

## Moving from Campaigning to Legislating

- Moderator:
- Nancy Cyr, Director, Legislative Research Office, Nebraska, and Staff Vice Chair, NCSL Standing Committees
  
- Speakers:
- Representative P. Eric Turner, Indiana
- Speaker Terie Norelli, New Hampshire, and President, NCSL
- Kyle Bozentko, Director, The Jefferson Center, Minnesota

Terie Norelli, president of NCSL and Speaker of the House in New Hampshire, led off. Over her years of service she's noticed that campaigns have gotten tougher, more personal and sometimes even ugly. And, "when I come into the legislature after a tough campaign, it's kind of hard to not hold a grudge." Yet, that's her goal.

She says that "if you or your constituents talk in partisan tones, it snowballs; as a legislator, and especially in leadership, she says "it is incumbent on us to change that dynamic" by speaking civilly at all times, remembering that everyone in the legislature is there to solve problems and building and developing relationships, the only route to success as a legislator.

As speaker, her message to everyone around her is that "we're going to work in a bipartisan manner." In a state that has shifted party control in 2006, 2010 and again in 2012, that's how it's got to be. Her specific efforts include:

- A weekly meeting with caucus leaders from both parties; sometimes they talk just about logistics, and sometimes policy comes up. As speaker, she decides in the end how things will proceed, but members of both parties appreciate being heard.
- Bringing subsets of her 400-member chamber in to meet. These, too, aren't likely to be policy-setting sessions. For instance, she's been meeting with her 160-member freshman class in groups of 15, and she plans to have a dinner with all female leaders.
- She undid a longstanding tradition of a "virtual aisle" with D's on one side and R's on the other, and instead mixed up seating. "I think the tone of the debate speaks volumes."
- She used NCSL for committee chair training, and asked that ranking members be included as well; feedback has been "extremely positive."
- During New Member Orientation she was conscious at all times to use bipartisan or non-partisan presentations, and she continues this with "continuing education" open to all legislators.

Representative Eric Turner, from Indiana, spoke next. Partisan control in Indiana, too, has shifted many times over the last twenty years. This means each race counts, leading to races that often are expensive and mean. "Tough campaigns make the transition to serving hard," he says. He reports that if

legislators focus only on the positions their caucuses support, that's ok, but there is much more that can be done, and that he has done.

- “You can always find something to agree on,” he says. In a couple of cases he went to sponsors of bills from the opposite party and offered to co-sponsor bills that appealed to him—even if 80 percent of issues would have him on the opposite side from the other sponsor. He’s even offered to be the lead sponsor, because sometimes a bill has better success when it comes from one caucus or the other. If a bill has support from both sides, it is harder for the issue to become a polarizing one, too.
- Like Norelli, Turner sees relationships as vital: “It’s okay to speak from the floor and disagree, and then have dinner together that night.”
- Holding events that draw members from both parties helps get socializing going.
- Indiana works hard during New Member Orientation to get the new members to know each other (and he thinks something similar for partisan staff might be useful, too).
- A basketball game that pits players from the House against players from the Senate—regardless of party—helps.

Kyle Bozentko, from The Jefferson Center in Minnesota, spoke about his organization’s efforts to involve citizens in policymaking. He has used “citizen juries” composed not of activists or advocates but of just plain people who are willing to come together and discuss policy. One key to making this work is to have a “common framework” so that conversations can’t be hijacked or sidetracked.

His organization has piloted a program where legislators can come and answer questions from citizens not in a “debate” but in a discussion forum. They found that after such a program in a highly partisan congressional campaign, the campaign literature from that point on was far less about the opponent’s perceived weaknesses and far more about policies and even background information. Kyle closed by saying “organizations such as ours are looking for ways to make contributions to elected officials” by promoting citizen communication and participation in a way that increases their trust in the system—and their ability to play a role. One way this can fail is if participants see themselves as “representing” their own issues; they must come as individuals, not as spokespeople for a cause.

Moderator Nancy Cyr asked how staff can help candidates transition from campaigning to serving as legislators, and offered the example from her state, Nebraska, of “issue symposiums.” These are retreats at state park cabins for all 49 legislators. These were done for some years, but had not been held for the last six years. In 2013, the concept was tried again, and she says “we can see the impact in the tone of debate.” This works because people get to know each other as individuals.

Additional thoughts came from the floor:

One legislator said that coming off a campaign, and being beaten up, “it’s like shell shock.” She added that legislators can be resistant to taking a chance on something new because their words can be held against them by their own party as well as the other, so it’s essential to create space for an “authentic” connection.

Speaker Norelli reminded participants that social media can make it harder for people to take an unexpected stand, and that it can be a problem in terms of the level of dialogue: “it’s incumbent upon us to not be sucked in and to not respond with venom and snarkiness when that’s being thrown at you.”

She added that “there is no such thing as a black and white issue.”

Senator Curt Bramble, of Utah, said that “statesmanship is lacking.” He pointed to domestic violence, term limits and immigration as three issues where taking the case to the public helped the process. “If we were driven by the partisan notion that the only thing that’s good for me is what’s bad for you,” these issues would have been sidelined.

Representative John Patton of Wyoming noted that “sometimes we get caught up in that it’s “me” that’s important. And yet not one of us is more important than the institution. If you want to be a statesman, then you stand up for the legislative institution.”

He sees a greater divide between rural and urban representatives than between D’s and R’s. Wyoming was able to diffuse both kinds of divisions when it came to redistricting last year by having members of the committee travel together all over the state, holding meetings to explain the legal requirements and get input. Because of that teamwork—and work with constituents—Wyoming’s redistricting avoided just about all partisan rancor.

Susan Byorth Fox, Executive Director, Legislative Services Division of Montana, says that her state’s “New Member Orientation” has been opened up to all legislators, not just newcomers. A highlight is a Montana-themed dinner, with seating assigned without regard to political parties. A “Montana trivia” game gets everyone on the same page—because everyone there loves Montana.

Representative Angel Matos, of Puerto Rico, said that “especially the first time, for the first six months you keep thinking you’re still on the campaign trail.”