

BOOK REVIEW

Rules for State Legislators: Jerry Kopel's Guide

By Jerry Kopel and David Kopel
Kindle edition, \$14.95



The late Gerald H. “Jerry” Kopel was elected to the Colorado House of Representatives in 1964, after careers in law and journalism. During his 22 years at the Capitol, he proved himself to be a master of legislative rules and procedures, an advocate for civil rights and a partisan statesman unafraid to reach across the aisle.

“Jerry Kopel was a legislator’s legislator,” former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb said at a House memorial after Kopel’s death in 2012.

Kopel, a Democrat, served as assistant minority leader, as chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and, after he retired in 1992, as a volunteer analyzing pending legislation. For many years, he wrote a column for the weekly Colorado Statesman.

In the new book “Rules for State Legislators,” Kopel’s son David, a lawyer and research director at the Independence Institute, lays out his father’s advice on what to do after getting elected—“Tips for Winners”—where to sit in the chamber and how to pass bills when you’re in the minority party. The “rules” are derived from the elder Kopel’s Statesman columns, and the book preserves his plain-spoken, sometimes colorful newspaperman’s tone. His counsel comes across best when you read it for yourself, in his own words.

Do your homework. When it comes to voting, there are legislators, especially new ones, who will follow the lead of legislators who have been in office for a few years. That is really dumb, especially when you later discover that legislator watching someone else’s vote before deciding.

Sponsor bills that have no fiscal impact. If you feel it’s important to get bills passed that carry your name as chief sponsor, then introduce bills that have no fiscal impact. Bills with no fiscal impact can give members of the minority party a better chance of success.

Don’t commit early and don’t commit often. You will be confronted by hundreds of bills. If you commit early to support a bill, chances are you will have to go to a particular lobbyist or legislator and confess to having changed your position.

Learn the rules. There is more to the House and Senate rule books than the daily routine. You will be amazed to discover how many motions you never knew existed and that are seldom used. I have killed bills by using up all possible motions, having all the motions defeated and leaving one bill, as the Rocky Mountain News reported, “like a dead horse in a bathtub.”

“Rules for State Legislators” is peppered with anecdotes from Colorado’s legislative history, but there’s plenty here for legislators from any state to appreciate. Kopel endears himself a bit like a good-natured older brother—someone genuinely interested in seeing you succeed, but not so serious that he wouldn’t enjoy a practical joke played at your expense.

—Reviewed by Kevin Frazzini



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