**For Release Wednesday, February 9, 2022**

**Capitol View
Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**Senator Slama Slams Nonpartisan Status of Legislature as Idolatrous**

A state Senator who won a nasty election battle with a member of the same party is calling for an end to the official nonpartisan status of the Nebraska Legislature.

Sen. Julie Slama of Sterling insulted the founder of the nonpartisan Unicameral George W. Norris and most Nebraskans when she introduced her proposed constitutional amendment ([LR282CA](https://nebraskalegislature.gov/bills/view_bill.php?DocumentID=46718)) to eliminate the requirement to nominate and elect members of the Legislature in a nonpartisan manner.

“It's high time we end the idolatrous practice of celebrating Nebraska's nonpartisan unicameral simply because it's unique," she said.

Let me tell you what’s idolatrous Senator. It’s the attitude that Republicans like you have that you’re the only ones who can make policy that impacts the lives of all Nebraskans, Democrats and Independents and Libertarians and whatever other party affiliations make this state unique.

"This form of government has failed to address structural issues in our state — from property taxes and school funding to Second Amendment rights — on the altar of being 'special,'" she said in a written statement accompanying her introduction.

"This measure brings a renewed transparency to the Nebraska Legislature," she said.

What transparency? Anyone who has been paying attention knows that there are 32 Republicans and 17 Democrats in the officially nonpartisan body. Once there was a Libertarian. Once there were a couple people who were officially registered as nonpartisan. Independent, we liked to call them.

Some of those Republicans can be counted on to break ranks with the party stance, which is apparently orchestrated, by the Governor and his minions, many of whom signed on to Slama’s proposal.

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Slama is a registered Republican who was appointed to the Legislature by Governor Pete Ricketts in 2019 at the age of 22. She was elected to a four-year term in 2020 after a particularly nasty election battle with fellow Republican Janet Palmtag who had the endorsement of former Governor Dave Heineman and several other notable Republicans.

Secretary of State records indicate at the end of 2021 there were: 594,126 Republicans; 355,306 Democrats; 270,786 Nonpartisans; 18,253 Libertarians; and 1,303 members of the Legal Marijuana Now Party registered to vote in Nebraska. Do the math, yes, there are more Republicans than any other group of registered voters.

So, roll with that Senator Slama and idolize that number and leave the nonpartisan status of the Nebraska Legislature alone.

"There is no evidence to support claims that Nebraska's nonpartisan Legislature offers any benefit to Nebraskans in policy outcomes," Slama said. "No other states in America have adopted and maintained a similar form of government," she said.

Granted, there is often division over issues that separate most of the Republicans from most of the Democrats, but they do not regularly vote in a bloc or answer to party leadership within the body. The late Governor Charlie Thone had a number of Republican Senators the media referred to as “Thone Clones.” Heineman clearly had a coalition supporting him, as well. Ricketts has maybe 10-12 who can be counted on to vote his way.

Writing in the HUFFPOST several years ago, political observer David Moshman noted that Nebraska law is better than it would otherwise be because it is generated through a process designed to promote deliberation. There is, in fact, substantial evidence in cognitive and social psychology that democratic deliberation increases the likelihood of rational outcomes. In a time when party politics overwhelms genuine argumentation across the nation, Nebraska’s unicameral legislature may be worthy of emulation.

Norris represented Nebraska in the U.S. Congress from 1903 to 1943, first as a Republican member of the House of Representatives, then as a Republican senator, and finally

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as an Independent senator. Nebraskans voted in 1934 to replace their traditional bicameral legislature with a unicameral legislature, which began operation in 1937.

Every act of the legislature and every act of each individual must be transacted in the spotlight of publicity, Norris said. In a one-house legislature, no actions could be concealed as was commonly done in the conference committee of bicameral legislatures. Conference committees resolve differences when bills passed in both houses vary in content. In Nebraska, the appointed six-member committee met in secret and members' votes were not public record. Norris said these committees had too much power and could be influenced easily by lobbyists.

By the way, Moshman said, a unicameral legislature is also less expensive to run than a bicameral legislature. You can be sure that was a factor in the thinking of fiscally conservative Nebraskans when they downsized the legislature. But finances aside, deliberative democracy is a good idea, and we desperately need more of it today. A nonpartisan unicameral legislature is one way to foster that.

Let’s review. Leave it alone.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years.*