



UNICAM KIDS!



A VISIT TO YOUR NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE

GUIDED BY GEORGE W. NORRIS,
"THE FATHER OF THE UNICAMERAL"

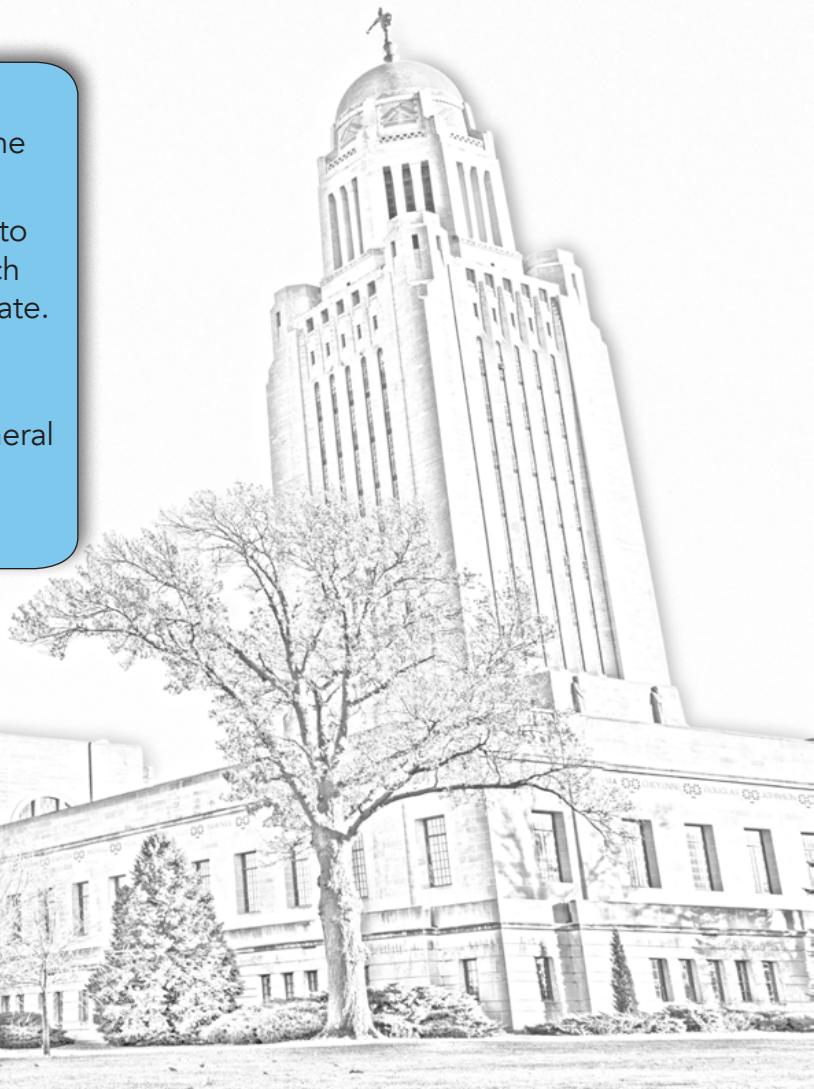
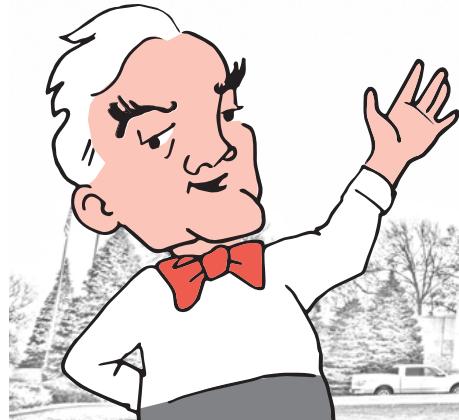
UNICAM KIDS

Hai! I'm George Norris. I represented Nebraska in Congress from 1913 to 1943. Many people call me the father of Nebraska's Unicameral [Legislature](#).

A [unicameral](#) is a legislature with just one group of people to make laws. Nebraska has the nation's only unicameral, which meets here at the Capitol in Lincoln to make laws for the state.

I believed this one-house system would serve Nebraskans better than a [bicameral](#), or two-house system, found in every other state. Nebraskans voted to change to a unicameral in 1934, and the first unicameral met in 1937.

Let's go inside. I'll show you around!



Nebraska is unique for its unicameral and also its unusual Capitol building. Architect Bertram Goodhue wanted the Capitol's design to reflect the spirit of Nebraska's people. The words and pictures on the outside of the building show Nebraska's place in the history of law and democracy. The Capitol took 10 years to build and was finished in 1932. The tower rises almost 400 feet and is topped by a 19-foot bronze statue of a man tossing seeds, called "The Sower."

A VISIT TO YOUR NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE

My experience as a lawmaker made me wish for a smoother process to make laws. I encouraged Nebraskans to vote for a new, smaller legislature so the process would be simpler and allow for more public input.

Some Nebraskans worried about becoming the only unicameral. They thought having fewer steps to pass a law might not allow for enough discussion about it.

But supporters said three rounds of debate on a bill would be plenty. In the end, there was enough support to adopt the new unicameral!



The Unicameral Legislature meets in the room through these doors. The room, or chamber, contains the same wooden desks and leather chairs that were installed when the Capitol was constructed. The voting board at the front of the chamber lists all the senators' names alphabetically and displays their votes—a green light for “yes” and red for “no.”

There are 49 state senators in the Nebraska Legislature. Each one represents an area of the state called a **district** that has about 40,000 people living in it.

Senators are elected by the people in their districts. They serve four years and then must be re-elected to serve another four.

The senators work together to create laws for the state. Laws are rules that tell people how to act in society. People who do not follow the laws may be arrested, fined or both.

Now let's walk downstairs to the senators' offices.



This is the Great Hall, which leads to the legislative chamber. The six murals on the wall, along with the other artworks in the Capitol's interior, represent the relationship between Nebraska's people and their environment. "The Blizzard of 1888," a mural by Jeanne Reynal, shows a Nebraska teacher leading her students to safety during the worst snowstorm in the state's history. Artist Hildreth Meière designed the marble murals on the floor and ceiling.

A VISIT TO YOUR NEBRASKA LEGISLATURE

Nebraskans can contact their state senator at the Capitol to tell them about problems and share ideas about laws to fix them. Senators then bring ideas to the Legislature in the form of a **bill**, or an idea for a new law, to help fix those problems. They also listen to ideas from other senators, decide how the state's money should be spent and vote on bills.

On a normal legislative day, senators have many meetings. They often meet in their Capitol offices with people from their district. They also listen to people talk about bills during committee hearings and discuss those bills with other senators during **debate** in the legislative chamber.



The Nebraska Legislature meets for four or five months at the beginning of every year. Having a part-time legislature allows senators to live most of the year in their districts, talking with the people who live there. Most of the senators have other jobs outside the Capitol. Some are farmers, business owners, teachers, bankers or lawyers.

Every bill introduced has a **public hearing** before a committee. A **committee** is a small group of senators who focus on certain topics. Public hearings give people the chance to tell senators what they think about the bill. This helps senators decide how the bill should be written and whether it should be debated by all the senators.

If the committee thinks the bill is good, it votes to send it to the first round of debate.



The senators sit at the front of the hearing room listening to the person speaking into the microphone. The people watching the hearing are waiting for their turn to speak in support of, or against, the bill. Notice that the media is there to report on the hearing. Many students have spoken at committee hearings about issues affecting schools, health, safety and the environment.

LAWS MADE BY KIDS

Students all across the country have brought ideas for bills to their state legislature to address a problem they see in their community. Here are some inspiring examples of bills that were suggested by students and made into law.

Bullying is a big problem for many kids. A group of students at Mansfeld Middle School in Tucson, Arizona, decided to speak up for victims of bullying. They wrote a bill that would require every school district to have anti-bullying rules. Their state representative introduced the bill for them, and it became a law.



The cost to provide electricity to Twinfield Union School in Vermont was very high, and the school needed to save money. A group of eighth-graders learned about a renewable source of energy that uses water, called hydropower. The students testified at a state senate hearing to support a bill that would make it easier to use this cheaper form of energy at their school. Lawmakers changed the process to allow smaller hydro-power projects like this to be more easily approved.

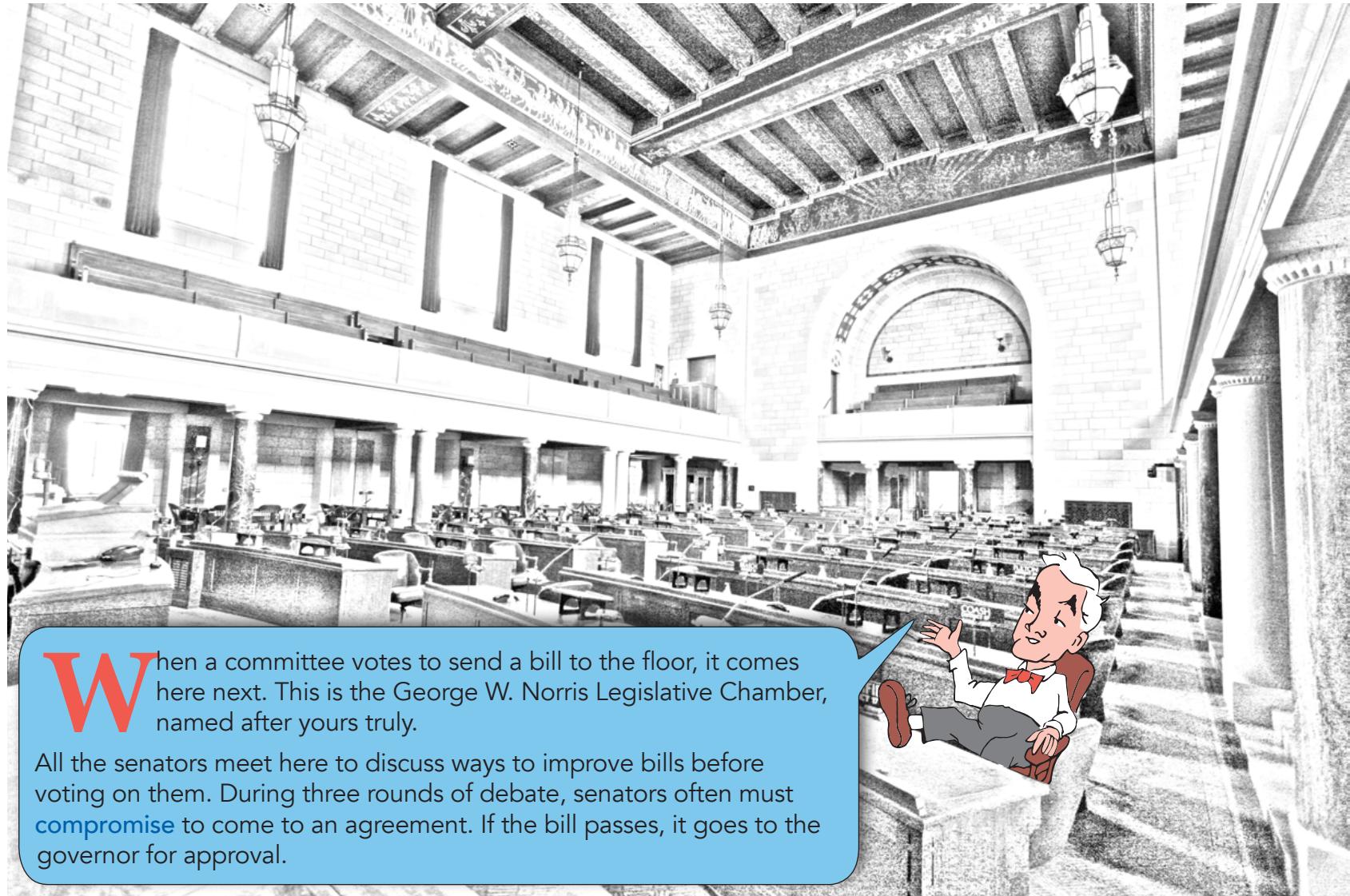


Drug-free zones around schools and parks help keep kids safe by increasing punishments for drug use near places where children gather. In Nebraska, however, parks without playground equipment were not made drug-free zones. Students at Omaha's Alice Buffett Magnet Middle School wanted to protect these areas, too. They talked to their state senator, and he introduced a bill for them, which was passed into law.



Air-drying laundry on a clothesline saves electricity and is good for the environment. But neighborhoods in some Colorado cities outlawed clotheslines because some people do not like how they look. When a bill was introduced in their state legislature, students at Basalt High School took action. They told their town council about the benefits of air-drying laundry. As a result, the town council passed a resolution asking their legislature to pass the bill. That bill passed and was signed into law.





When a committee votes to send a bill to the floor, it comes here next. This is the George W. Norris Legislative Chamber, named after yours truly.

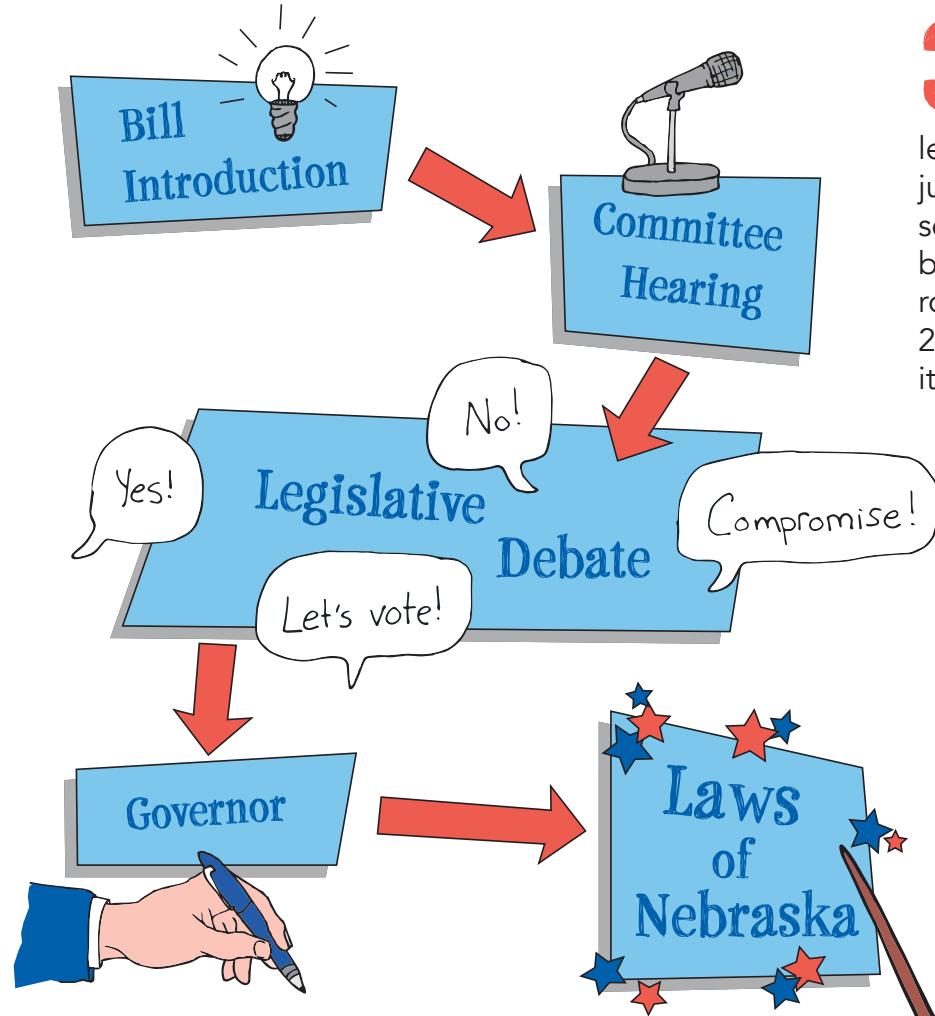
All the senators meet here to discuss ways to improve bills before voting on them. During three rounds of debate, senators often must **compromise** to come to an agreement. If the bill passes, it goes to the governor for approval.

The gold leaf scenes painted on the wooden ceiling beams show the European cultures that settled in Nebraska. The public can come anytime to watch their senators from the balconies. Under the balconies, you will see senators' staff and members of the media who report the Legislature's actions to the public.

REVIEW: HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

1 When the Legislature is not meeting, senators research ideas for new laws. They work with staff to write a bill that will solve the problem.

2 After a bill is introduced, it is given a public hearing. If the committee thinks the bill is a good idea, it sends it to the floor for debate. If there is not enough support for the bill, it stays in committee or is killed.



3 There are three rounds of debate on each bill. It takes at least 25 senators' votes—just over half of the 49 senators—to change a bill or move it to the next round. If a bill gets at least 25 votes on the last round, it is passed.

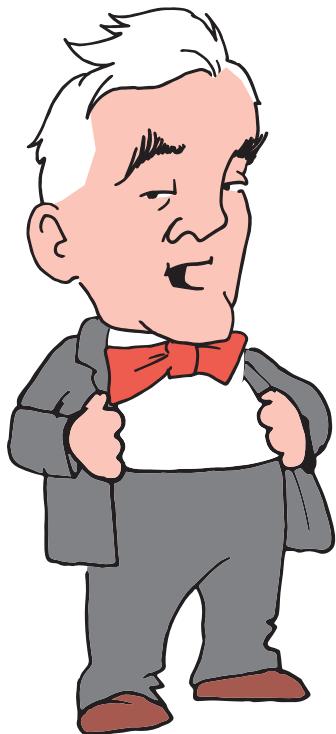
4 After a bill is passed, it goes to the governor for approval. He or she can sign the bill or **veto** it. If a bill is vetoed, senators can still try to make it law, but it takes 30 votes to do it.



See how simple that was? If we had a bicameral system, the process would be twice as long! You can learn more about our unique unicameral at NebraskaLegislature.gov and visit capitol.nebraska.gov to learn more about our beautiful Capitol. Read more about my public service at History.Nebraska.gov.

Or, when you are in downtown Lincoln, stop by to see for yourself where our unicameral meets. Tell them George Norris sent you! Until then, let's review some vocabulary that will come in handy.

Glossary



legislature: a group of people who make or change laws

unicameral: a legislature in which one group of people makes laws

bicameral: a legislature in which two groups of people make laws

state senator: a person elected to serve in a legislature

district: an area of the state represented by a state senator

bill: a proposal for a new law

debate: senators' discussion about a bill in the legislative chamber

public hearing: a meeting in which all people have the chance to give their opinion on a bill

committee: a group of people chosen to study and make decisions on a certain subject

compromise: each side gives up something it wants in order to reach an agreement

veto: the right of the governor to decide that a bill should not become a law

WHO IS YOUR STATE SENATOR?

Find out which senator is yours by entering your address on NebraskaLegislature.gov. You'll find information about your senator and the issues that are important to him or her. Circle the senator's photo below so you remember who represents you!



Sen. Carolyn Bosn, Dist. 25



Sen. Eliot Bostar, Dist. 29



Sen. Tom Brandt, Dist. 32



Sen. John Cavanaugh, Dist. 9



Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh, Dist. 6



Sen. Bob Andersen, Dist. 49



Sen. John Arch, Dist. 14



Sen. Christy Armendariz, Dist. 18



Sen. Beau Ballard, Dist. 21



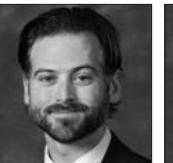
Sen. Barry DeKay, Dist. 40



Sen. Myron Dorn, Dist. 30



Sen. Robert Dover, Dist. 19



Sen. George Dungan, Dist. 26



Sen. John Fredrickson, Dist. 20



Sen. Robert Clements, Dist. 2



Sen. Stan Clouse, Dist. 37



Sen. Danielle Conrad, Dist. 46



Sen. Wendy DeBoer, Dist. 10



Sen. Rick Holdcroft, Dist. 36



Sen. Jana Hughes, Dist. 24



Sen. Megan Hunt, Dist. 8



Sen. Teresa Ibach, Dist. 44



Sen. Mike Jacobson, Dist. 42



Sen. Dunixi Guereca, Dist. 7



Sen. Bob Hallstrom, Dist. 1



Sen. Ben Hansen, Dist. 16



Sen. Brian Hardin, Dist. 48



Sen. Terrell McKinney, Dist. 11



Sen. Fred Meyer, Dist. 41



Sen. Glen Meyer, Dist. 17



Sen. Mike Moser, Dist. 22



Sen. Dave Murman, Dist. 38



Sen. Jason Prokop, Dist. 27



Sen. Dan Quick, Dist. 35



Sen. Jane Raybould, Dist. 28



Sen. Merv Riepe, Dist. 12



Sen. Victor Rountree, Dist. 3



Sen. Rita Sanders, Dist. 45



Sen. Tony Sorrentino, Dist. 39



Sen. Ashlei Spivey, Dist. 13



Sen. Tanya Storer, Dist. 43



Sen. Jared Storm, Dist. 23



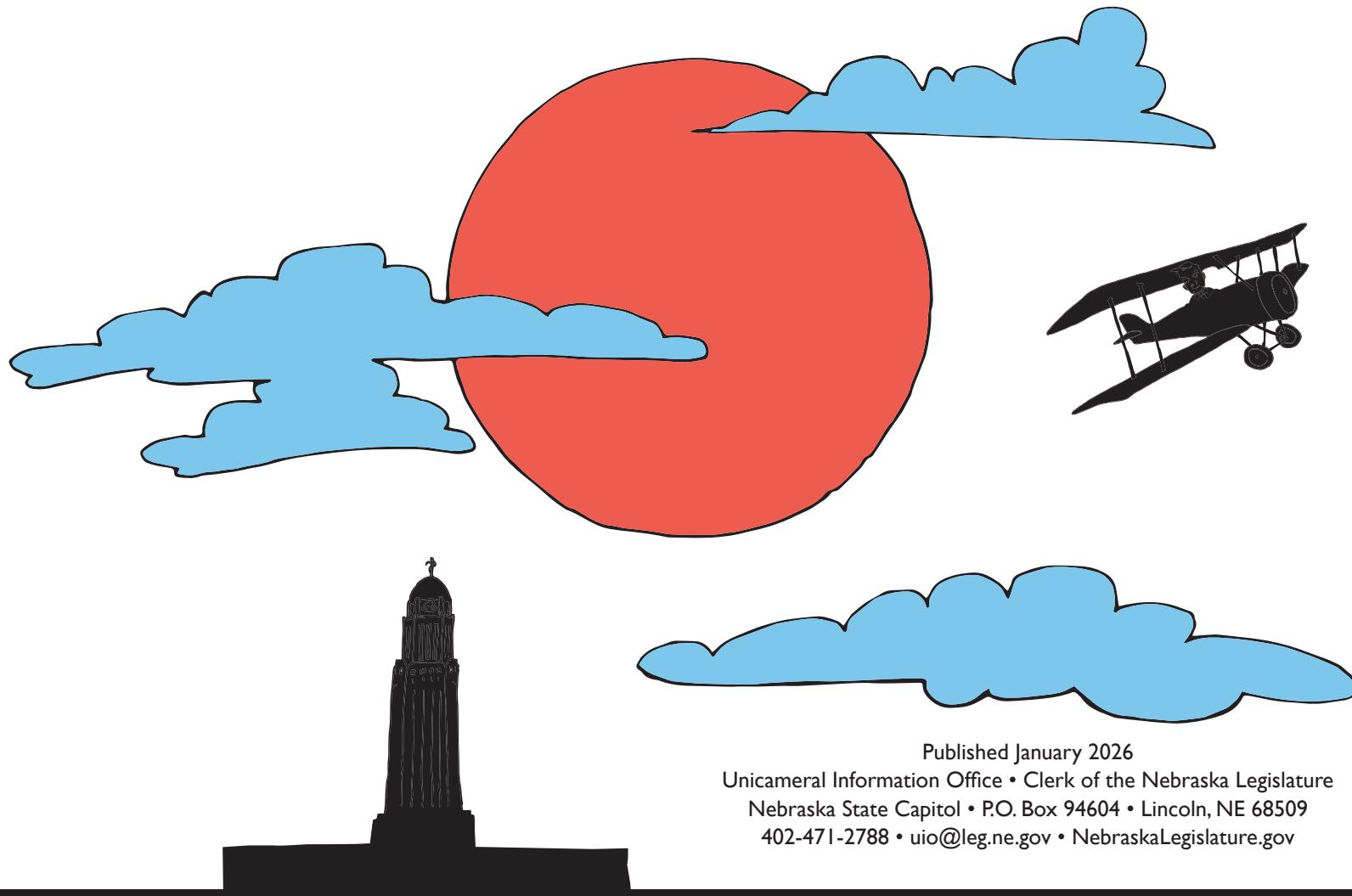
Sen. Paul Strommen, Dist. 47



Sen. R. Brad von Gillern, Dist. 4



Sen. Dave Wordekemper, Dist. 15



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