

One-party control doesn't always eliminate political turmoil

Sometimes, even being among friends—or at least political allies—is not enough. Consider the legislative leaders in the 33 states where one party controls both chambers of the legislature and the governor's office. You might assume things would run smoothly, with everyone pulling in the same direction. That's true in some states, not so much in others.

What appears to make the difference is experience—political experience. In 20 of the 33 states, the governor is a first-term chief executive. Of those, only 10 had state legislative experience before becoming governor. Of those, only six had been committee chairs or on the leadership ladder. Of the other 10 first-termers, two had been in Congress, two had been elected to statewide office, and three had been mayors. Three of the 10 had never before run for office.

Most of the 33 states with undivided control have a significant majority. Only in Arkansas are both the Senate and the House closely divided.

Each of these variables—tenure of the governor, the governor's experience in elected office, and how closely the chambers are divided—affects the nature of the challenges faced by legislative leaders.

Several leaders in those positions have shared with me—anonously, of course—some of the unanticipated bumps in the road they have faced. Here are some of them.

- ◆ Newly elected governors, and particularly those from outside the political process—think Florida's Rick Scott—tend to come into office thinking they have a “mandate.” They often expect fellow party members in the legislature to fall into line behind whatever they propose.
- ◆ Members of the majority caucus often expect special treatment from the governor's office and the executive branch. They assume their legislative leaders have such open access and solid relationships with the governor and staff that they will willingly



and successfully put their issues on the front burner.

- ◆ Governors and their staff expect legislative leaders to crack the whip if there is resistance in the caucus and deliver majorities for whatever legislation the governor considers a priority.
- ◆ In those states where there are huge legislative majorities—Florida, Georgia and Kansas, for example—divisions in the caucuses tend to emerge more visibly and publicly because individual members know their vote is not necessary to secure passage of any particular bill.
- ◆ In states where the legislative majorities are razor-thin—the Senate in Washington and Wisconsin and the House in Maine and Mississippi—there is tremendous pressure on leaders to use whatever resources are available to keep members in line on bills that are high gubernatorial priorities.

Disappointing Artfully

What does this all mean for a legislative leader? Plenty of opportunity to test my favorite definition of leadership: Disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb.

Every politician knows it is easy, maybe even fun, to disturb the folks on the other side of the aisle. Upsetting your own caucus is a different story. Doing so requires courage and skill. That's why it is called leadership.

In two significant respects, legislative leaders must sometimes deliver hard news to two key constituencies: their caucus and the governor. These tasks are complicated when the leader was elected after a hard-fought process, and his hold on the job could be tenuous.

Unlike members of Congress, the political fortunes of most state legislators are not intimately tied to the approval ratings of the governor of their party. Nevertheless, the speaker, Senate president, and the majority leader have some responsibility to shepherd the legislative agenda of their governor through their chamber. They want to avoid the public embarrassment that comes when governors fail to move legislation through chambers controlled by their own party. That means legislative leaders must promote gubernatorial loyalty as yet one more factor that members, already being pushed and pulled in different directions, must consider when deciding how to vote on an issue.

Marty Linsky's column on leadership runs occasionally in State Legislatures. Linsky, who has been teaching leadership and politics for more than 25 years on the faculty of the Harvard Kennedy School, is a former journalist and one-time assistant minority leader of the Massachusetts House. He is cofounder of Cambridge Leadership Associates (www.cambridge-leadership.com), a global consulting practice. Contact him at marty@cambridge-leadership.com.

Frank Talk

Legislative leaders face the toughest challenge, however, when dealing with a first-term governor with no legislative experience.

Have you ever tried to explain a hard truth to a newly elected governor still pumped up about how brilliant he or she was in the campaign and how “the people” want him or her to lead big change at the capitol? I have. It’s no picnic.

Of all the hard truths legislative leaders must give a new governor, the toughest is to respect the role of the legislature as separate branch of government.

It boils down to providing some basic civics instruction to the newly elected executive who probably ran against the legislature’s inefficiencies and who sees the House and Senate as annoying, barely tolerable, barriers to progress. Helping a new governor understand the legislature’s distinct role, and the many loyalties a legislator must consider when deciding how to vote, is a message not often well-received. It is a prescription for intra-party conflict, strife a legislative leader must sometimes make public. It is no coincidence that, of the six first-term governors without any legislative service, four currently suffer from very negative approval ratings, and one is under recall.

Leaders blame the pressure to support a governor’s aggressive legislative agenda for placing the most stress on them and their members. In several states—Wisconsin comes to mind—where the governor is very unpopular with the public, legislators’ loyalty is constantly being tested. They must evaluate whether they can support the governor’s agenda, still do what is best for their districts, and be consistent with their own values and priorities and electoral prospects.

Most legislative leaders already think of themselves as having one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat. The job involves constant balancing of differing ideologies and political considerations within their caucus. With the mixed blessing of a newly elected governor of their own party who is pursuing a big-time change agenda, the balancing act becomes more complicated and the leadership challenge more dangerous. None of those leaders come with a third foot.

