

The Nelson Years

Nelson prepares to leave office after two terms of service to state



Mike Warren/DN

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At a gathering of Democratic supporters in Omaha, the glum reality had set in: Ben Nelson, the popular governor of Nebraska, had suffered a crushing defeat in the U.S. Senate race at the hands of Republican Chuck Hagel.

Around 10 p.m., a dejected but still smiling Nelson took the podium to concede defeat. The lieutenant governor, Kim Robak, stepped to the microphone to introduce him.

"Ben, the people of Nebraska have spoken," she said. "And it's obvious that they really, really want you to remain their governor."

Robak's comment, although a positive spin on a disappointing loss, nevertheless rang true for Nelson.

Growing up in McCook, home of famous U.S. Sen. George Norris, Nelson's aspiration was to become governor. In 1990, his dream came true, by the slimmest of margins.

He won the Democratic primary by just 42 votes, then won a narrow victory over incumbent Kay Orr in the general election. Four years later, he was re-elected in a landslide.

Nelson is the first two-term governor of Nebraska since James Exon held office from 1971 to 1979. As his eight years in office draw to a close, fellow politicians said Nelson will be remembered for his connection with Nebraskans:

"Ben Nelson established a personal relationship with this state in which his open-heartedness and good intentions were obvious to its citizens," said Lincoln state Sen. Dave Landis. "People like Ben Nelson."

Even political opponents such as State GOP Chairman Chuck Sigerson grudgingly acknowledge Nelson's rapport with Nebraskans.

"Ben Nelson was a person people seemed to like, to a certain extent," he said.

"He is a likable person, and he seemed to enjoy good support among the electorate of Nebraska."

"Ben Nelson established a personal relationship with this state in which his open-heartedness and good intentions were obvious to its citizens."

DAVE LANDIS
Nebraska state senator

"I know that you can cut spending but you don't have to cut hope, that you can balance interests if you're willing to make the difficult decisions."

BEN NELSON
governor of Nebraska

Plays well with others

Since he took office in 1991, Nelson has enjoyed popularity, both with the voters of the state and the body created to check his power, the Legislature.

Nelson tapped that popularity and translated it into an effective form of leadership, fellow Nebraska politicians said.

Retiring Sen. Don Wesely of Lincoln said it was

Nelson's methodical persistence that earned his initiatives a strong approval rating in the Legislature.

"I think (Nelson) was fairly typical in that he was aggressive and had an agenda," Wesely said. "But Ben kind of paced himself — he wasn't a sprinter, he was a marathoner."

Doug Kristensen, speaker of the Legislature, said Nelson had worked diligently to broker budget agreements with the Legislature.

"Ninety-nine percent of the time, the Legislature and the governor agreed on budget priorities," he said. "That's in large part due to his good working relationship with the Legislature."

Pulling strings of spending

A political leader knows taxpayers pay attention to their pocketbooks when granting their approval, and for Nelson, taxes and spending issues have been a constant challenge.

With the introduction of Initiative 413 — a proposed constitutional amendment that would have limited the growth of state revenue and spending — some Nebraskans demonstrated their discontent with what they perceived to be unchecked taxation and growth in spending.

But Nelson often jokes that he is fiscally tighter than three coats of paint, and said those who complain about out-of-control state spending are basing their talk on something other than fact.

Nelson said he acted to cut the cost of running government by advocating efficiency and reorganizing state agencies such as the Health and Human Services System.

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Though the state budget grew by 12 percent last year — which included a large dose of aid to local municipalities and schools — Nelson said his eight-year average for growth in total state spending from the general fund was near 5

percent.

"Spending is the issue, and I think we've addressed it," Nelson said. "We've fought diligently to hang on to the controls on spending."

Harrison Sen. Bob Wickersham agreed.

"I think that (Nelson) probably will be remembered most for his fiscal constraint and prudent use of resources," he said.

A matter of gray matter

As one of his top priorities, Nelson sought to address what he commonly referred to as the "brain drain," the loss of some of the state's best and brightest students to out-of-state universities and employers.

To combat that trend, Nelson twice introduced "brain gain" bills, which would have set up scholarship and loan programs to be used by top students at the University of Nebraska and state colleges.

"It seemed to me that one of the most logical places to start to be sure that we have enough people to fill the jobs was the young people we already have in the state," Nelson said.

After being awarded a scholarship from the state for study in a specified field, students would have been required to stay in Nebraska to work for three years after graduation.

Even though the bills failed, Nelson said the idea created discussion on how to stop the exodus of Nebraska students to other states perceived to have more job opportunities or better standards of living.

Nelson, a graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said he has enjoyed a positive relationship with his alma mater.

He said he takes pride in state government's strong support for higher education. During the Nelson years, state financial support for its public universities has remained steady, and the Legislature appropriated funds for renewal of old buildings on all four NU campuses, including UNL's Richards, Lyman and Bancroft halls.

In September, Nelson announced the birth of the Nelson Institute, his own private charity for economic development and educational oppor-