an emergency.



**UNICAM KIDS!**



## **A Visit to Your Nebraska Legislature**

**guided by George W. Norris,  
“the Father of the Unicameral”**

## UNICAM KIDS

**H**il I'm George Norris. I represented Nebraska in Congress from 1913 to 1943. Many people call me the father of Nebraska's unicameral Legislature.

A **unicameral** is a legislature made up of just one group of people who make laws. Nebraska has the nation's only unicameral, which meets here at the Capitol in Lincoln to make laws for the state.

I believed this would serve Nebraskans better than a **bicameral**, or two-house system, found in every other state. Nebraskans voted to change to a unicameral in 1934 and the first unicameral met in 1937.

Let's go inside. I'll show you around!



*Nebraska is unique for its unicameral and also its unusual Capitol building. Architect Bertram Goodhue wanted the Capitol's design to reflect the spirit of Nebraska's people. The words and pictures on the outside of the building show Nebraska's place in the history of law and democracy. The Capitol took 10 years to build and was finished in 1932. The tower rises almost 400 feet and is topped by a 19-foot bronze statue of a man planting seeds called "The Sower."*

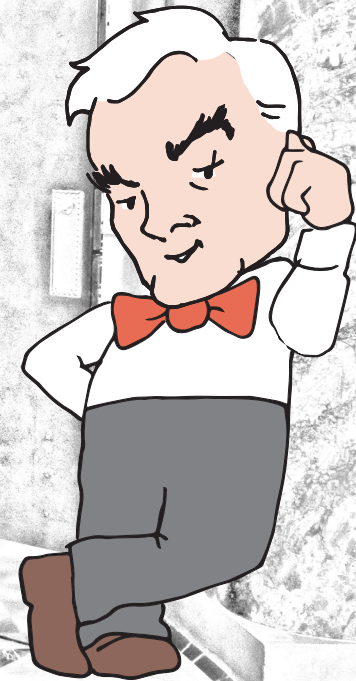


## A VISIT TO YOUR NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE

**M**y experience as a law-maker made me wish for a smoother process to make laws. I encouraged Nebraskans to vote for a new, smaller legislature so the process would be simpler and allow for more public input.

Some Nebraskans worried about becoming the only unicameral. They thought having fewer steps to pass laws might not allow for enough discussion on bills.

But supporters said three rounds of debate on a bill would be plenty. In the end, there was enough support to adopt the new unicameral!



*The unicameral Legislature meets in the room through these doors. The room, or chamber, contains the same wooden desks and leather chairs that were built when the Capitol was constructed. The voting board at the front of the chamber lists all the senators' names and displays their votes — green for "yes" and red for "no."*

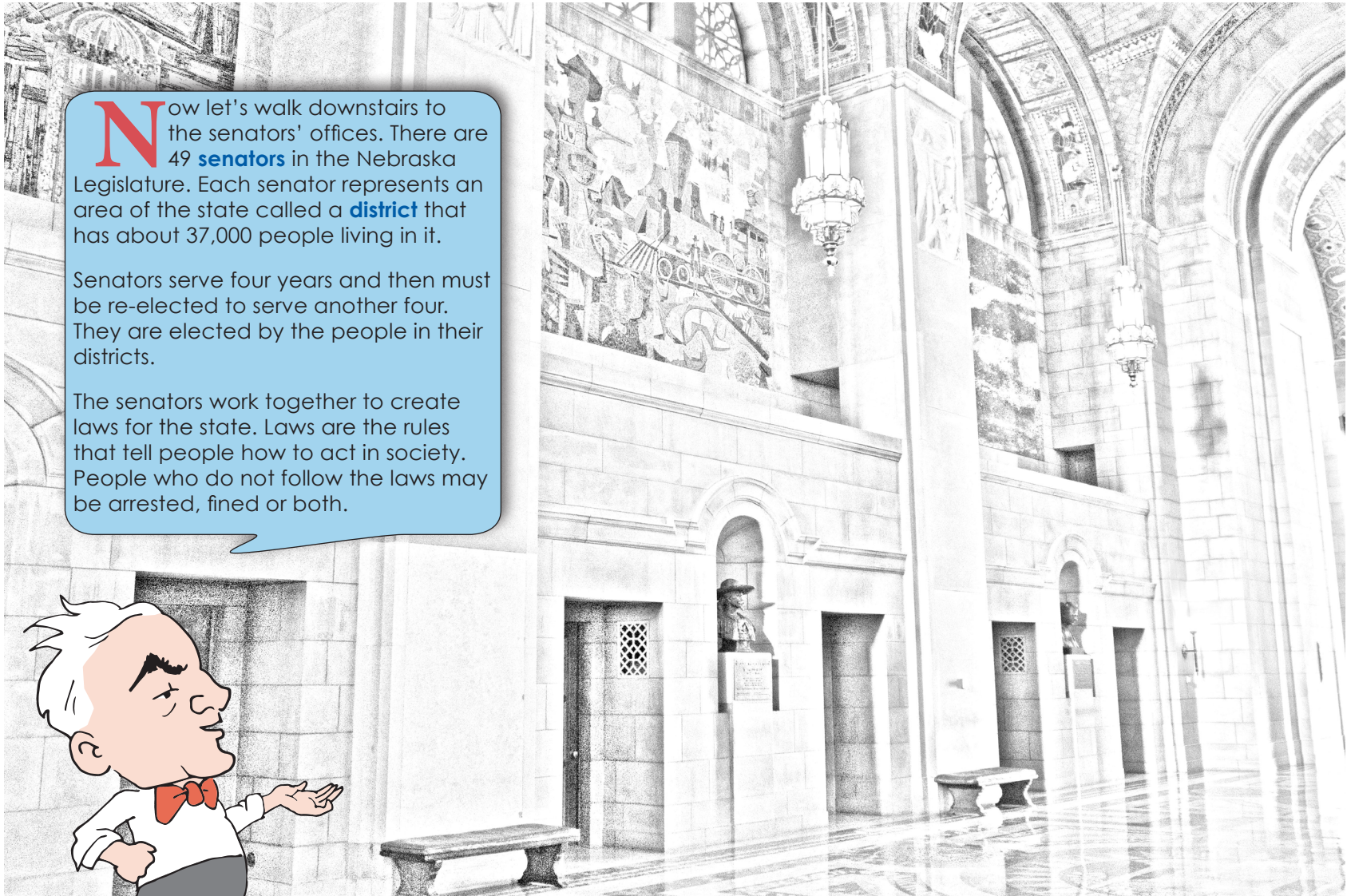


## UNICAM KIDS

**N**ow let's walk downstairs to the senators' offices. There are 49 **senators** in the Nebraska Legislature. Each senator represents an area of the state called a **district** that has about 37,000 people living in it.

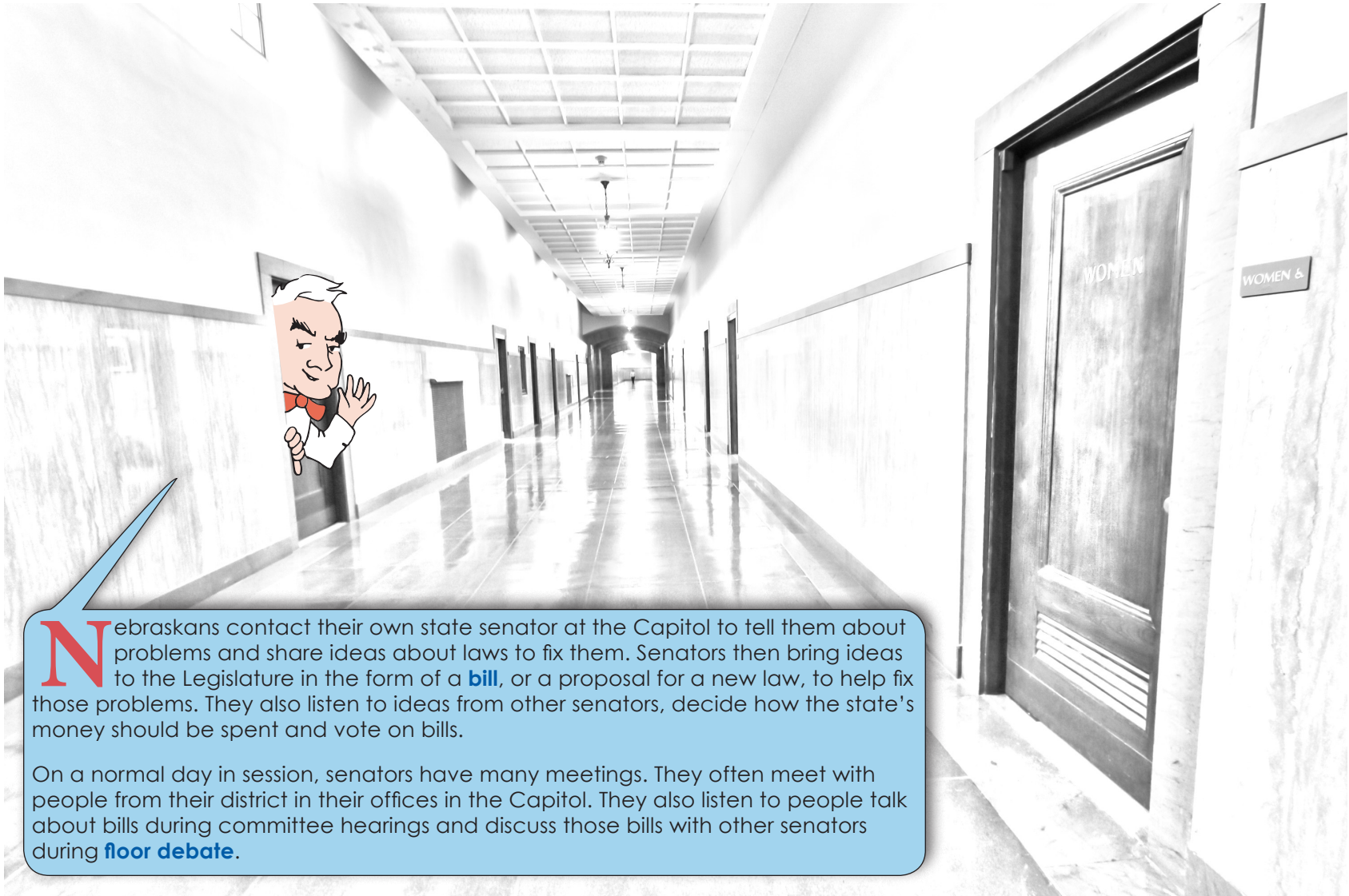
Senators serve four years and then must be re-elected to serve another four. They are elected by the people in their districts.

The senators work together to create laws for the state. Laws are the rules that tell people how to act in society. People who do not follow the laws may be arrested, fined or both.



*This is the Great Hall that leads to the legislative chamber. The six murals on the wall, along with the other artworks in the Capitol's interior, represent the relationship between Nebraska's people and their environment. "The Blizzard of 1888," a mural by Jeanne Reynal, shows a Nebraska teacher leading her students to safety during the worst snowstorm in the state's history. Artist Hildreth Meiere designed the marble murals on the floor.*

## A VISIT TO YOUR NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE



**N**ebraskans contact their own state senator at the Capitol to tell them about problems and share ideas about laws to fix them. Senators then bring ideas to the Legislature in the form of a **bill**, or a proposal for a new law, to help fix those problems. They also listen to ideas from other senators, decide how the state's money should be spent and vote on bills.

On a normal day in session, senators have many meetings. They often meet with people from their district in their offices in the Capitol. They also listen to people talk about bills during committee hearings and discuss those bills with other senators during **floor debate**.

*The Nebraska Legislature meets for four or five months at the beginning of every year. Having a part-time legislature allows senators to live most of the year in their districts, talking with the people who live there. Most of the senators have other jobs outside the Capitol, such as farming, running a business, teaching, banking or practicing law.*



## UNICAM KIDS

**E**very bill introduced has a **public hearing** in a committee. A **committee** is a small group of senators. Public hearings give people the chance to tell senators what they think about the bill. This helps senators decide whether the bill should be passed and how it should be written.

If the committee thinks the bill is good, it votes to send it to the floor for a full debate among all the senators. What's the floor? Come on, I'll show you.



*The senators sit at the front of the room listening to the person speaking into the microphone. The people watching the hearing are waiting for their turn to speak in support of, or against, the bill. Notice the media is there to report on the hearing. Many students have spoken at committee hearings about issues affecting schools, safety and the environment.*

## LAWS MADE BY KIDS

Students all across the country have brought ideas for bills to their state legislature to address a problem they see in their community. Here are some inspiring examples of bills that were suggested by students and made into law.

**B**ullying is a big problem for many kids. A group of students at Mansfeld Middle School in Tucson, Arizona decided to speak up for victims of bullying. They wrote a bill that would require every school district to have anti-bullying rules. Their state representative introduced the bill for them and it became a law.



**D**rug-free zones around schools and parks help keep kids safe by increasing punishments for drug use near places where children gather. In Nebraska, however, parks without playground equipment were not made drug-free zones. Students at Omaha's Alice Buffett Magnet Middle School wanted to protect these areas, too. They talked to their state senator and he introduced a bill for them, which was passed into law.



**T**he cost to provide electricity to Twinfield Union School in Vermont was very high and the school needed to save money. A group of eighth-graders learned about a renewable source of energy that uses water, called hydropower. The students testified at a state senate hearing to support a bill that would make it easier to use this cheaper form of energy at their school. Lawmakers changed the process to allow smaller projects like this to be more easily approved.



**A**ir drying laundry on a clothesline saves electricity and also is good for the environment. The state of Colorado did not allow people to have clotheslines until students at Basalt High School took action. They supported a bill in the Colorado Legislature and also convinced their town council to support the bill.





## UNICAM KIDS



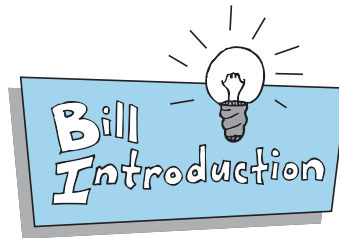
**W**hen a committee votes to send a bill to the floor, it comes here next. This is the west chamber, also called the George W. Norris Legislative Chamber — after yours truly.

All the senators meet here to discuss ways to improve bills before voting on them. During three rounds of debate, senators often must **compromise** to come to an agreement. Then the bill goes to the governor for approval.

*The gold leaf scenes painted on the wooden ceiling beams show the European cultures that settled in Nebraska. The public can come anytime and watch their senators from the balconies above the floor. Under the balconies, you will see senators' staff and members of the media who report the Legislature's actions to the public.*

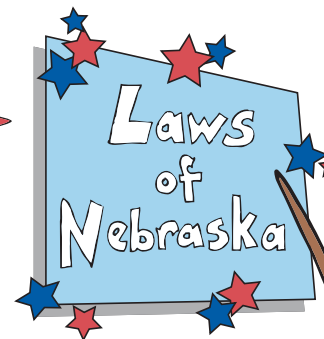
## REVIEW: HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

**1** When the Legislature is not meeting, senators research ideas that have been brought to them. They work with staff to write a bill that will solve the problem.

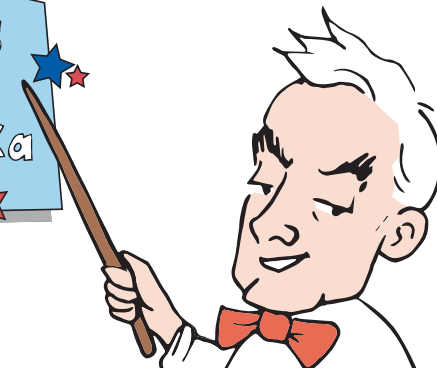


**3** There are three rounds of debate on each bill. It takes at least 25 senators' votes — just over half of the 49 senators — to change a bill or move it to the next round. If a bill gets at least 25 votes on the last round, it is passed.

**2** After a bill is introduced, it is given a public hearing. If the committee thinks the bill is a good idea, it sends it to the floor for debate. If there is not support for the bill, it stays in committee or is killed.



**4** After a bill is passed, it goes to the governor for approval. He or she can sign the bill or **veto** it. If a bill is vetoed, senators can still try to make it law, but it takes 30 votes to do it.



## UNICAM KIDS

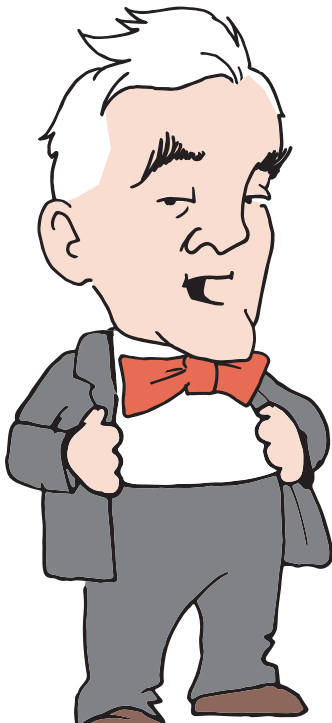
**S**ee how simple that was? If we had a bicameral system, the process would be twice as long! There is so much to learn about our Legislature and our Capitol that I couldn't possibly cover it all in one tour.

You can learn more about our unique unicameral at [NebraskaLegislature.gov](http://NebraskaLegislature.gov). Visit [capitol.nebraska.gov](http://capitol.nebraska.gov) to learn more about our beautiful Capitol. Read more about my public service at [NebraskaHistory.org/sites/norris](http://NebraskaHistory.org/sites/norris).

Or, when you are in downtown Lincoln, stop by to see for yourself where our unicameral meets.

Tell them George Norris sent you! Until then, let's review some vocabulary that will come in handy.

## Glossary



**unicameral:** a legislature in which one group of people makes laws

**bicameral:** a legislature in which two groups of people make laws

**state senator:** a person elected to serve in a legislature

**district:** an area of the state represented by a state senator

**bill:** a proposal for a new law

**legislature:** a group of people who make or change laws

**committee:** a group of people chosen to study and make decisions on a certain subject

**public hearing:** a meeting in which all people have the chance to give their opinion on a bill

**floor debate:** senators' discussion in which they share opinions and ask questions

**compromise:** a way of reaching an agreement in which each side gives up something it wants

**veto:** the right of the governor to decide that a bill will not become a law

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