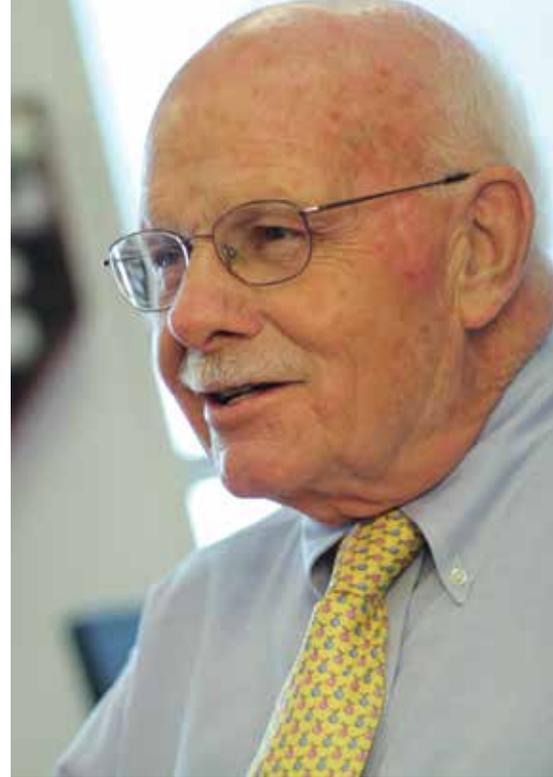


“Legislatures are the single most important public policy arena at a time when the federal government has been gridlocked.”



Bill Pound, executive director of NSCL, discusses the crucial role of state legislatures and NSCL’s mission to help them succeed.

State Legislatures: Voters in November elected some 6,000 state legislators. Why are state legislatures important?

Bill Pound: Because they exemplify representative democracy. They are the chief institution in our democratic system and they embody the voice of the people. Beyond that, legislatures are the single most important public policy arena at a time when the federal government has been gridlocked. The bulk of our major public policy issues comes out of the state legislatures and are resolved there.

SL: What does NSCL do for legislators and why should they care about it?

BP: We provide a wide range of services to the 50 state legislatures and legislative staff. We engage in information sharing on a major scale, so we’re able to prevent the reinvention of the wheel in the 50 states. We run one of the largest and, I think, most high quality websites. We also advocate for state legislatures in Washington, D.C., representing them in the committee process in Congress based on what they want. We work continually to improve the operations of state legislatures in the United States and have even consulted with governments in other parts of the world.

SL: Has NSCL’s original vision changed through the years?

BP: No, although I think it has probably expanded a bit. We started with the mission to improve state legislatures. We train legislative staff, and to some extent legislators, in how best to be effective in their jobs. We develop and embody the state voice in our federal system.

It’s changed somewhat in this era of social media, and with the much greater demands placed on state legislatures today than 38 years ago when NSCL was founded. We’ve had to remain nimble and responsive.

SL: Why is NSCL located in Denver?

BP: The decision was made when the organization was created that it wouldn’t be inside the beltway in Washington, D.C. Denver was chosen largely because it was a capital city that had a good transportation and communications infrastructure.

SL: With partisanship so strong, do you see any hope for the parties to come together and find solutions—at least at the state level—and can NSCL play a role in that?

BP: The parties come together more often at the state level than at the federal level. Every state enacts a budget every year—something we don’t always see at the federal level. The middle ground can be found much more in state legislatures than in our national politics, especially in recent years. What happens at the national level regarding partisanship is hard to determine, but I do believe state legislatures will still be able to govern and to develop good public policy. If you look at what’s happened in the last biennium, you can find example after example of that in states with divided government, where the houses are controlled by opposing parties or the legislature and the governor may be from different parties. You would see even in those instances that, by and large, there is very successful governing going on.

SL: NSCL advocates for states in Washington, D.C. How effective has the organization been?

BP: We’ve had a good a number of successes and some failures. We tend to oppose federal

preemption of state authority and we’ve had varied success in that over the years. We also oppose unfunded federal mandates; in particular, mandates that require the expenditure of money but are not accompanied by the needed resources.

SL: Is NSCL a politically partisan organization?

BP: NSCL is a bipartisan organization. Our members are the elected legislators and appointed staff. Legislators are elected for the most part as either Democrats or Republicans, so they are partisans. But the organization itself is bipartisan; our bylaws assure us that. The presidency rotates between the two parties yearly, and we have a balance between the parties on our governing board at all times. We strive very hard to be a bipartisan organization.

SL: Does NSCL write model legislation?

BP: Generally we do not. We take policy positions primarily on federal-state issues. We do occasionally develop model legislation. Probably the most dramatic example in recent years has been the Marketplace Fairness Act now being considered in Congress. It has two pieces: One is getting Congress to grant states the authority to collect taxes on Internet and electronic sales under the commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution. The second piece involves removing obstacles for the private sector by creating a collection mechanism that would be relatively uniform in the states that decide to join the model.

SL: What's the role of legislative staff in NCSL?

BP: NCSL is a unique organization in that staff play a major role in its governance. Our executive committee has a two-to-one legislator-to-staff ratio. We serve as the professional organization for legislative staff, who are organized by the functions they perform, like bill drafting, fiscal analysis, research, auditing and the like. We do a lot of training in those areas and by the same token, staff play a very important role in helping us develop our services and providing direction to us.

SL: What advice would you give new legislators?

BP: The first piece of advice is to learn the rules. That always serves well. I think a second, very valuable piece of advice is to keep your word. Beyond that, lawmakers should look at the resources available to them, and not just in their own states—resources like legislative staff, the executive branch, the lobby and organizations like NCSL. In particular, I believe we are the premier organization in providing information and assistance to legislators, and they will be better at their jobs by taking advantage of that.

SL: What's a recent book you have enjoyed?

BP: Actually, I've read a couple of books that sound like a busman's holiday here. The most recent one is *Minnesota Miracle*, which covers Minnesota in the 1970s when the Legislature enacted many pieces of legislation still effective today that have shaped the state. It takes place in the context of the relationship between the national and state governments, and I think there are a good number of lessons that may be drawn from it.

SL: When did you develop your interest in state-level politics?

BP: I've always been interested in politics. I majored in political science. I taught it at one time, and I've always been particularly interested in the legislative branch.

SL: What's the big glass case filled with baseballs on the wall of your office all about?

BP: Each year NCSL hosts a legislative summit, the largest gathering of legislators and staff in the country. Several years ago members of the staff—unbeknownst to me—got in the habit of having every prominent speaker sign a baseball. There are all sorts of people, ranging from Newt Gingrich and Nancy Pelosi to Doris Kearns Goodwin and Bill Gates.