

Governing Kansas, 1966 to 1986

Editor's Introduction

To say that Kansas was and is a Republican state seems a truism. The GOP emerged in reaction to the founding of Kansas Territory on the principal of popular sovereignty, which reopened the possibility for the westward expansion of slavery in the mid-1850s, and Kansas, the party of Lincoln, and the nation have been inextricably linked ever since.¹ Nevertheless, partisan politics have always been vital in the Sunflower State, and although at times the most intense political contests have been internecine, always the Kansas Democratic Party has been a factor in this “rock-ribbed Republican” state.

Kansas has delivered its electoral votes to only four different Democratic presidential candidates in its history, sent only two Democrats to the U.S. Senate after the politically tumultuous Populist years of the late nineteenth century, and been without a Republican controlled legislature only on very, very rare occasions. But especially since World War II, the two-party system has been more dynamic than might appear with only a cursory glance, and one big exception

1. See, among others, Nicole Etcheson's *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); G. Raymond Gaeddert, *The Birth of Kansas* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Publications, Social Science Studies, 1940); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Lewis L. Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (New York: Random House, 2003); William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

to apparent Republican hegemony—clearly demonstrated in this issue—has been at the top of the statehouse ticket. A Kansas Democrat has occupied the governor's office for twenty-nine of the last fifty-one years, and five of the state's ten chief executives during that time have been members of the Kansas Democratic Party.²

Fifty years ago, in the wake of the first Governor Docking's reelection and, from the Republican perspective, a generally disastrous election night, pundits predicted the demise of GOP hegemony in Kansas. In addition to the governorship, the Democratic Party captured three of six congressional seats, won four other statewide offices, including lieutenant governor, and narrowly missed taking over the state house of representatives. Then Attorney General John Anderson, Jr., liberated the statehouse from George Docking and the Democrats in 1960 and Republican fortunes improved, but Democrats staged a comeback of sorts with the election of Robert Docking in 1966—making William H. Avery a one-term Republican. The younger Docking “proved himself to be a master practitioner of the

2. Allan Cigler and Burdett Loomis, “Kansas: Two-Party Competition in a One-Party State,” in *Party Realignment and State Politics*, ed. Maureen Moakley (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 163–78; Homer E. Socolofsky, *Kansas Governors* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 206–30; Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 320–416.

electoral arts," linking his four-term administration with the curious, but apparently effective, slogan "austere but adequate" and fixing his own image "in the citizen's mind as a tightfisted man with the public dollar."³

"During the Dockings' era (1956–1974), Democrats became increasingly competitive in the legislature," as well, concluded political scientists Alan Cigler and Burdett Loomis. "The post-Watergate election of 1976 elevated statehouse Democrats to overall levels of success that they have roughly maintained ever since."⁴ John W. Carlin, a Saline County Democrat first elected to the lower house of the state legislature in 1970, was, of course, a beneficiary of this turn of electoral events. Elected speaker of the new Democratic house of representatives for the 1977–1978 term, Carlin was perfectly situated for a run for the governor's office in 1978. His reflections on Kansas government and legislative and executive politics are featured in this issue in the third installment of *Kansas History's* series of gubernatorial interviews, edited by Bob Beatty, associate professor of political science at Washburn University. Carlin speaks to issues such as the high cost of energy, the severance tax, capital punishment, and education. "Carlin was very much an activist governor who sought change when he felt it was needed and was willing to fight for the changes he wanted," writes Beatty in the introduction. "Carlin's two terms as governor were served with Republican legislatures, so the Democratic governor had to be politically adroit, flexible, and convincing to muster the majorities needed to get his programs passed." When the legislature said no, however, Carlin was not averse to taking his case to the people—a tactic he used to great effect in 1982.⁵

The premature death of former Governor Bob Docking in October 1983 precluded his inclusion in the interview

3. "Master of the Arts," *Parsons Sun*, November 4, 1970. See also Socolofsky, *Kansas Governors*; Secretary of State, *Forty-First Biennial Report of the Secretary of State, 1957–58* (Topeka: State Printing Plant, 1958); *State of Kansas, Election Statistics, 1966, Primary and General Elections* (Topeka: State Printing Plant, [1966]); Marvin A. Harder, *The Governor of Kansas: An Analysis of Decision-Making Opportunities, Constraints and Resources* (Topeka: Capitol Complex Center, University of Kansas, 1981).

4. Cigler and Loomis, "Kansas: Two-Party Competition in a One-Party State," 176.

5. The two previous essays in the interview series are Bob Beatty, ed., "'For the Benefit of the People': A Conversation with Former Governor John Anderson, Jr.," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 30 (Winter 2007–2008): 252–69, and "'You have to like people': A Conversation with Former Governor William H. Avery," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 31 (Spring 2008): 48–67; see also, www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2007winter.htm and www.kshs.org/publicat/history/2008spring.htm.

project that serves as the basis for our series. Fortunately, however, some excellent scholarship already exists, and so we reached into the journal's archive to redo Joel Paddock's fine article from 1994, "The Gubernatorial Campaigns of Robert Docking, 1966–1972." Paddock, a professor of political science at Missouri State University, found that during these turbulent years the state's electoral politics, like those nationally, were in flux. In Kansas, Robert Docking "epitomized a new style of electoral politics" that slowly replaced the historical dominance of the Republican Party with "a more competitive two-party politics in which individual political entrepreneurs ran candidate-centered campaigns. . . . Like many Democratic officeholders who survived and even flourished during a period of growing Republican dominance of presidential politics, Docking fashioned an electoral strategy that appealed to an increasingly independent electorate. Ironically," concludes Professor Paddock, "this increasingly independent electorate contributed to greater two-party competition in Kansas during the 1970s and beyond."⁶

Between the second Governor Docking, who chose not to run for a fifth term in 1974, and Governor Carlin served Bob Bennett, who presided over—as president of the senate and governor—a state government in transition. Despite his impressive resume and accomplishments, however, Bennett's tenure was cut short. One might argue that in this new era of Kansas politics his experience confirms the Paddock thesis, which puts a premium on style and personality and emphasizes the importance of the individual political entrepreneur who runs a "candidate-centered campaign" over the traditional politician whose strategy relies on party loyalty and organization. Governor Bennett's death at age seventy-three in October 2000 also precluded his inclusion in the gubernatorial interview project, but he had the opportunity to reflect on his term as Kansas governor for publication shortly before he left office. We have included excerpts from this interview, first published by the National Governors' Association, as the second of three articles that make up the heart of this special issue of *Kansas History*.⁷

6. Joel Paddock, "The Gubernatorial Campaigns of Robert Docking, 1966–1972," first published in *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 17 (Summer 1994): 108–23; for quotation, see page 103 in this issue of *Kansas History*.

7. See below, Virgil W. Dean, ed., "The Observations of Former Governor Robert F. Bennett," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 31 (Summer 2008): 104–13; the main excerpts are from the National Governors' Association, *Reflecting on Being Governor* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors' Association, Center for Policy Research, 1981), 41–58.



Kansas in the 1960s through the mid-1980s was governed by a very capable, interesting cast of five characters—three Republicans and two Democrats. Each of these governors, in his own way, met the challenges of his day. One such challenge is presented here by Kansas college students in a reinterpretation of the famous territorial period epithet, “Bleeding Kansas.” Invoking “Pleading Kansas” during the tumultuous Vietnam era, the protesters appeal for state and national lawmakers to stop the killing, end the war, and bring Kansas and American troops home. The immediate cause of the scene above, which took place on the statehouse steps in front of a couple thousand assembled demonstrators from various Kansas colleges and universities on May 13, 1970, was the recent U.S. invasion of Cambodia on April 30 and the Kent State shootings on May 4. Governor Bob Docking and Lieutenant Governor Jim DeCoursey both addressed the students from the capitol’s south steps. Although the Lawrence Journal-World reported some heckling, the paper also reported that the demonstration was controlled and peaceful, and DeCoursey remembered the students being, for the most part, well behaved and courteous.

With his “involuntary” retirement in 1979, Bob Bennett joined Bill Avery on a very, very short list of twentieth-century Kansas Republican governors to be denied a second term. By all accounts, their lack of success politically did not reflect negatively on their administrations’ efforts to deliver good government to the people of Kansas. Indeed, Kansas in the 1960s through the mid-1980s was governed by a very capable, interesting cast of five characters—three Republicans and two Democrats. As we discovered in the two previous interviews with John Anderson and William Avery, and as will be apparent in this issue’s pieces on Docking, Bennett, and Carlin, these governors differed in personality and on some issues of policy, but it is safe to conclude that they shared in common a commitment to Kansas and Kansans. A better understanding of their administrations and the various issues they confronted is critical to our understanding of the recent Kansas past.

From the right-to-work and school district unification to the right to life and capital punishment; the civil rights movement, including race relations and the ERA (Equal Right Amendment), to rural depopulation, health care, and senior citizens; the severance tax, nuclear energy, and the environment to liquor by the drink and legalized gambling (casinos, state lottery, and parimutual betting), the last half century, no less than the first (1854–1904), has been an im-

portant, dynamic period in Kansas history. In one way or another, state government has been intimately involved in all of these issues and more, and one could argue that Kansas really has been—or could be studied as—“America in microcosm.”⁸ Unlike the earlier period, however, the state’s more recent past has not yet been the focus of much scholarly attention. Some good beginnings have been made, but much remains to be done. It is our hope that this special issue, which continues our gubernatorial series, will stimulate discussion and perhaps encourage new scholarship focusing on social, economic, and political developments in Kansas during the decades since World War II.⁹ [KH]

8. Nearly a century ago, University of Kansas historian Carl L. Becker wrote an essay simply titled “Kansas,” reflecting on and in some ways marveling at the exceptional history and character of Kansas and Kansans. The essay, which arguably holds as much relevance for Kansans of the early twenty-first century as it did for those of the early twentieth, has been republished many times. A fine source for Becker’s “Kansas” and many other essays of enduring value and interest is Thomas Fox Averill, ed., *What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); see also, Dudley T. Cornish, “Carl Becker’s Kansas: The Power of Endurance,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Spring 1975): 1–13.

9. As suggested, some fine work has been done on certain aspects of the late-twentieth-century history of Kansas (i.e., the 1950s and beyond), and Miner’s *Kansas*, 320–416, offers a very useful overview; but no subject has been treated definitively, and most areas of study are wide open.