

The Failed Diffusion of the Unicameral State Legislature, 1934–1944

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The early twentieth-century witnessed numerous efforts to reform state government institutions, resulting in the widespread adoption of such reforms as the direct primary and citizen initiative. By contrast, efforts to establish unicameral state legislatures experienced success in just one state: Nebraska. In this article, I examine why movements to adopt one-house legislatures in other states failed in the wake of the Nebraska breakthrough of 1934. Using a most-similar case study research design, I compare the successful Nebraska effort to unsuccessful subsequent efforts in Ohio and Missouri, and I point to rural opposition as being the decisive factor explaining divergent outcomes across the three states. In Nebraska, the lack of malapportionment in the bicameral legislature meant that rural communities did not fear that unicameralism would lead to their diminished influence in state government, but in Ohio and Missouri (where malapportionment was high) rural communities used their structural advantages in state politics to shut down unicameralism efforts. The article's findings suggest that the bicameral state legislature is an important institutional legacy of the bygone era of rural dominance in American politics.

American legislatures differ from those of other advanced democracies in many ways, but perhaps the most important aspect of their distinctiveness lies in their bicameral structure. Unlike nearly all of the world's other federal democracies, the United States employs bicameralism for its national legislature as well as for the vast majority of its subnational (state) legislatures. Moreover, the particular form that bicameralism takes in the United States is quite unusual. In the U.S. Congress and the forty-nine bicameral state legislatures, both chambers have absolute veto power over almost all pieces of legislation and neither chamber enjoys major formal advantages over the other in the lawmaking process.¹ This form of bicameralism makes the process of bill passage in American legislatures considerably more cumbersome and abstruse than in the legislatures of most other countries.

Since the American Founding in 1787, the bicameral structure of an American state legislature has been eliminated only once. This singular instance occurred in the fall of 1934, when the people of Nebraska, responding to an active campaign spearheaded by progressive Senator George Norris, voted to turn their state legislature into a nonpartisan, unicameral body. With this vote, Nebraska's state government embarked on an unprecedented political

experiment with an institution whose long-term fate initially seemed in doubt but which quickly proved durable. Today, the Nebraska unicameral legislature is thoroughly embedded in the Cornhusker State's political system and enjoys widespread support from its residents.² Scholarly evaluations of the Nebraska's unicameral system have been scant but have generally yielded positive assessments.³

And yet, despite its longstanding experiment with unicameralism, Nebraska to this day remains the only state in the union with a unicameral legislative body. The fact that Nebraska's adoption of unicameralism did not lead to the adoption of unicameralism in other American states is puzzling given what we know about the diffusion of major institutional innovations in state government during the twentieth century. Since at least the late nineteenth century, state-level institutional innovations have tended to spread across the country once they have been adopted by a single state. For example, significant changes, such as the citizen initiative, the direct primary, judicial retention elections, legislative term limits, and others, all rapidly spread to many states

2. Charlyne Berens, *One House: The Unicameral's Progressive Vision for Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

3. John P. Senning, "Unicameralism Passes Test," *National Civic Review* 33 (1944): 60–65; Hugo F. Srb, "The Unicameral Legislature—A Successful Innovation," *Nebraska Law Review* 40 (1961): 626–33; Kim Robak, "The Nebraska Unicameral and Its Lasting Benefits," *Nebraska Law Review* 76 (1997): 791–818; Berens, *One House*.

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1. George Tsebelis and Jeannette Money, *Bicameralism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 45–70.

after an initial adoption by a single state.⁴ It is hard to think of a major twentieth-century structural innovation in state government and politics that has been restricted to a single state, aside from the unicameral legislature.

The most obvious potential explanation for why, unlike the citizen initiative or the direct primary, the unicameral legislature did not spread beyond Nebraska is lack of organized support in other states. Nearly all the major institutional reforms that were widely adopted by states throughout the twentieth century were made possible either by the support of grassroots movements involving the general public or by significant backing from organized interests operating across many states. Perhaps an arcane issue like unicameralism simply could not generate as much organized grassroots or progressive backing as did the more successful twentieth-century state government reform efforts.

As this article will show, however, organized movements to establish unicameral legislatures did in fact exist in many states during the early twentieth century, and these movements enjoyed a surge of support in the wake of Nebraska's adoption of unicameralism. Indeed, political scientists writing shortly after the unicameralism initiative passed in Nebraska predicted that at least some of these movements would be successful and thus that other states would soon join Nebraska in abolishing their upper or lower state legislative chambers.⁵ These predictions did not pan out, however. While several of the unicameral movements came quite close to achieving success, all ultimately failed, leaving bicameralism as the legislative structure of every American state except Nebraska.

4. The diffusion of most of these institutional reforms across the states has been studied extensively. On the diffusion of the citizen's initiative, see, e.g., Nathaniel A. Persily, "The Peculiar Geography of Direct Democracy: Why the Initiative, Referendum, and Recall Developed in the American West," *Michigan Law and Public Policy Review* 2 (1997): 11–41; Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan, "Direct Democracy and Political Parties in America," *Party Politics* 12 (2006): 649–69; Daniel A. Smith and Dustin Fridkin, "Delegating Direct Democracy: Interparty Legislative Competition and the Adoption of the Initiative in the American States," *American Political Science Review* 102 (2008): 333–50; Amy Bridges and Thad Kousser, "Where Politicians Gave Power to the People: Adoption of the Citizen Initiative in the U.S. States," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 11 (2011): 167–97. On the diffusion of the direct primary, see, e.g., Charles E. Merriam and Louise Overlacker, *Primary Elections* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928); Alan Ware, *The American Direct Primary: Party Institutionalization and Transformation in the North* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Stephen Ansolabehere, John Mark Hansen, Shigeo Hirano, and James M. Snyder Jr., "More Democracy: The Direct Primary and Competition in U.S. Elections," *Studies in American Political Development* 24 (2010): 190–205.

5. John W. Senning, *The One-House Legislature* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937); Alvin W. Johnson, *The Unicameral Legislature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938).

In this article, I investigate why efforts to bring one-house legislatures to additional states in the wake of the 1934 Nebraska referendum consistently failed. Using detailed case studies, I compare the 1934 Nebraska campaign to subsequent unicameralism efforts in two states where the political and institutional environments of the 1930s–1940s were especially conducive to its passage: Ohio and Missouri. Through examining the successful effort in Nebraska alongside the unsuccessful efforts in Ohio and Missouri, I show that the degree of conflict between urban and rural areas over apportionment of legislative seats was the key factor accounting for the divergent outcomes across these three states. In Nebraska, districting in both chambers of the state's pre-1934 bicameral legislature had roughly adhered to an equal-population standard, so rural communities were not particularly concerned that adopting a single-chambered legislature composed of equal-population districts would cause them to lose influence in state government. In Ohio and Missouri, on the other hand, districting in one chamber of the bicameral legislature was deliberately designed to give rural communities representation disproportionate to population size; not surprisingly, rural leaders strongly opposed efforts to scrap that structure in favor of a unicameral one in which districting would be based on the principle of population equality. Unicameralism advocates in both states responded to rural resistance with a variety of interesting and innovative proposals, but despite their best efforts, they were consistently stymied by their opponents. Over time, the heightened interest in unicameralism that had emerged after the Nebraska breakthrough of 1934 subsided, and unicameralism supporters could not maintain enthusiasm for their cause.

The findings of this article have important implications for several areas of inquiry in the historical study of American politics. First, through demonstrating the role of rural interests in the preservation of bicameral legislatures during the 1930s and 1940s, the article points to an important long-term institutional legacy of the era of rural dominance in American politics that ended with the Supreme Court's early-1960s reapportionment decisions. In doing so, the article also suggests the need to rethink standard accounts of cameral choice in the United States, which have generally emphasized reasons other than apportionment politics in explaining why the vast bulk of American legislatures continue to have two chambers. Finally, through examining the causal processes underlying the *failure* of a diffusion effort, the article provides an important addition to the literature on policy diffusion, which has focused overwhelmingly on diffusion *successes*.

The article proceeds as follows: first, I provide a brief history of efforts to establish unicameral state legislatures in the United States, including their origins in the early twentieth century, the successful

citizen initiative in Nebraska, and the growth of national interest in unicameralism that followed the Nebraska breakthrough. I then lay out the puzzle of why unicameralism did not spread beyond Nebraska, considering and dismissing a number of potential explanations. From there, I present a political explanation for the failed diffusion of unicameralism, one focusing on opposition from rural leaders who believed that the adoption of unicameral legislatures would lead to the diminished influence of rural areas in state government. I then present case studies of the unicameralism efforts in Nebraska, Ohio, and Missouri, providing clear evidence that the degree of rural opposition accounts for the divergent outcomes across the three states. Following these case studies, I address the question of why unicameralism did not spread to additional states that, like Nebraska, did not have heavily malapportioned legislatures during the 1930s. The article concludes with a consideration of why unicameralism has not taken hold in contemporary American politics, given the absence of significant malapportionment in modern legislatures, and reflections on the theoretical implications of its findings.

THE UNICAMERALISM MOVEMENT IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

America's distinctive form of bicameralism spread throughout states that joined the union with little dissent for the first 100 years of the country's history.⁶ Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, some began to question the wisdom of bicameralism at the state level. By the early twentieth century, populist and (later) progressive movements in many states began to champion unicameralism as an important reform to the operation of state government. Support for one-house legislatures was rooted in the progressive conviction that American political institutions needed to be reformed to foster greater democratic accountability and popular power.⁷ As one of the early proponents of unicameralism, Kansas Governor George H. Hodges (1913–1915), put it, “we should now concern ourselves in devising a system for legislating that will give us more efficiency and quicker response to the demands of our economic and social conditions and to the will of the people.”⁸ Unicameralists like Hodges believed that having doubled-chambered assemblies made the legislative process unnecessarily complex and weakened the link between the people and their elected representatives.

No national politician provided a stronger pro-unicameralism voice than Nebraska U.S. Senator George Norris. Over the course of his forty-year career in Congress, Norris established himself as one of the nation's foremost progressive leaders, promoting a wide range of activist policies and institutional reforms (with a mixed record of success). Of the latter, Norris was especially passionate about unicameralism, a cause for which his advocacy spanned decades. Like Hodges and others, Norris's unicameralist views were motivated by the belief that single-chambered legislatures would allow for a more simplified legislative process, thereby giving ordinary citizens the ability to “follow the work of their legislature without being expert parliamentarians.”⁹ In criticizing the bicameral legislative process, Norris focused much of his attention on the conference committee, an institution he decried for its “evils [that] ... are inherent and cannot be eliminated.”¹⁰ Norris saw conference committees as fundamentally undemocratic because they were generally composed of small numbers of legislators chosen by powerful chamber leaders rather than rank-and-file legislators, and because their meetings tended to be held out of public view. Due to their insulation from public pressure, Norris believed that conference committees were especially vulnerable to lobbyist influence and thus that the legislation they ultimately produced tended to be biased in favor of special interests.¹¹ For Norris, one of the primary benefits of a one-house legislature was that it would obviate the need for conference committees, since there would be no competing bills emanating from upper and lower chambers in need of being reconciled. Adopting one-house legislatures was thus a key component of Norris's larger progressive vision of a more open, transparent, and democratically responsive government.

Given its ideological roots, it is not surprising that unicameralism enjoyed its greatest support in western states where populism and (later) progressivism were most prominent. Unlike other progressive reform movements, however, the unicameralism movement was initially unsuccessful. Two unusually complex unicameralism initiatives made it to the Oregon ballot in 1912 and 1914 but were voted down overwhelmingly. Four years later, unicameralism initiatives reached the ballot in Arizona and Oklahoma; while unicameralism was defeated in Arizona, a majority of Oklahoma voters supported turning their legislature into a single-chamber body, but the vote failed to reach the supermajority threshold

6. Three states (Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Vermont) had unicameral legislatures at the time of the American Founding, but all adopted bicameral legislatures by the 1830s. Johnson, *The Unicameral Legislature*, 32–44.

7. Berens, *One House*, 1–17.

8. Quoted in Senning, *The One-House Legislature*, 40.

9. George Norris to L. E. Williams, August 18, 1942, George Norris Collection, Library of Congress, file 15.

10. George Norris to E. D. Nolan, March 7, 1940, George Norris Collection, Library of Congress, file 15.

11. Norris to Williams; Berens, *One House*.

required for passage.¹² Between 1916 and 1934, unicameralism efforts emerged in a number of states, but these efforts consistently failed to make it to the general election ballot. The tide finally turned in the early 1930s, when Norris decided to make an all-out effort to bring a one-house legislature to his home state of Nebraska. The efforts of Norris and his extensive network of supporters bore fruit on November 6, 1934, when just under 60 percent of Nebraska voters chose to ratify a state constitutional amendment establishing a unicameral legislature in the Cornhusker State.¹³

The national response to the passage of unicameralism in Nebraska was extensive. This fact has been little noticed by scholars and thus merits some attention.¹⁴ To begin with, many of the country's most prominent newspapers gave the unicameralism initiative considerable coverage, in some cases more than once.¹⁵ Given that the long-serving Senator Norris was by the 1930s the country's most prominent remaining advocate of progressive institutional reforms, his successful efforts in Nebraska buoyed the spirits of other activists throughout the country who were committed to reforming state government. Editorialists in local newspapers throughout the country penned articles supporting a transition to unicameralism in their states. One indication of the extent to which the issue became a national topic of discussion is that the National Speech and Debate Association chose the topic: "Resolved: That the several states should adopt a unicameral system of legislation" as its official topic for high school debate competitions in the 1937–1938 academic year.¹⁶ Moreover, throughout the mid-1930s, Senator Norris's offices in Nebraska and Washington, DC, received numerous letters from every state in the union inquiring about unicameralism in Nebraska. The authors of these letters were an extremely diverse lot: Many were interested civic leaders or

citizens who wanted to advance the unicameralism cause in their states, others were state legislators who wanted to introduce unicameralism legislation in their chambers, and still others were high school students who wanted information about unicameralism for their debate teams.¹⁷ Once the new Nebraska unicameral legislature was set up, its clerk quickly became inundated with the task of responding to similar letters from all over the country.

Beyond merely triggering interest among citizens, Nebraska's successful unicameralism initiative led to the development of organized advocacy on behalf of unicameralism in many American states. In some cases, veteran political reform groups such as state chapters of the League of Women Voters decided to make unicameralism a primary objective of theirs; in other cases, new organizations formed with the sole and express purpose of promoting a unicameral legislature in their states. Organized advocacy on behalf of unicameralism was matched with significant and unprecedented legislative action. In 1935, bills establishing unicameral legislatures were introduced in a dozen states; by 1937, this number had risen to twenty-two.¹⁸ Additionally, in states like Nebraska where the option of a citizen-initiated constitutional amendment existed, petition drives to bring unicameralism referenda to voters commenced. All of these efforts were unsuccessful, however, and by the mid-1940s, unicameralism efforts in the American states began to fade. By the late 1940s, it became clear that the window of opportunity for unicameral reform had closed.

POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE FAILED DIFFUSION OF UNICAMERALISM IN THE 1930S AND 1940S

Why did the passage of unicameralism in Nebraska not lead to the successful passage of unicameralism in other states? As discussed above, the most obvious potential explanation (namely, that unicameralism simply did not capture the attention of would-be reformers elsewhere) is untenable. Unicameralism absolutely did claim the interest of government reform advocates and individual citizens throughout the country, particularly after the Nebraska breakthrough. Indeed, the examples of other successful institutional reform movements (i.e., the citizen initiative and direct primary movements in the early twentieth century) suggest that an initial breakthrough in a single state is precisely the spark that is

12. Senning, *One-House Legislature*, James R. Rogers, "Judicial Review Standards in Unicameral Legislative Systems: A Positive Theoretic and Historical Analysis," *Creighton Law Review* 33 (1999): 65–120.

13. State of Nebraska, *Nebraska Blue Book* (Lincoln, NE: State Journal, 1934).

14. It also makes the post-1934 period different from other points in American history in which cameral reform was considered, such as the period between 1912 and 1916 when several unicameral initiatives made it to statewide ballots. As much research has shown, the adoption of a major institutional reform in a single state usually triggers a set of mechanisms that lead to the diffusion of that reform in other states. As will be shown, most of these mechanisms were triggered when Nebraska adopted unicameralism in 1934. For a more extensive discussion of other moments in American history in which unicameralism was considered, see Rogers, "Judicial Review Standards in Unicameral Legislative Systems."

15. Senning, *One-House Legislature*.

16. "Resolved: That the Several States Should Adopt a Unicameral System of Legislation," Topics, National Speech and Debate Association, accessed June 5, 2018, <https://www.speechanddebate.org/topics/>.

17. George Norris Papers, Library of Congress, boxes 15–19.

18. The twenty-two states in which constitutional amendments establishing unicameral legislatures were proposed in 1937 were Arkansas, California, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Johnson, *The Unicameral Legislature*, 184–87.

necessary to generate successful movements on behalf of the same cause in other states. Unicameralism advocates appear to have understood this: In a highly publicized legislative studies textbook published in 1934 (shortly before the Nebraska initiative was passed), the well-known political scientist W. F. Willoughby wrote, “Should one state make the break and go over to the new system of a single chamber, it might easily result that others would speedily follow the example.”¹⁹

Another possibility is that the failed diffusion of the unicameral legislature can be explained by the timing of its initial adoption. Whereas the other reforms mentioned above enjoyed their breakout moments in the middle of the Progressive Era, when popular interest in institutional reform was at its apogee, the movement to establish unicameral legislatures did not experience success until 1934, by which point national interest in progressive reform had waned and public attention was focused on Depression-era economic challenges. Thus, perhaps the one-house legislature failed to spread beyond Nebraska because its proponents were unable to capitalize on heightened interest in government reform in the 1930s in the way that they could have some three decades earlier.

There is little doubt that efforts to spread unicameralism in the aftermath of the Nebraska breakthrough were made more difficult by the fact that they did not occur in the thick of the Progressive Era. However, not all widely adopted progressive reforms experienced their initial breakthrough when progressivism was at its peak. For example, merit selection of judges followed by retention elections, an idea that originated during the Progressive Era, was first adopted by a state several decades later and then spread to thirty-three additional states.²⁰ Other progressive reforms (including the direct primary) continued spreading to additional states well past the end of the Progressive Era.²¹ Thus, the diffusion of progressive reforms was more difficult but far from impossible after the Progressive Era had concluded.

It is also plausible that unicameralism failed to spread beyond Nebraska because of strong resistance on the part of state legislators to an institutional reform clearly contrary to their self-interest. Transforming a state legislature from a bicameral to a unicameral body generally involves downsizing it, meaning that it has the side effect of (in the words

of Senator Norris) of “[taking] a great portion of [incumbent state legislators] out of public office.”²² In states where constitutional amendments can only be submitted to voters by state legislators, it is therefore hard to see how unicameralism proposals could ever reach voters absent truly massive public pressure. This would not be the case, however, in states like Nebraska where elected officials could be bypassed and proposed constitutional amendments could be brought to the voters via the initiative petition process. By the mid-1930s, there were twelve such states in addition to Nebraska.²³ Resistance to unicameralism on the part of elected officials cannot explain its failure to spread to these states. Moreover, an examination of letters written by George Norris to unicameralism supporters outside Nebraska in the mid-1930s suggests he recognized that the diffusion of unicameralism could likely only occur among states where citizen-initiated constitutional amendments were possible (at least initially). In his letters, Norris regularly provided encouragement to unicameralism supporters located in states with an initiative process but politely told supporters from states without one not to get their hopes up.²⁴

Last, even where organized efforts on behalf of unicameralism emerged and where the citizen initiative existed, unicameralism efforts might have fizzled because of resistance among many in the citizenry to a drastic institutional reform that seemed contrary to core American constitutional principles. As noted at the outset, bicameralism is a fundamental component of the design of the American federal Constitution, one defended by its framers as a key means for ensuring deliberation and stability in republican government.²⁵ Perhaps Madisonian-style veneration of the federal constitutional structure led many Americans in the 1930s to ultimately reject state-level unicameralism despite the good arguments made in its favor.

The difficulty with this explanation, once again, lies in the fact that, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, citizens of many states repeatedly voted to reform state government institutions in ways that flatly contradicted the core principles inherent in the federal constitutional design. In addition to direct democracy, judicial elections and gubernatorial recall were common state-level reforms during the early twentieth century that were justified based on principles with which the American Founders

22. George Norris to H. B. Porterfield, May 16, 1940, George Norris Collection, Library of Congress, file 15, box 145.

23. These states were Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Oregon. New York State Constitutional Convention Committee, *Constitutions of the States and United States* (Albany, NY: J.B. Lyon, 1938).

24. Norris to Porterfield.

25. Sandy Levinson, *Framed: America's 51 Constitutions and the Crisis of Governance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

19. W. F. Willoughby, *Principles of Legislative Organization and Administration* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1934).

20. The first state to adopt merit selection of judges was Missouri, in 1940. See, e.g., Brian T. Fitzpatrick, “The Politics of Merit Selection,” *Missouri Law Review* 74, no. 3 (2009), available at <https://scholarship.law.missouri.edu/mlr/vol74/iss3/13>.

21. Ware, *The American Direct Primary*.

almost certainly would not have agreed. Thus, veneration for principles inherent in the design of the federal Constitution cannot account for the failure of unicameralism to be adopted by states other than Nebraska.

A POLITICAL EXPLANATION FOR THE FAILED DIFFUSION OF UNICAMERALISM

The major claim of this article is that unicameral legislatures failed to spread beyond Nebraska during the 1930s and 1940s chiefly because of opposition from rural communities that believed that they would be politically disadvantaged by a transformation to unicameralism. As alluded to earlier, prior to the one-person, one-vote Supreme Court decisions of the early 1960s, many states based districting plans for their upper and lower legislative chambers on different representational principles. Whereas districting in one chamber (usually the upper) tended to prioritize the principle of equal representation for individuals regardless of geography, districting in the other tended to prioritize the principle of representation for local units of government.²⁶ Thus, each town or county was frequently guaranteed at least one legislator regardless of population, leading to situations in which sparsely populated, rural counties or towns enjoyed representation completely disproportionate to their population size in these chambers.²⁷

Because adopting a legislature composed of only one chamber would mean that top priority in legislative apportionment could only be given to one representational principle (population equality or representation for local jurisdictions), the unicameralism issue inevitably became entangled with longstanding conflicts over representation between urban and rural areas. For many of the urban reformers who were often the driving forces behind unicameralism efforts, proposing a malapportioned one-house legislature was a nonstarter, since such an arrangement would have been even worse for metropolitan areas than the status quo of a bicameral legislature with one chamber featuring population-based representation. Thus, even though they were primarily motivated to pursue unicameralism for reasons other than ending malapportionment, unicameralism proponents nonetheless routinely championed proposals for one-house legislatures composed of equal-population districts. For rural areas that benefited from malapportioned state legislative chambers, however, the adoption of such proposals would have

26. Robert B. McKay, *Reapportionment: The Law and Politics of Equal Representation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

27. To be sure, urban counties or cities usually enjoyed a greater number of legislators than their rural counterparts in these chambers, but the number of legislators they had was rarely proportionate to their populations.

meant a substantial loss in political power. Having long feared the urban takeover of state politics, rural politicians and voters thus resisted attempts to adopt unicameral legislatures, leading to their ultimate failure.

A related though less public factor accounting for opposition to unicameralism in the 1930s and 1940s was its potential consequences for party control of state governments. In the aftermath of the 1928–1936 New Deal realignment, party conflict in numerous American states in the Northeast and industrial Midwest took on a strong urban-rural dimension, with Democratic voters concentrated in large urban centers and Republican voters concentrated in rural areas. Not coincidentally, by the mid-1930s, state legislative chambers in which representation was more equally apportioned tended to have higher proportions of Democratic legislators than those that were highly malapportioned. This is demonstrated in Figure 1, which plots the mean percentage of Democratic legislators across the more malapportioned and less malapportioned chambers within the thirty-seven non-Southern state legislatures between 1926 and 1938. The figure clearly demonstrates the New Deal-era onset of a gap in Democratic representation (especially pronounced in the ten most malapportioned states) between more and less malapportioned legislative chambers. Thus, insofar as adoption of unicameral legislatures would have led to a shift in power from rural to urban areas, it would have almost certainly led to diminished Republican representation in state legislatures as well. Consequently, while urban-rural conflict was the primary source of opposition to unicameralism, partisan concerns among Republicans also played an important (if less visible) role in scuttling unicameralism efforts in many states.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To investigate the foregoing explanation for the failed diffusion of unicameralism, I utilize a most-similar case study research design examining efforts to establish one-house legislatures in three states: Nebraska, Ohio, and Missouri. A most-similar case study design is one in which the cases are “similar on all the measured independent variables, *except* the independent variable of interest.”²⁸ The three cases in this study are similar with regard to two crucial factors: (1) an organized movement to establish a unicameral legislature in the 1930s–1940s existed within them and (2) as of the 1930s–1940s, all three states gave their voters the ability to amend the state constitution via a citizen-initiated referendum. Uniformity on these

28. Jason Seawright and John Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options,” *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2009): 294–308.

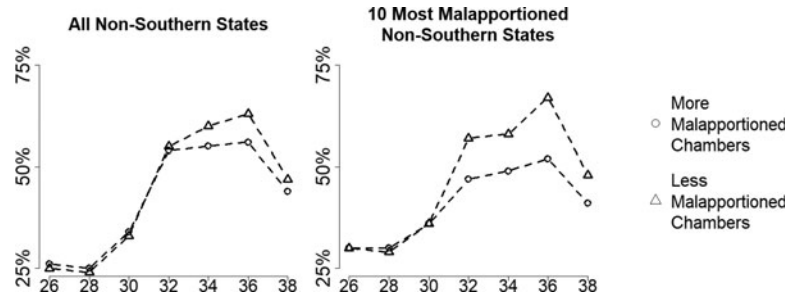


Fig. 1. Mean Percentage of Democratic Legislators Among More and Less Malapportioned State Legislative Chambers, 1926–1938.

Sources. Walter Dean Burnham, *Partisan Division of American State Governments, 1834–1985* (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [producer and distributor], 1992). <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR00016.v1>; Gus Tyler, “The Majority Don’t Count,” *The New Republic*, August 22, 1955, 13–15.

two factors effectively eliminates the two most obvious potential explanations for the failed diffusion of unicameralism—lack of organized interest and opposition among self-interested elected officials—from the analysis.

The crucial independent variable on which these states differ is the degree of malapportionment in their bicameral legislatures. In Nebraska, the state constitution of 1919 had established a bicameral legislature in which both chambers would be composed of equal-population districts, and while a delay in reapportioning legislative seats after the 1930 Census led to some inequality in district populations, the Cornhusker State’s bicameral legislature was nonetheless among the ten *least* malapportioned in the country as of the early 1930s.²⁹ In Ohio and Missouri, on the other hand, the constitutions in place during the 1930s guaranteed each county at least one legislator in the state House of Representatives regardless of population, causing the legislatures of both states to be among the twenty *most* malapportioned.³⁰ As this study will show, these differences mattered. The fact that both chambers in Nebraska’s legislature were apportioned on a population-equality basis meant that its rural communities did not fear that adopting a unicameral legislature composed of equal-population districts would cause them to lose influence in state government; in Ohio and Missouri, on the other hand, rural fears of a loss of influence were pronounced and were, indeed, the ultimate

cause of the failure of the unicameralism movement in both states.

THE UNICAMERALISM MOVEMENT IN NEBRASKA, 1919–1934

The unicameralism movement in Nebraska began, as in other Great Plains states where populism and later progressivism was prominent, during the late nineteenth century. Throughout the 1910s, reformers waged unsuccessful efforts to convince the Nebraska legislature to submit a constitutional amendment establishing a unicameral legislature to the state’s voters. In 1919, during a state Constitutional Convention, a proposal for a unicameral legislature received a tie vote of 43–43 among delegates, thus narrowly missing passage.³¹ Four years later, tiring of hopeless efforts to convince the state’s political class to support their efforts, unicameralism advocates in Nebraska decided to launch a petition drive to bring a citizen-initiated constitutional referendum to the people instead. Efforts to gather a sufficient number of signatures failed, however.³²

Between the early 1920s and early 1930s, not a single proposal for a unicameral legislature made it to a statewide ballot anywhere in the United States, and Senator George Norris became increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress made by the national movement for unicameralism. In the wake of a particularly unsatisfactory Nebraska state legislative session in 1933, Norris sensed an opening and decided to throw his full weight behind a new effort to bring a unicameralism proposal to Nebraska voters. Norris spent the month of December 1933 writing an initiative proposal and then hashing out a compromise with the Nebraska Model Legislature League concerning its precise provisions and language. The resulting proposal called for a one-house legislature

29. Neb. Const. of 1919, art. III, sec. V; McKay, *Reapportionment: The Law and Politics*, 366; Gus Tyler, “The Majority Don’t Count,” *The New Republic*, August 22, 1955, 13–15.

30. McKay, *Reapportionment: The Law and Politics*, 359–60, 398. The malapportionment rankings come from Tyler, “The Majority Don’t Count.” Tyler cites calculations from Henry Stoner showing that constituencies accounting for at least 40.8 percent of Nebraska’s population were required to elect a majority of seats in the Nebraska House (the state’s more malapportioned chamber), while 29.4 percent and 31.8 percent of the state populations could conceivably elect a majority of seats in the Missouri and Ohio Houses, respectively.

31. Senning, *One-House Legislature*, 45.

32. Berens, *One House*, 34.

composed of thirty to fifty single-member districts of equal population.³³

The ensuing campaign surrounding the unicameralism proposal was intense and hard-fought. Most in Nebraska's political establishment (including all but two of the state's newspapers) came out against the proposal, for reasons of both principle and self-interest. Opponents of the proposed one-house legislature made a wide variety of arguments to the public, including that a unicameral legislature was contrary to the American constitutional tradition, that it eliminated necessary checks and balances in government, and that it would lead to irresponsible lawmaking.³⁴ But while the unicameralism referendum clearly evoked an intense political fight between Norris's supporters and much of Nebraska's political establishment, the fight did not take on a clear urban-rural dimension. For example, the organization that Norris put together on behalf of the unicameralism proposal included leaders from all parts of the state, while opposition to the proposal was expressed by both urban and rural newspapers.³⁵

The fact that the unicameralism proposal did not evoke a strong urban-rural divide is unsurprising given that the proposal was not designed to change the balance of power between urban and rural forces in Nebraska government. The one-house legislature would be apportioned according to population, just as both chambers of the bicameral legislature had been. Opponents of the unicameralism proposal did attempt to provoke rural resistance by pointing out that the proposed unicameral body would be far smaller than the state's 133-member lower chamber, and that its adoption would therefore necessitate the creation of large legislative districts composed of numerous counties in sparsely populated parts of central and western Nebraska, thereby depriving many rural residents of close relationships with their state legislators. But while unicameralism opponents did frequently make this argument, they did not frame it in terms of competition between the state's rural areas and its cities; quite to the contrary, the argument was featured regularly in the editorial pages of the *Omaha World Herald*, the state's premier urban newspaper.³⁶

The lack of a strong urban-rural dimension in the 1934 Nebraska unicameralism campaign is further

33. Berens, *One House*.

34. "History Approves Bicameral System," *Omaha World Herald*, October 17, 1934 (originally printed in *Grand Island Independent*); "Not a Personal Issue," *Omaha World Herald*, October 23, 1934; "The Separate Ballots," *Omaha World Herald*, November 5, 1934; Berens, *One House*, 37–38.

35. Norris Amendment Committee to George Norris, April 6, 1934, George Norris Papers, Library of Congress, file 15; Berens, *One House*, 37.

36. "The Why the Concession?" *Omaha World Herald*, October 15, 1934; "Suppose There Were Fifty," *Omaha World Herald*, October 26, 1934; "Not a Personal Issue."

reflected in how ordinary Nebraskans ultimately voted on the proposal. Table 1 classifies Nebraska counties into four categories based on their urban-rural composition as of the 1930 Census and presents the results of the unicameralism referendum among voters in each county category. As can be seen, a majority in all four county categories supported the unicameralism proposal, with almost no difference in degree of support across most of the categories. The level of support for the unicameralism referendum among Nebraskans from the state's sixty-one completely rural counties was, at 56 percent, 6 percentage points lower than the level of support from Nebraskans in the state's other thirty-two counties, suggesting that some rural voters may have been swayed by the argument that they would enjoy less intimate representation in a small unicameral legislature. Still, this difference is minimal, and the overall similarity in voting results across the four county categories is far more striking. Thus it does not appear that most Nebraskans who voted on the unicameralism referendum in 1934 had urban-rural conflict at the forefront of their minds.

THE UNICAMERALISM MOVEMENT IN OHIO, 1935–1939

The unicameralism movement that arose in Ohio after the 1934 Nebraska breakthrough was in large measure a reaction to longstanding institutional dysfunction within the Ohio General Assembly. Throughout the 1930s, Ohio's legislature muddled through an extended deadlock over the issue of funding relief for Ohio's poor and unemployed. The legislature's inability to deal with the poor relief issue was in part a product of the fact that the legislature (particularly the House of Representatives) was heavily malapportioned in favor of rural areas. Rural Republicans holding veto power in the House were strongly resistant to state-level tax increases for poor relief, arguing that localities rather than the state government should be responsible for funding social services.³⁷ During the administration of Governor George White (1931–1935), the Ohio legislature thus repeatedly refused White's entreaties that it enact a comprehensive poor relief program managed at the state level. The problem of relief funding was compounded by the 1935 ascendancy to the governorship of conservative Democrat Martin Davey, who resisted using state funds for social services with as much fervor as the legislature's rural Republicans.³⁸ Frustration with the legislature's

37. "The State's Relief Job," *Columbus Citizen*, June 26, 1937; Hal Confery, "City-Rural Aid Row Resumed in House," *Columbus Citizen*, May 25, 1938; William H. Newton, "Senate Rebels as Its Leader Blocks Relief," *Columbus Citizen*, June 22, 1938.

38. David J. Maurer, "Relief Problems and Politics in Ohio," in *The New Deal, Volume Two: The State and Local Levels*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975).

Table 1. Results of 1934 Nebraska Unicameralism Referendum by Urban-Rural County Classification

County Category	Number of Counties	Total Population, 1930	Yes on Unicameralism Proposal	No on Unicameralism Proposal
Completely rural	61	495,500	101,335 (56%)	79,212 (44%)
More than 2/3 rural	15	243,315	56,635 (62%)	34,944 (38%)
Between 1/3 and 2/3 rural	15	305,842	62,445 (62%)	38,933 (38%)
Less than 1/3 rural	2	333,306	63,624 (62%)	39,063 (38%)

Sources. U.S. Census Bureau, *Urban-Rural Populations, 1930*, prepared by Social Explorer (New York: Social Explorer, 2017), accessed November 6, 2017, www.socialexplorer.com; State of Nebraska, *Nebraska Blue Book* (Lincoln, NE: State Journal, 1935).

inability to agree enact significant poverty-alleviating measures in the middle of the Great Depression caused Ohioans to actively consider ways of reforming the legislature so as to make it more responsive to the needs of the state's residents.

As frustration with the Ohio legislature grew, interest in transforming it into a unicameral body grew as well. Support for unicameralism experienced a particularly dramatic upturn in early 1937 due to the confluence of several factors. First, national attention on the newly convened unicameral legislature in Nebraska prompted government reform advocates in Ohio (as elsewhere) to make unicameralism a top priority. The Citizen's League of Cleveland, one of the most prominent public interest groups in 1930s Ohio, repeatedly extolled the Nebraska unicameral in its monthly newsletter during the mid-1930s and announced its intention to work toward bringing unicameralism to the Buckeye State.³⁹ Additionally, the 1936 Democratic landslide in Ohio resulted in the election of several new reform-minded legislators who promised to become champions of unicameralism in the 1937 state legislative session.

Like George Norris and his collaborators in Nebraska, the core supporters of unicameralism in Ohio were chiefly motivated by a belief in the inherent superiority of single-chambered legislatures over double-chambered ones. In one of their newsletters, the Citizen's League of Cleveland listed what it considered to be the eight chief advantages of unicameralism:

1. The unicameral system has proved satisfactory...
2. The unicameral system affords a simpler and more direct method of legislating...
3. The unicameral system fixes responsibility...

4. The unicameral system invites better candidates...
5. The unicameral system will develop real leadership...
6. The unicameral system will prevent stalemates...
7. The unicameral system will foster citizen interest...
8. The unicameral system will be less expensive...⁴⁰

Others actively involved in the unicameralism movement, such as former Governor and then-current U.S. Senator Vic Donahey, made similar statements, emphasizing that a unicameral legislature would be "far more economical ... and tremendously more efficient" than the bicameral system in place. State representative Lody Huml of Cleveland, a leader of the pro-unicameralism bloc in the legislature during the late 1930s, argued that a unicameral legislature would "attract better talent" and "be more responsible to the people."⁴¹

Given the substantial interest in adopting a one-house legislature that had surfaced in Ohio by early 1937, hopes were high that a proposed constitutional amendment establishing such a legislature would make it out of the 1937 Ohio state legislative session. Within the session's first few months, five different proposals to adopt a unicameral legislature (all sponsored by Democrats) were introduced in the Ohio House of Representatives.⁴² These proposals caught the attention of Ohio's major newspapers, which began to also take an active interest in the unicameralism cause. But while unicameralism's original supporters emphasized benefits such as democratic

40. Citizens League of Cleveland, "The One-House Legislature: Nebraska's First Experience Proves Unicameral Plan Popular," *Greater Cleveland*, November 18, 1937, 2–3.

41. Lody Huml, "The Cause for the Unicameral Legislature" (unpublished manuscript), John Senning Papers, State Historical Society of Nebraska.

42. Joint Resolutions 10, 11, 16, 26, 59, Ohio House of Representatives, 92nd General Assembly of Ohio, Regular Session, 1937, *Bulletin of the 92nd General Assembly of Ohio, Regular Session* (Columbus, OH: F.J. Heer, 1937).

39. "Cuyahoga County Demands Equal Representation," *Greater Cleveland*, January 28, 1937; "The One-House Legislature," *Greater Cleveland*, November 18, 1937.

accountability and efficiency gains, Ohio's big-city newspapers jumped on the unicameralism bandwagon for other reasons. While not denying (and occasionally emphasizing) the inherent benefits of one-house legislatures, the editorials boards of newspapers like the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Columbus Citizen*, and the *Toledo Blade* made it clear that they favored unicameralism primarily because they saw it as a means of eliminating the malapportioned, rural-dominated state House of Representatives. In an editorial decrying "Ohio's apparent inability to cope with its relief obligations," which it blamed on rural legislators in the state's lower legislative chamber, the *Plain Dealer* editorial board stated that "the strong argument for a unicameral assembly ... is that it would involve revision of a system which now denies truly representative government."⁴³ In a similar vein, the *Columbus Citizen* editorial board argued that Ohio's bicameral legislature was "designed to meet the needs of an agricultural state of 50 years ago" and that the Ohio House consistently ignored the state's urban areas: "We would encounter little less comprehension of metropolitan ... needs if we were represented by a majority of Hottentots."⁴⁴

Despite the initial optimism among many unicameralism supporters, efforts to have the Ohio legislature submit a constitutional referendum on unicameralism to the state's voters quickly ran into various roadblocks. To begin with, supporters were internally divided about how the unicameral proposal should address the issue of apportionment. Aware that a proposal for a unicameral legislature composed of equal-population districts would almost certainly draw substantial rural opposition, Representative Huml proposed a one-house legislature with a permanent 50–50 split in representation between urban and rural areas.⁴⁵ Naturally, such a proposal drew the opposition of urban interests, who instead rallied around a competing proposal mandating equal-population districts and the periodic reapportionment of legislative seats to account for population shifts.⁴⁶ Beyond their internal disagreements, however, unicameralism supporters faced a bigger problem: Legislative leaders were indifferent to their cause and pigeonholed all of the unicameralism proposals in the House Committee on Government Operations.⁴⁷

In an effort to overcome their internal differences, unicameralism supporters from across the state organized regular meetings in Columbus starting in the middle of the state legislative session.⁴⁸ Initially

these meetings focused on the need to rally behind a single proposal to promote within the Ohio General Assembly, but as the legislative session moved into its final months, advocates began to recognize the unlikelihood that the Assembly would ever propose such a referendum. Thus they decided to turn their attention away from crafting a proposal that could pass both houses of the legislature and toward crafting one that could be brought to the statewide ballot via the initiative petition process. On April 23, 1937, leading representatives of the group filed incorporation papers for a new nonprofit organization called the Ohio Single-House Legislature League (OSHLL). The league, which named U.S. Senator Donahey as its honorary president and Congressman Harold Mosier and Charles P. Taft as honorary vice presidents, announced plans to bypass the legislature and work to bring a citizen-initiated unicameralism referendum to Ohio voters.⁴⁹ The petition that OSHLL settled upon called for a unicameral legislature of 100 members representing single-member districts "containing approximately equal populations."⁵⁰ Thus, the forces insisting that the proposed unicameral legislature be composed of equal-population districts won out over those who warned that such a provision would likely doom the proposal's chances of gaining passage.

Between 1937 and 1938, OSHLL oversaw a large-scale signature drive to put a unicameralism question on the statewide ballot in the 1938 general election. OSHLL successfully recruited volunteers to canvass neighborhoods in the state's biggest cities, but encountered significant problems with signature collection in the state's rural counties.⁵¹ The Ohio Constitution specified that, in order to qualify for the statewide ballot, an initiative petition must get the signatures of 10 percent of Ohio's voters in the previous gubernatorial election (slightly less than 300,000 voters in 1938) as well as 5 percent of the voters in forty-four of Ohio's eighty-eight counties. Since only eleven of Ohio's counties were primarily urban, unicameralism advocates could not ignore Ohio's rural areas in their quest to get enough signatures to make it to the November 1938 ballot. Their task was made more difficult by the fact that political leaders from the state's rural areas quickly counter-mobilized against the initiative. John Hodson, chair of the Ohio Farm Bureau, called the unicameral proposal "one of the most dangerous issues we have faced in years" and argued that it would "place [Ohio's farmers] under the complete domination of the strong political

43. "Ox-Cart Government," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 30, 1938.

44. "Our 'One-Horse Shay,'" *Columbus Citizen*, April 9, 1937, 2B.

45. "Thanks to Mr. Huml," *Cleveland Press*, January 26, 1937, 8.

46. "5 Unicameral Plans," *Columbus Citizen*, February 2nd, 1937, 28.

47. *Bulletin of the 92nd General Assembly of Ohio, Regular Session*.

48. Vinton E. McVicker, "One-House League Seeks Ohio Constitution Change," *Columbus Citizen*, February 17, 1937, 2A.

49. "One-House League Incorporated Here," *Columbus Citizen*, April 23, 1937, 1.

50. "A Single House Legislature for Ohio," 1938, Ohio League of Women Voters Collection, Ohio History Connection, box 2.

51. "Prof. King Leads Unicameral," *Akron Beacon-Journal*, May 14, 1937, 41; Gene Fiske, "Three Petitions Fail from Lack of Signers," *Toledo Times*, June 1947.

forces in the few large urban areas.”⁵² By the early part of 1938, the proposal’s backers recognized that opposition in rural areas posed a major challenge to signature-gathering efforts. In a March 1938 letter to George Norris, the OSHLL secretary stated that “we are getting petitions signed although [sp.] not . . . in the great number that is required” and explained that this was due to the necessity of getting a large number of signatures from forty-four counties: “Our eleven urban counties could provide the number of signatures, but not as required by law.”⁵³

Eventually, OSHLL was forced to abandon its efforts as funding dried up, and it became clear that the requisite number of signatures in rural counties could not be obtained. When OSHLL officially abandoned its petition drive in 1938, its volunteers had only managed to reach the 5 percent threshold in two rural counties.⁵⁴ OSHLL’s failure appears to have permanently quieted the movement to adopt a unicameral legislature in Ohio; while the issue was occasionally brought up by various interest groups and political gadflies over the next two decades, it does not appear that sustained, organized efforts on behalf of unicameralism were made after 1938.

THE UNICAMERALISM MOVEMENT IN MISSOURI, 1935–1944

Of all the states in which a unicameralism movement emerged after the 1934 Nebraska breakthrough, the state in which unicameralists may have come closest to achieving success was Missouri. Unlike in Ohio, where efforts fizzled after the failure of the 1937–1938 petition drive, supporters of unicameralism in Missouri advanced the cause of a one-house legislature time and time again between 1935 and 1946. Their movement went through many twists and turns, including a notable effort to advance unicameralism within the 1943–1944 Missouri Constitutional Convention as well as a statewide unicameralism referendum in 1944. As will be shown, however, while the unicameralists in Missouri were more tenacious and determined than their counterparts in Ohio, they repeatedly encountered the same, ultimately fatal obstacle: intense opposition from rural communities.

As in Ohio and other states, unicameralism efforts in Missouri were initially launched in 1935 by reform-minded state legislators responding to widespread public interest in the subject following the Nebraska breakthrough.⁵⁵ The efforts of these legislators were

met with indifference by legislative leaders and thus failed to advance. The unicameral cause was then picked up by a group of activists calling themselves the Unicameral Legislature Committee of Missouri, who launched an ultimately unsuccessful statewide petition drive in 1938.⁵⁶ A few years later, a group of St. Louis–area businessmen surveyed colleagues throughout the state regarding their views on the state legislature and potential support for reform efforts.⁵⁷ Discovering strong support for unicameralism among the Missouri business community, these leaders created a new organization called the Crusaders of Missouri, whose sole purpose was to work toward the establishment of a unicameral legislature in the state.

Like the core supporters of unicameralism in Nebraska and Ohio, the Crusaders were united by a strong belief that unicameral legislatures were inherently superior to bicameral ones.

Promotional material that the Crusaders sent to businessmen throughout the state read as follows:

Would you have two boards of directors? NO!
Then why a two-house legislature [with each house] duplicating the work of the other, with responsibility divided and therefore non-existent?⁵⁸

Similarly, in a generic letter to supporters, the chairman of the organization argued that a bicameral legislative setup “acts to prevent the true expression of the people’s will” and that a unicameral setup would facilitate a more “efficient, democratic state government.”⁵⁹

Soon after forming, the Crusaders set to work on designing and then gathering signatures for a new initiative petition to bring the unicameralism issue to Missouri voters in the 1942 general election. In the spring of 1942, the Crusaders publicly announced their petition drive, which called for a legislative body of fifty to seventy-five members, composed of legislators representing single-member districts of equal population.⁶⁰ During the summer of 1942, the organization submitted more than 78,000 signatures from Missourians to the Missouri secretary of state, a number well in excess of what was required. The proposed amendment never reached the

56. Ray Buchan to George Norris, April 28, 1938, George Norris Collection, Library of Congress, file 15.

57. F. Taylor Bryant Jr. to President of the League of Women Voters of St. Louis, October 17, 1941, Papers of the League of Women Voters of St. Louis, State Historical Society of Missouri, box 86; “50 to 75-Seat Legislature Is Proposed,” *St. Louis Star-Times*, April 24, 1942, evening edition.

58. Promotional Material of the Crusaders of Missouri, N.D., Stratford Lee Morton Constitutional Convention Papers, State Historical Society of Missouri (hereafter cited as SLMCC MSS).

59. James W. Miller to Unnamed Recipient, January 30, 1943, SLMCC MSS.

60. “50 to 75-Seat Legislature Is Proposed.”

52. “Proposed One-House Legislature Scored,” *Columbus Citizen*, February 17, 1938.

53. Norman H. Ford to George Norris, March 26, 1938, George Norris Collection, Library of Congress, file 15, box 144.

54. Gene Fiske, “Three Petitions Fail from Lack of Signers,” *Toledo Times*, June 1947.

55. Johnson, *The Unicameral Legislature*, 185.

ballot, however, because the state attorney general determined that over half of the signatures were not properly notarized.⁶¹

While the 1942 general election did not provide Missouri voters with the opportunity to establish a unicameral legislature, it did give them the opportunity to call for a state Constitutional Convention, which a majority agreed to do. The focus of the Crusaders and other unicameralism supporters thus shifted, temporarily, to advancing unicameralism within the Missouri Constitutional Convention of 1943–1944. This was despite the fact that, as unicameralists surely recognized, the method of selecting delegates to the convention made the prospect that convention delegates would propose a one-house legislature unlikely. Sixty-eight out of the eighty-three delegates to the convention were to be chosen from Missouri's thirty-four current State Senate districts (with one Democratic and one Republican delegate from each district), but the Missouri State Senate map, though composed of equal-population districts when it was adopted in 1901, had not been redrawn to account for population shifts in the ensuing four decades and was badly malapportioned by 1943. In one particularly egregious example, a St. Louis-based Senate district had come to have eight times the population of the state's least-populous rural district.⁶² The malapportioned nature of the Senate map meant that representation of rural areas in the convention would be substantially in excess of their share of the state population, thus making it less likely that a majority of convention delegates would be amenable to a one-house legislature. Nonetheless, unicameralism supporters held out hope that appealing to the sensibilities of convention delegates in a forum that was at least somewhat removed from ordinary political pressures might bear fruit.

The most prominent advocate for unicameralism among the convention delegates was Stratford Lee Morton, a St. Louis-area businessman with strong ties to national and local organizations advocating progressive reform. Morton served on the council of the National Municipal League, a leading government reform organization whose *Model State Constitution* handbook had since 1920 endorsed the adoption of unicameral state legislatures. Morton also had close connections with the Crusaders, though he was not a member of the group. During the early months of the Constitutional Convention, Morton began a series of communications with George Norris and John Senning, the University of Nebraska political science professor with whom Norris collaborated on the Nebraska unicameralism initiative. In one letter to Morton, Senning wrote

61. Harry Wilson, "Unicameralism May Be Ruled Off Ballot," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 10, 1942.

62. "A Solution to the Senatorial Redistricting Problem," SLMCC MSS, folder 90.

that "you have problems to face that we did not have," noting that "your state is more politically minded than Nebraska" and thus that a nonpartisan legislature would likely be a nonstarter. Senning also correctly predicted that Morton would "encounter . . . great, though not insuperable, obstacles in the area of representation," particularly in terms of conflict between urban and rural areas.⁶³

Morton proved to be a tireless fighter for unicameralism, attempting to advance the cause at every stage of the convention's twelve-month duration through a wide variety of means. As a member of the convention's legislative committee, Morton initially proposed that the committee's previously agreed-upon language for the constitution's legislative article be stricken and that new language—establishing a unicameral legislature along the lines of the Crusaders' proposal—be substituted in its place.⁶⁴ In January 1944, the rural-dominated committee rejected Morton's proposal by an 13–2 vote.⁶⁵ A few months later, Morton introduced a minority report detailing a highly unusual proposal for an eighty-three-member unicameral legislature with a composition nearly mirroring that of the convention: thirty-four equal-population districts would be represented by one Democrat and one Republican, and an additional fifteen legislators would be selected through at-large (statewide) elections. Morton hoped that the selection scheme's similarity to that of the convention would make it seem reasonable in the minds of convention delegates.⁶⁶ Recognizing that the proposal, via the inclusion of fifteen statewide-elected legislators, would raise fears among rural delegates that the state's rapidly growing metropolitan areas would dominate state politics in the long run, Morton proposed to couple the unicameral proposal with a constitutional guarantee of home rule for both urban and rural jurisdictions. As Morton stated in a letter to an ally, "I am hoping that with a strong home rule provision for counties . . . I can satisfy them that there is no desire to give the control to the cities."⁶⁷

On July 18, 1944, Morton made his case for his proposal in front of the entire convention. In doing so, he attempted to appeal to conservative delegates

63. John Senning to Stratford Lee Morton, October 30, 1943, SLMCC MSS, folder 189.

64. "Proposal No. 11 in the 1943 Constitutional Convention of Missouri," October 7, 1943, SLMCC MSS.

65. "Unicameral Plan for Legislature Rejected, 13 to 2," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 12, 1944, 1.

66. In letters to other supporters of unicameralism, Morton frequently argued that the most effective argument in its favor among convention delegates was that, if a unicameral body was good enough for the purposes of writing fundamental (constitutional) law, it should be good enough for the purpose of statute writing as well. See, e.g., Stratford Lee Morton to Arthur Willoughby, April 26, 1944, SLMCC MSS.

67. Morton to Willoughby.

from rural areas by arguing that establishing one-house legislatures was a key way of reinvigorating state governments, a topic that interested many who were anxious about the growing dominance of the federal government over the states during the New Deal Era.⁶⁸ Morton's fellow delegates, however, were largely unpersuaded by his pleas and denied him a vote on his minority report.⁶⁹

Members of the Crusaders had been closely watching the convention throughout the fall of 1943, but after Morton's initial proposal was voted down in committee, they concluded that his efforts to advance unicameralism through the convention were a lost cause. Thus, in the early part of 1944, they began circulating another initiative petition to put their original proposal for a unicameral legislature composed entirely of equal-population districts on the November 1944 ballot.⁷⁰ Once again, they exceeded the signature requirements easily, but this time, efforts to challenge their signature-gathering efforts were unsuccessful. In August 1944, as the Constitutional Convention was beginning to wind down, the Missouri secretary of state certified that the Crusaders' petition had met the legal requirements to appear on the statewide ballot in November.⁷¹

Naturally, the reactions of Missouri newspapers to the Crusaders' success tended to vary by geography. The *St. Louis Star-Times*, one of the state's leading urban newspapers, published numerous columns and editorials praising the Crusaders' efforts. Interestingly, unlike Ohio's big-city newspapers, the *Star-Times* emphasized the intrinsic benefits that a one-house legislature would bring to state government rather than the fact that it would be composed of equal-population districts.⁷² Rural newspapers, on the other hand, often voiced strong opposition to the Crusaders' plan. The local paper in Houston, Missouri, a small town in the Ozarks region, published an article by U.S. Congressman William P. Elmer warning rural voters of the consequences of passage of the unicameral amendment in the strongest possible terms:

The representation in the country areas will be materially reduced, and in the cities it will be

68. Debates of the 1943–1944 Constitutional Convention of Missouri (Jefferson City, MO, 1944), University of Missouri–Kansas City School of Law, http://dl.mospace.umsystem.edu/umkclaw/islandora/object/umkclaw%3A56_5446.

69. *Journal of the 1943–1944 Constitutional Convention of Missouri* (Jefferson City, MO, 1944), July 18–19.

70. Stratford Lee Morton to Tilghman Cloud, February 15, 1944, SLMCC MSS folders 180–83.

71. "Stockard Ordered to Accept Unicameral Vote Petitions," *Jefferson City Post-Tribune* (Jefferson City, MO), August 7, 1944, 1.

72. "The Letter of the Law," *St. Louis Star-Times*, July 10, 1944, 12; John T. Stewart, "One-House Legislature Confounds Its Enemies and Proves Efficiency," *St. Louis Star-Times*, December 6, 1943, 13; John T. Stewart, "Labor Is Firmly Backing Nebraska's One-House System," *St. Louis Star-Times*, December 8, 1943, 19.

increased. This is the real purpose of the plan. The large cities have long been jealous of the power and influence of rural sections in State affairs. They want this power. The Unicameral System will give it to them.⁷³

Thus, the stage was set for an acrimonious statewide campaign about the upcoming unicameral referendum. However, just as the campaign commenced, a new twist in the struggle to bring a unicameral legislature to Missouri emerged. In September 1944, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention finally announced that they had completed their work: A new state constitution, setting up a standard bicameral legislature, would be proposed, and a special election in which the people of Missouri would vote on its ratification was announced for February 1945. The timing of this special election posed a massive new difficulty for the Crusaders: If the people approved the unicameralism referendum in November but then approved the proposed state constitution (complete with a bicameral legislature) in February, their earlier vote in favor of a unicameral legislature would be nullified. Scrambling to save their proposal, the Crusaders lobbied several convention delegates to include an item in the official constitutional schedule stating that the Crusaders' unicameralism proposal would be inserted into the new constitution to be voted on in February should the unicameralism referendum pass in November.⁷⁴

On September 28, 1944, the last full day of the convention, the delegates held a fascinating and acrimonious debate on the Crusaders' last-ditch effort. Several convention delegates opposed to a unicameral legislature nonetheless rose in support of the Crusaders' position, arguing that regardless of their personal preferences, to propose a new state constitution setting up a bicameral legislature immediately after voters approved a referendum calling for a unicameral legislature would be an insult to the popular will. Judge Charles Mayer, a delegate from St. Joseph, expressed this sentiment well in his remarks:

I don't think there is any member of this Constitutional Convention who is more completely and absolutely opposed to unicameral legislation than I am. I feel that it would be the greatest mistake Missouri ever made if she . . . turned the government of this great state over entirely to the cities. . . . [The unicameral] is alright for a rural agricultural state, maybe like Nebraska, but it ought not to be in Missouri, but the people are going to vote on it in November of this year. . . . We are submitting this Constitution as a whole and we're saying to the people of

73. William P. Elmer, "Congressman Elmer Expresses His Opposition to the Unicameral Amendment Number Two," *Houston Herald* (Houston, MO), October 26, 1944, 2.

74. Curtis A. Betts, "One-House Move May Delay End of Convention," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 28, 1944, 6.

Missouri that “Here is an amendment which you adopted in November, but you must throw it away in order to vote for this Constitution. You want a unicameral Legislature; you want the rest of this Constitution, but you can’t have it. You can’t have both.”⁷⁵

The convention’s pro-unicameralism delegates, particularly Stratford Lee Morton, echoed these comments, imploring his fellow delegates to defer to the people on the matter of whether Missouri should have a bicameral or unicameral legislature.⁷⁶ However, those opposed to the Crusaders’ efforts would not budge. They took strong offense at the suggestion that they were thwarting the will of ordinary Missourians, instead contending that they were defending the people against the Crusaders’ efforts to sow confusion by forcing a statewide vote on a proposal that had been roundly rejected by the convention. As one delegate put it, “I have a feeling that a great many people, in voting for this unicameral amendment . . . will feel that they are voting for something that this [convention] has arranged.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, opponents of the Crusaders rejected the notion that they were denying the people of Missouri from being able to support both the proposed constitution as well as a unicameral legislature. Assuming that the constitution would be ratified, they argued, all the Crusaders needed to do was gather a third set of signatures for another unicameralism referendum after the new constitution was in place.⁷⁸ In a dramatic final vote, the convention delegates indicated their agreement with these arguments by refusing to graft the unicameral proposal onto their proposed constitution if the Crusaders’ referendum passed in November.⁷⁹

Following their loss at the end of the convention, the Crusaders attempted to remove the constitutional referendum they worked so hard to bring to voters from the statewide ballot. Given the likelihood that a pro-unicameralism result in the referendum would soon be nullified, they decided to turn their attention toward a third attempt at a citizen-initiated unicameralism referendum in 1946 and did not want to confuse voters with multiple referenda. However, the secretary of state refused their request, arguing that ballots for the November election (which included the unicameralism referendum) had already been sent out to absentee voters and soldiers overseas.⁸⁰ In response, the Crusaders publicly

disavowed their own ballot measure and decided not to waste any time or resources campaigning for it. Leading state newspapers that had previously voiced strong support for the unicameralism cause also called on Missourians to vote no on it.⁸¹

Thus, the unicameralism proposal went to the polls with few prominent endorsements and no campaigning on its behalf. Despite this near-complete lack of organized support, the proposal failed by a quite narrow margin, with 47.5 percent of voters (a total of 364,794 Missourians) voting in its favor. Perhaps more important than the close outcome of the referendum was the sharp urban-rural divide in voting patterns that it provoked. Evidence of this divide is presented in Table 2, which examines electoral support for the unicameralism proposal across Missouri counties with different urban-rural compositions. The table provides a marked contrast to Table 1, which depicts the same relationship for the 1934 Nebraska unicameral referendum. In Nebraska, a majority of voters in every county category supported the unicameralism proposal, with support in the state’s completely rural counties only slightly lower than in the other county categories. In Missouri, on the other hand, voters in the state’s sixty-three completely rural counties voted overwhelmingly against the unicameralism proposal, voters from counties with a mixture of rural and urban residents voted for it in significantly higher rates, and voters in the state’s one completely urban county (St. Louis City) overwhelmingly supported it. Unlike in Nebraska, then, the views of Missouri voters on unicameralism in 1944 appear to have been substantially by their geographical location.

A year and a half after the unicameralism vote and the new state constitution’s adoption, the Crusaders started yet another petition drive for a citizen-initiated unicameralism referendum. This effort fizzled, however, in part because the state’s new constitution placed stricter limits on the amount of time organizers had to gather signatures for the statewide ballot.⁸² Additionally, it is likely that support for the cause had diminished as activists grew tired of repeated failures on the issue. It does not appear that additional organized efforts to bring a unicameral legislature to Missouri occurred after the late 1940s. As in Ohio nine years earlier,

75. *Debates of the 1943–1944 Constitutional Convention of Missouri*, 7604.

76. *Ibid.*, 7628.

77. *Ibid.*, 7607.

78. *Ibid.*, 7624.

79. *Journal of the 1943–1944 Constitutional Convention of Missouri*, September 27, 1944.

80. “One-House Proposal to Stay on November Ballot—Stockard,” *Daily Capital Times* (Jefferson City, MO), October 5, 1944.

81. “Election Skulch,” *Pleasant Hill Times* (Pleasant Hill, MO), November 17, 1944.

82. Under the initiative petition rules in place prior to the adoption of the new constitution, organizers were required to turn in signatures to the Missouri secretary of state no later than four months prior to an election in order to qualify for its ballot. Mo. Const. of 1875, art. IV, sec. LVII (amended November 3, 1908). Under the constitution adopted in 1945, organizers were required to turn in signatures no later than *six months* prior to a November election, thus depriving them of the ability to canvass during the summer. Mo. Const. of 1945, art. III, sec. L.

Table 2. Results of 1944 Missouri Unicameralism Referendum by Urban-Rural County Classification

County Category	Number of Counties	Total Population, 1940	Yes on Unicameralism Proposal	No on Unicameralism Proposal
Completely rural	61	759,742	33,563 (27%)	91,456 (73%)
More than 2/3 rural	32	686,771	34,029 (33%)	69,486 (67%)
Between 1/3 and 2/3 rural	15	570,727	84,413 (52%)	78,545 (48%)
Less than 1/3 rural	6	790,167	65,360 (47%)	74,857 (53%)
Completely urban	1	821,960	147,429 (63%)	87,556 (37%)

Sources. U.S. Census Bureau, *Urban-Rural Populations, 1930*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Total Populations, 1940*, prepared by Social Explorer (New York: Social Explorer, 2017), accessed November 6, 2017, www.socialexplorer.com; Missouri Secretary of State, *Official Manual of the State of Missouri 1945–1946* (Jefferson City, MO, 1945), 408–409, <http://cdm.sos.mo.gov/cdm/compoundobject/collection/bluebook/id/24089/rec/35>.

the window for unicameral reform in Missouri had closed.

POST-1934 UNICAMERALISM EFFORTS IN STATES WITHOUT SIGNIFICANT MALAPPORTIONMENT

The foregoing case studies have sought to demonstrate that the chief obstacle to the adoption of unicameral legislatures in Ohio and Missouri was opposition from rural areas with a vested interest in maintaining malapportioned legislative chambers. An obvious question thus arises: What about states besides Nebraska in which neither legislative chamber was heavily malapportioned? Because unicameralism proposals in these states would likely not have encountered strong rural opposition, another factor must explain why one-house legislatures did not spread to them.

At the outset, it is worth noting that the number of such states was relatively small. As of the mid-1930s, there were only ten states besides Nebraska in which capturing a majority in both chambers of the legislature necessitated winning seats accounting for at least 40 percent of the state population.⁸³ Nearly all of these states did not give their residents the option of amending the state constitution via the initiative petition process, so the spread of unicameralism through them was likely foreclosed by self-interested opposition from incumbent state legislators.

The experience of South Dakota provides an instructive example of how the lack of a citizen-initiated constitutional amendment option prevented the adoption of unicameralism in a state that otherwise seemed like a prime candidate for the reform. A largely rural state neighboring Nebraska with a strong populist tradition but without a highly

malapportioned legislature, South Dakota had also been the site of extensive debate on unicameralism in the 1920s, when Governors Peter Norbeck and W. J. Bulow both championed the reform.⁸⁴ Thus, the state would have appeared a very likely adopter of a one-house legislature when the attention of many across the country turned to the subject following the Nebraska referendum of 1934. But because South Dakota voters in the 1930s could not bypass their elected legislators to change the state's constitution, effort to adopt a one-house legislature for the state had to begin with the legislators themselves.⁸⁵ This was a very tall order, given that South Dakota legislators had spent the two previous decades deflecting many potential reforms to legislative structure that bore upon their political futures.⁸⁶ A proposed constitutional amendment, publicly and vocally supported by reform-minded Governor Tom Berry, was indeed introduced in the 1935 South Dakota legislative session.⁸⁷ The proposal generated little enthusiasm from most rank-and-file legislators or their leaders, however, and remained stuck in committee throughout most of the session. Toward the session's end, Gov. Berry decided to spend his limited political capital on pressuring legislators to advance a somewhat less contentious structural change—downsizing both chambers of the legislature while retaining its bicameral form.⁸⁸ Berry apparently reasoned that it would be easier to convince reluctant legislators to

84. Senning, *The One-House Legislature*, 41.

85. Interestingly, South Dakota was the first state in the country to adopt the citizen initiative in 1898, but it only did so for the purpose of enacting statutes. The Mount Rushmore State did not give its voters the ability to initiate changes to the state constitution until 1974.

86. Ralph O. Hillgren, "One Amendment to Be Voted on at 1938 Election," *Daily Argus-Leader*, March 5, 1937.

87. "Limit on Debt, Unicameral Bills Are Introduced," *Daily Argus-Leader*, January 19, 1935; "Unicameralism Plan Faces Uncertain Future at Pierre," *Daily Argus-Leader*, January 24, 1935.

88. "New Legislative Setup Scheduled for Vote in 1935," *Daily Argus-Leader*, March 9, 1935.

83. These states were Arkansas, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, South Dakota, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. Data are from Tyler, "The Majority Don't Count."

modestly shrink both legislative chambers than to eliminate one of them entirely. His gambit was successful: A proposed constitutional amendment downsizing South Dakota's bicameral legislature passed the state House and Senate, made it to the statewide ballot in 1936, and was ratified by the state's voters. The next few years of South Dakota politics were spent debating how to redistrict the state's newly downsized legislative chambers, and the unicameralism option thus faded from public discussion.⁸⁹

Nebraska's unique adoption of unicameralism was therefore made possible by its unusual status as a state that simultaneously had low malapportionment in its bicameral legislature as well as a citizen initiative option for constitutional change. Table 3 compares Nebraska to other states that were sites of significant unicameralism efforts in the early twentieth century on these two crucial factors.⁹⁰ As can be seen, most of the states with an initiative option for constitutional change suffered from high malapportionment in at least one of their legislative chambers, while most states with low malapportionment in both legislative chambers did not have an initiative option for constitutional change. Nebraska is the only state in the table in which both factors favorable to the adoption of unicameralism were present.

DISCUSSION

This article has told the story of a largely forgotten political reform movement that emerged across numerous states in the 1930s but consistently failed to achieve its goal. During the mid-1930s, unicameralism was not an obscure or quirky idea occasionally trotted out by a handful of delegates in state Constitutional Conventions, as it has become in modern American politics. Rather, in the wake of Nebraska's adoption of the one-house legislature, unicameralism briefly assumed the status of cause celebre among institutional reform advocates in states throughout the country. The problem these reformers ran into, however, was that adopting a unicameral legislature stood to do more than just bring greater efficiency, transparency, or democratic responsiveness to state government, as its advocates passionately argued. Rather, its opponents understood that unicameralism

89. "Problem of Apportionment is Studied by Committee, Preliminary Bill Offered," *Daily Argus-Leader*, January 11, 1937; Hillgren, "One Amendment to Be Voted on at 1938 Election."

90. States are considered to have low levels of malapportionment if capturing a majority in both of their legislative chambers necessitated winning seats accounting for at least 40 percent of the state population. States considered sites of significant unicameralism efforts met one of the following three benchmarks: (1) an organized interest group working on behalf of unicameralism existed in them across multiple years; (2) a unicameralism referendum was voted upon by the state electorate; or (3) a governor made unicameralism one of his signature issues and worked actively on its behalf.

Table 3. Factors Favorable to Adoption of Unicameral Legislatures in States with Significant Unicameralism Efforts in the Early Twentieth Century

State	Citizen Initiative for Constitutional Amendment	Low Malapportionment in Both State Legislative Chambers
Arizona	YES	NO
California	YES	NO
Kansas	NO	NO
Minnesota	NO	NO
Missouri	YES	NO
Nebraska	YES	YES
Ohio	YES	NO
Oklahoma	YES	NO
Oregon	YES	NO
South Dakota	NO	YES
Washington	NO	YES
Wisconsin	NO	YES

Sources. On malapportionment: Gus Tyler, "The Majority Don't Count." *The New Republic*, August 22, 1955, 13–15; on citizen initiative availability as of mid-1930s: New York State Constitutional Convention Committee, *Constitutions of the States and United States*; on the presence of significant unicameralism efforts: Alvin W. Johnson, *The Unicameral Legislature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938); John W. Senning, *The One-House Legislature*, John Senning, "Unicameral Movement in the Several States, 1912–1939" (unpublished manuscript), John Senning Papers, State Historical Society of Nebraska; letters to George Norris from unicameralism supporters in various states, George Norris Papers, Library of Congress, file 15. It is possible that I have missed a few states with significant unicameralism efforts that were unrecorded in these sources.

had the potential to fundamentally alter a state's balance of power, advantaging urban interests and Democrats at the expense of rural interests and Republicans.

The failed diffusion of unicameralism can essentially be explained by a basic rule of democratic politics: Institutional reforms are unlikely to occur within fora that are structured to give those benefiting from the status quo a political advantage. Among the thirty-six states in which voters did not have the ability to initiate constitutional referenda as of 1934, prospects for unicameral reform were very slim from the beginning because of self-interested opposition from incumbent state legislators. Even among states where citizen-initiated constitutional amendments were possible, however, structural barriers existed that prevented potential democratic majorities from effectively expressing themselves on the issue. In Ohio, the signature-gathering requirements for bringing initiatives to the ballot box gave the state's rural minority a veto power over such efforts, thereby blocking unicameral reform. The story in Missouri was more complicated, given the

simultaneous efforts to adopt a one-house legislature within the state Constitutional Convention and through the initiative petition process. Clearly, the unicameral movement in Missouri made some strategic missteps that may have doomed its efforts (had the Crusaders waited until after the Constitutional Convention concluded to launch their second petition drive, they might well have been successful, though this is by no means certain). But in Missouri, too, various structural barriers existed (most notably, the disproportionately rural composition of the Constitutional Convention) that limited the potential for a coherent democratic expression in favor of unicameralism.

Beyond merely answering a puzzling historical question, this article contributes to broader scholarly debates on a range of important matters. To begin with, the article sheds new light on a once-common topic of inquiry for political scientists: the influence of rural interests on American politics and public policy. Prior to the reapportionment revolution of the early 1960s, much writing on state politics emphasized the dominance of rural interests on policymaking in malapportioned state legislatures, with many going so far as to suggest that state legislative malapportionment was the primary reason behind the lethargy of state governments and the consequent intervention of the national government into many policy areas previously reserved for states.⁹¹ In later years, scholars demonstrated that, by causing rural areas to lose the disproportionate representation they had enjoyed in many legislative chambers, the reapportionment revolution played a crucial role in shifting state policymaking in a more urban, progressive direction.⁹² This study, however, shows that while most of the policy-based effects of rural overrepresentation in state legislatures may have disappeared, at least one long-term institutional legacy of rural overrepresentation in state government—the bicameral legislature—remains. Had it not been for rural concerns over apportionment in the 1930s and 1940s, the unicameral legislature likely would have spread to Missouri and possibly to Ohio as well as some of the other states in which citizen-initiated constitutional amendments were possible during this period. The adoption of unicameralism by several states in the New Deal Era may well have paved the

way for the more widespread adoption of unicameralism in later decades.⁹³

Relatedly, this study also suggests the need to revise scholarly understandings of the factors that have affected cameral choice in the American states. Extant scholarship has argued that the original decisions of most states to adopt bicameral legislatures in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was shaped by a normative belief in the value of bicameralism or fidelity to the federal constitutional structure, not by a desire to protect sparsely populated jurisdictions. To support this claim, scholars have pointed out that most states originally apportioned both of their legislative chambers on the basis of population rather than jurisdictional equality, and that it was only during the late nineteenth century (when cities began to overtake rural areas in terms of state population shares) that many states switched to guaranteeing localities legislative representation regardless of population.⁹⁴ From this perspective, then, state legislative malapportionment was a temporary political reality not fundamentally related to the choice of a bicameral legislature. This study, however, shows that when the issue of cameral choice re-emerged at the forefront of state politics following the Progressive Era and the 1934 Nebraska breakthrough, it was ultimately the desire to protect rural overrepresentation that prevented the spread of one-house legislatures. Thus, the decisions of states to *retain* the bicameral structure of their legislatures was intimately related to apportionment politics, even if their original decision to adopt it was not.

Next, this article provides an important contribution to the robust political science literature on policy diffusion across jurisdictions.⁹⁵ Recent work has voiced the concern that the diffusion literature

93. This idea gains support from the fact that, like the American states, most of the Canadian provinces started out with bicameral legislatures. However, over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all of the Canadian provinces gradually adopted unicameral legislatures. Brad Wall, "Time to Consider Abolition of the Senate," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (Winter 2013), http://www.revparl.ca/36/4/36n4e_13_wall.pdf.

94. Robert B. McKay, *Reapportionment, One Man, One Vote: A Statement of Basic Principles of Legislative Apportionment* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1962); Ansolabehere and Snyder, *The End of Inequality*. For a somewhat contrary view, see Robert G. Dixon, *Democratic Representation: Reapportionment in Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford, 1968).

95. The policy diffusion literature is vast and includes studies examining diffusion across countries, American states, and localities. Some of its most important works examining diffusion across American states include Jack L. Walker, "The Diffusion of Innovation among the American States," *American Political Science Review* 63 (1969): 880–99; Virginia Gray, "Innovation in the States: A Diffusion Study," *American Political Science Review* 67 (1973): 1174–85; Andrew Karch, *Democratic Laboratories: Policy Diffusion among the American States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Charles R. Shipan and Craig Volden, "The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008): 840–57; Graeme T. Boushey, *Policy Diffusion Dynamics in America* (New York: Cambridge, 2010).

91. Gordon E. Baker, *Rural Versus Urban Political Power: The Nature and Consequences of Unbalanced Representation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1955); V. O. Key Jr., *American State Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1956); Tyler, "The Majority Don't Count"; Richard Frost, "On Derge's Metropolitan and Outstate Legislative Delegations," *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959): 792–95. For contrary views, see, e.g., Thomas R. Dye, "Malapportionment and Public Policy in the States," *Journal of Politics* 27 (1965): 586–601; Herbert Jacob, "The Consequences of Malapportionment: A Note of Caution," *Social Forces* 43 (1964): 256–61.

92. Stephen Ansolabehere and James M. Snyder, *The End of Inequality: One-Person, One-Vote and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 2008).

suffers from a “pro-innovation bias” in which only diffusion “successes” across numerous jurisdictions are selected for study, thereby leading to inaccurate inferences.⁹⁶ While this critique is primarily focused on studies of substantive policy diffusion (which account for the bulk of the diffusion literature), it can also be applied to the smaller number of studies examining the diffusion of institutional reforms, almost all of which have focused on reforms that were widely adopted. Through examining diffusion efforts on behalf of an institutional reform that were ultimately unsuccessful, this article adds an important corrective to the preexisting bias in the literature. It suggests that structural factors that prevent the coherent expression of democratic majorities may be key to distinguishing between diffusion successes and failures, particularly when the policy or institutional reform at hand is a fairly simple or nontechnical one.

The findings of this study concerning the role of rural communities in scuttling unicameralism efforts in the 1930s and 1940s raise an important question: If fear of losing influence in one-house legislatures composed of equal-population districts was the primary reason why unicameralism efforts encountered significant opposition during these decades, why did the unicameralism cause not advance in the wake of the Supreme Court’s reapportionment decisions in the early 1960s? As noted previously, these decisions effectively mandated that population equality be “the highest redistricting priority” in the drawing of district lines for all representative assemblies in the country except the U.S. Senate.⁹⁷ In modern American politics, therefore, those who draw the lines for *all* state legislative chambers are required to ensure that districts are equal or nearly equal in population, with the representation of local jurisdictions a secondary consideration. Rural areas (and, by extension, Republicans) have thus lost the disproportionate representation they once enjoyed under many bicameral reapportionment arrangements and no longer have cause to fear that a transformation to unicameralism will lead to a further shift in power toward highly Democratic urban areas. One would therefore think that modern-day unicameralism efforts would be much more likely to experience success than those of the 1930s and 1940s. And yet, few significant unicameralism efforts

have emerged across the American states since that period.⁹⁸

While providing a thorough explanation for the failure of serious unicameralism movements to materialize after the reapportionment revolution is beyond the scope of this article, it is nonetheless possible to offer several potential reasons for their absence from modern state politics. First, since George Norris’s passing in 1944, no national leader of Norris’s stature has taken up the cause of unicameralism. As noted earlier, Norris was perhaps the leading progressive in the U.S. Congress during his four decades on Capitol Hill in the early twentieth century. Ideas that he championed immediately became popular among supporters of progressive reform all over the country. Moreover, Nebraska would almost certainly not have adopted the unicameral legislature absent Norris’s tireless campaigning on its behalf. Thus, it seems likely that the absence of a Norris-like figure advocating for a one-house legislature in any state is a key factor behind the lack of organized support for unicameralism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Second, it may be that efforts to mobilize large numbers of citizens on behalf of unicameralism in the contemporary U.S. are unlikely to be successful without the sort of highly objectionable inequalities in representation that existed in the early twentieth century. As emphasized throughout this article, the core supporters of unicameralism across the country were consistently motivated by a belief that unicameralism was superior to bicameralism as a mode of legislative organization. In Ohio, however, these true believers gained important backing from interests who supported a one-house legislature chiefly because they saw it as a means of achieving more equitable state legislative representation for the Buckeye State’s cities. There is little evidence that ending malapportionment was the primary motive of any of those involved with the unicameralism movement in Missouri (the dark warnings of Congressman Elmer aside), and no evidence whatsoever exists that George Norris and

96. Andrew Karch, Sean C. Nicholson-Crotty, Neal D. Woods, and Ann O. M. Bowman, “Policy Diffusion and the Pro-Innovation Bias,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69 (2016): 83–95.

97. Bruce E. Cain, Karin MacDonald, and Michael McDonald, “From Equality to Fairness: The Path of Political Reform Since *Baker v. Carr*,” in *Party Lines: Competition, Partisanship, and Congressional Redistricting*, ed. Thomas E. Mann and Bruce E. Cain (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 8.

98. Most of the very modest efforts to advance unicameralism in the second half of the twentieth century occurred within broader efforts to write or revise state constitutions. For example, during the Alaska Constitutional Convention of 1955–1956, delegates debated and rejected an effort to make the Alaska state legislature a unicameral body. See, e.g., Jonathan S. Ross, “A New Answer to an Old Question: Should Alaska Once Again Consider a Unicameral Legislature,” *Alaska Law Review* 27 (2010): 258–96. In the early 1970s, North Dakota and Montana each held state Constitutional Conventions in which supporters of unicameralism were a very modest presence. In each state, the unicameral proposals were voted down but later presented to voters as alternatives to the convention proposals for the legislature. It does not appear that the unicameralism referenda in either state were backed by organized campaigns on their behalf. Thus, it is not surprising that they failed in both states. Craig H. Grau and Dale W. Olsen, *Voting on Unicameral Referenda in North Dakota and Montana* (Fargo, ND: University of North Dakota Bureau of Governmental Affairs, 1976).

his confreres pursued a one-house legislature out of a desire to eliminate the very minimal amount of malapportionment that had existed in Nebraska. Nonetheless, the Ohio case suggests that urban anger over malapportionment may have been a key factor behind the growth of significant unicameralism movements in other states like California, Oklahoma, and Oregon during the same period.⁹⁹ If this is true, it may well be that, in the absence of malapportionment (and without a nationally recognized political leader like Norris working on its behalf), it is difficult to galvanize large numbers of Americans in the contemporary era around the cause of a one-house legislature (the sensibility of the idea notwithstanding).

At the same time, it is important to reemphasize that, while significant unicameralism efforts occurred in several states during the earliest decades of the

twentieth century, widespread enthusiasm for the unicameralism cause did not truly emerge until the Nebraska breakthrough of 1934 directed national attention toward the issue. It therefore stands to reason that the adoption of a one-house legislature in a single state today could generate substantial national interest and spawn significant new unicameralism movements across the country. Moreover, given the absence of malapportionment in modern state legislatures, such efforts would almost certainly not be met with the same level of resistance from rural or sparsely populated communities that the efforts documented in this article encountered. Thus, it is quite possible that a unicameral breakthrough in the early twenty-first century would set in motion a diffusion process with a remarkably different outcome from that which occurred a century earlier.

99. Investigating the post-1934 unicameralism movement in these states, as well as the others listed in Table 3, is beyond the scope of this article, but the author would be delighted if other researchers would take up this challenge.

