

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 2006

## Review of *One House: The Unicameral's Progressive Vision for Nebraska* By Charlyne Berens

James Johnson

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Johnson, James, "Review of *One House: The Unicameral's Progressive Vision for Nebraska* By Charlyne Berens" (2006). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 810.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/810>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**One House: The Unicameral's Progressive Vision for Nebraska.** By Charlyne Berens. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. 231 pp. Photographs, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$25.95 paper.

This is a book that needed to be written—a valuable, though flawed, addition to the literature on Nebraska's unique legislative body. It is the first addition to research

on the Nebraska Legislature in some time and presents a new approach to the subject: has the Unicameral lived up to the promises of its founders? The answer is, by and large, yes.

Berens sets her research within the context of the progressive and populist traditions that have significantly influenced the politics of the Great Plains states. While focusing mainly on Nebraska, the book describes the rise and fall of populism in nearby states and nationally, thereby showing the connection of the nonpartisan and unicameral movements to the regional and national politics of the early twentieth century.

Early in the book, Berens does a skillful job of explicating the rationale proponents used to promote establishing a small, nonpartisan, unicameral legislature: increased representation, efficiency, openness, and responsibility. The remaining chapters bring the practices of the Unicameral up to date, relying on extensive interviews with former and current legislators, lobbyists, and other knowledgeable sources. In the process, she shows how the practices of the Unicameral have developed since its inception—through changes in rules, the Nebraska constitution, and the legislature's own culture. The book also contains a valuable appendix that presents the results of surveys documenting the views of citizens and current and former legislators on the working of the Unicameral.

The study is not without flaws. At times it is tedious, gives short shrift to two of the “fathers of the Unicameral” (Professor John Senning and State Senator John Norton), overlooks some important previous research, and is insufficiently indexed. And there is excessive repetition. Although Berens develops the goals set for the new legislature in an early chapter, she repeats these at the beginning of each ensuing one, often reiterating material previously used.

Surprisingly, when discussing the Unicameral's lack of organization and structure, Berens does not mention the work of Susan Welch, which documents this through roll call analysis. In the chapter on interest groups, there is no mention of John Comer's research on the topic. She also makes no mention of Richard Marvel's doctoral dissertation, a curious omission since Marvel was a Speaker of the Unicameral and his dissertation contains an excellent overview of Nebraska's political culture and how the rules developed by the Unicameral fit that culture—a topic she pays close attention to.

Finally, I was disappointed that Berens gives almost exclusive credit for the creation of the Unicameral to George Norris. Although there is no doubt he was critical to its adoption, one is given the impression that it was his

brain child, when in fact he was more the entrepreneur and marketer of ideas originated by John Senning and John Norton.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the book does make a valuable contribution that recommends it to those interested in the history and development of Nebraska's nonpartisan Unicameral. Berens succeeds in showing where the Unicameral has lived up to its promise and where it has fallen short. **James B. Johnson**, *Department of Political Science, University of Nebraska at Omaha*.