

OKLAHOMA GOVERNORS

Jean Shumway Warner

In the 90 years since Oklahoma was granted statehood, 24 men have served as governor of Oklahoma (see Figure 1). Fearing excessive power in the hands of one individual, the framers of the Oklahoma Constitution intentionally created a weak state chief executive. The Oklahoma state legislature has shown little interest in surrendering any power to the executive branch. Indeed, in recent years, the legislature has passed laws permitting the legislative branch to encroach into traditionally executive realms. Unless there is strong public support for Constitutional reforms to strengthen the state's chief executive, the office of the Governor in Oklahoma will remain weak well into the twenty-first century.

Qualifications for Office

The Oklahoma Constitution requires that candidates for the position of governor be 31 years of age, a citizen of the United States, and a qualified elector of the state for 10 years prior to the election. The state's youngest governors, J. Howard Edmondson (1957-1961) and David L. Boren (1975-1979) were 34 years of age when they took office. Oklahoma's first native born governor was Robert S. Kerr (1943-1947). Raymond Gary (1955-1959) was the first state governor born in Oklahoma following statehood.

Term of Office and Term Limitations

The governor's term of office is four years beginning the second Monday in January following the election. Gubernatorial elections are held in even years between national elections for the President. The original state Constitution prohibited a governor from serving in consecutive terms. Upon impeachment of a governor, the person who succeeded the impeached governor also became ineligible to succeed himself in the governor's office. In 1966, the Constitution was amended to allow governors to serve two consecutive terms.

Dewey Bartlett (1967-1971) was the first governor eligible to succeed himself. He ran for re-election but lost to Democrat candidate David Hall in the general election by

FIGURE 1

Oklahoma Governors Since Statehood

Name	Party	Term in Office
Haskell, Charles Nathaniel	D	1907-1911
Cruce, Lee	D	1911-1915
Williams, Robert Lee	D	1915-1919
Robertson, James Brooks Ayers	D	1919-1923
Walton, John (Jack) Callaway	D	January 1923-November 1923
Trapp, Martin Edwin	D	1923-1927
Johnston, Henry Simpson	D	January 1927-March, 1929
Holloway, William Judson	D	1929-1931
Murray, William Henry	D	1931-1935
Marland, Ernest Whitworth	D	1935-1939
Phillips, Leon (Red) Chase	D	1939-1943
Kerr, Robert Samuel	D	1943-1947
Turner, Roy Joseph	D	1947-1951
Murray, Johnston	D	1951-1955
Gary, Raymond Dancel	D	1955-1959
Edmondson, James Howard	D	1959-1963
Nigh, George Patterson	D	January 6-14, 1963
Bellmon, Henry Louis	R	1963-1967
Bartlett, Dewey Follet	R	1967-1971
Hall, David	D	1971-1975
Boren, David Lyle	D	1975-1979
Nigh, George Patterson	D	1979-1987
Bellmon, Henry Louis	R	1987-1991
Walters, David Lee	D	1991-1995
Keating, Francis (Frank) A. II	R	1995-

2,181 votes (338,338 to 336,157). Hall (1971-1975) also intended to run for reelection, but his support faded when news leaked that he was the subject of an IRS investigation. He lost the state gubernatorial primary to David Boren in August, 1974. Hall was indicted by a grand jury just days after his term in office ended. Convicted of extortion and bribery, he served eight months in a federal prison.

George Nigh (1979-1987) is Oklahoma's longest serving governor having served a total of two four-year terms plus nine days. As Lieutenant Governor, Nigh became governor briefly in 1963 when Governor J. Howard Edmondson (1959-1963) resigned in order to complete U.S. Senator Robert S. Kerr's term following the Senator's death.

Nigh subsequently was elected governor in 1978. When he was reelected Governor in 1982, he became the first Oklahoma governor to serve two consecutive terms.

Henry Bellmon (1963-1967 and 1987-1991) served as governor twice but not in consecutive terms. Bellmon was not eligible to run for reelection when his first term in office ended in 1967. After serving in the U.S. Senate from 1969 through 1980, he ran successfully for governor a second time in 1986. He could have run for a second consecutive term and become the only governor to serve three terms. However, Bellmon chose not to run for reelection in 1990.

Relationship Between the Governor and Lieutenant Governor

The Constitution states that “in case of impeachment of the governor, or of his death, failure to qualify, resignation, removal from the State, or inability to discharge the powers and duties of the office, the said office, with its compensation, shall devolve upon the Lieutenant Governor for the residue of the term or until the disability shall be removed.” The lieutenant governor also serves as acting governor and enjoys the full powers of the governor, as defined by the Constitution, when the governor temporarily leaves the state.

In Oklahoma, the governor and lieutenant governor do not run on a single ticket nor are they elected as a team. They may be of the same political party but hold very different policy views, or they may belong to opposing political parties. Prior to 1994, Oklahomans elected Republican governors three times — Henry Bellmon to two terms (1963-1967 and 1987-1991) and Dewey Bartlett to one term (1967-1971). During all three terms, the lieutenant governors were Democrats — Leo Winters (1963-1967), George Nigh (1967-1971), and Robert S. Kerr III (1987-1991). When Oklahomans elected Republican Frank Keating governor in 1994, it marked the first time in state history that the voters also elected a Republican Lieutenant Governor, Mary Fallin.

Removal From Office

Oklahoma governors are subject to impeachment. Two governors have been successfully tried, convicted, and removed from office. The state’s fifth governor, Jack Walton, served from January 8, 1923, to November 19, 1923. Walton ran on a farmer-laborite platform and began his term of office by endorsing radical bills that alienated powerful legislators. Four months into his term of office, he turned his back on his Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League supporters. He placed political cronies on the government payroll and meddled so deeply in the administration of state universities that he ran off the presidents of both the University of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma Agriculture and Mechanical College. In hopes of reducing Ku Klux Klan violence, Walton placed Tulsa County under martial law and, later, suspended habeas corpus (a power not granted the governor in the Constitution). He eventually extended martial law to the entire state. The combination of an administration plagued by graft plus a rash, tyrannical management style led to Walton’s impeachment after only ten months in office (Isern, 1981).

The state's seventh governor, Henry S. Johnston, served close to half of his term (January 10, 1927 to March 20, 1929) before being impeached. The governor started his term badly when he lost several battles with the state legislature. He placed his trust in men of questionable character and dug in his heels when compromise might have served him better. Historian Kenneth L. Tracy concludes of Johnston that

Incidents that a more capable politician might have avoided gathered force until they led to Johnston's downfall....While there were perhaps adequate grounds for Johnston's removal from office, his impeachment was primarily politically motivated (Tracy, 1981:193).

Impeachment involves removal from office but does not prohibit the impeached individual from running for, and holding, elective office in the future. Following impeachment, Governor Walton was elected to the Oklahoma Corporation Commission from 1932 to 1939 and Governor Johnston served four years in the Oklahoma State Senate.

Limited Appointment Powers Contribute to a Weak Governor

The drafters of Oklahoma's Constitution placed substantial power in the hands of the Oklahoma state legislature and intentionally designed a weaker role for the state's governor. For instance, the Constitution states that the governor makes all appointments unless otherwise provided by law or the Constitution. In fact, the directors of many of the largest, most powerful state agencies are hired and fired by agency boards and commissions rather than by the governor. And while the governor does make appointments to these boards and commissions, the commissioners' terms of office are usually staggered over several years. For example, the nine members of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education serve staggered nine-year terms. Thus, several years must pass before a Governor has appointed a majority of the members on many Oklahoma boards and commissions. Exceptions to this rule do exist. For instance, upon taking office, the Governor may immediately replace all eight members of the Oklahoma Transportation Commission and the Secretary of the Oklahoma Department of Commerce. A 1935 Brookings Institution study described the effect of limited appointment powers on the Oklahoma governor:

According to the text books, the Governor and the elected constitutional officers are the heads of the executive departments. In practice, that is almost pure theory. They have the power and authority in so far as they play ball with the legislature and those individual members of the legislature who wish to dictate in administrative matters. If they do not play ball, they have to fight for their power and authority; and the legislators ordinarily can use a larger variety of weapons. The real control of administration in Oklahoma is largely in the hands of the legislature (Institute for Government Research, 1935, 7).

Almost a half century later, Governor Bellmon noted that the existence of so many

independent boards and commissions made up of holdover appointees makes the job of Oklahoma's governor extremely frustrating (Bellmon, 1992).

Reorganization Authority and Cabinet Structure

Throughout the state's history, Oklahoma governors have considered state government reorganization and Constitutional revision proposals as means of improving government efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. In recent decades, Governor Boren convened a Special Commission on the Reorganization of State Government which issued recommendations in 1979. Five years later, Governor Nigh appointed a Commission on Reform of Oklahoma State Government; the one-hundred member Commission released its report in November, 1984. During Governor Bellmon's administration, a thirty-two member Oklahoma Constitution Revision Study Commission proposed to modernize Oklahoma government's structure and operation through a series of modifications to the state constitution.

Among the many recommendations proposed in 1984 by the Commission on Reform of Oklahoma State Government was a cabinet structure of government organization to enhance coordination and oversight within the Executive branch of state government. Governor Nigh organized state agencies into an informal "mini-cabinet" structure until the legislature passed enabling legislation in 1986.

Governors Bellmon (1981-1991), Walters (1991-1995), and Keating (1995-present) have each structured their cabinet differently to reflect their interests and management styles. Unless the governor's cabinet secretaries are also directors of major state agencies, however, they are little more than gubernatorial staff members with responsibilities in a substantive area. For instance, Governor Keating has a Secretary of Education. But the administration of education programs and policies is actually controlled by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education and its Chancellor, the State Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction (a statewide elective office), and the State Board of Vocational/Technical Education and the Director of the Oklahoma Department of Vocational/Technical Education.

Legislative Power of the Governor

The governor may not introduce a bill in the state legislature. Instead, governors try to influence members of the House and Senate to introduce bills and amendments that reflect the governor's preferences. The governor's annual State of the State address provides an important forum for promoting policy initiatives. The governor's annual budget offers another opportunity to shape policy. Staging an elaborate bill signing ceremony is yet another way for a governor to highlight preferred legislative initiatives.

The most important way that governors influence the legislative process is by approving or vetoing bills passed by the state legislature. After an identical bill has been passed in both houses of the state legislature, the bill must be presented to the governor for action. The governor may veto the bill and return it to the legislature for further consideration; when this happens, the governor usually accompanies the bill

with comments outlining objections that led to the veto. If the legislature is in session at the time the bill is presented to the governor, the bill automatically becomes law after five days (excluding Sundays) unless it is vetoed by the governor. If the legislature adjourns before the bill is presented to the governor, the bill will die after 15 days — unless it is signed by the governor (this is known as the pocket-veto); bills making appropriation of money, however, are deemed to have been approved unless the governor actually vetoes the bill. A governor's veto can be overridden by a two-thirds vote of the legislature. A three-fourths vote of the legislature is required to override a bill that carries an emergency clause.

Oklahoma governors also can use the “line-item” veto to strike specific wording within appropriations bills; the same rules for overriding a veto apply to line-item vetoes. Governor Bellmon used his line-item veto power extensively during the second year of his second term in order to end the legislature's practice of including millions of dollars of “special projects” (i.e., pork) in appropriation bills.

Another way that the governor can influence legislation is through the power to call the legislature into special session. According to the original Constitution, only the governor could call a special session; the legislature was granted authority to call itself into special session following State Question No. 540 and Legislative Referendum No. 225 adopted in November, 1988. In the state's early years, “extraordinary” sessions were frequently called to handle fairly routine matters that the legislature did not have time to address during the regular session. More recently, special sessions have been called to address one, narrowly defined issue. The legislature is not required to act during a special session; if it chooses, it may meet and immediately adjourn. During his second term, Governor Bellmon called the legislature into special session four times; one session ran from August 1989 through April 1990 — thus running concurrently with a regular session of the legislature.

The Oklahoma governor is also charged with enforcing the laws of the state, keeping the domestic peace, and preserving order. The governor cannot suspend the writ of habeas corpus but does have limited quasi-judicial power to grant pardons and approve paroles upon a favorable report from the Pardon and Parole Board.

Oklahoma's Current Governor

Frank Keating was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 10, 1944, and was raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He holds degrees from Georgetown University and the University of Oklahoma Law School. Keating gained legislative experience when he served in the Oklahoma House of Representatives from 1972 through 1974 and in the Oklahoma State Senate from 1974 to 1981.

A Republican, Keating served in the Reagan and Bush administrations. He was a U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Oklahoma before moving to Washington, D.C., to become Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and, later, Associate Attorney General with the U.S. Department of Justice. From 1991 through 1993, he was General Counsel and Acting Deputy Secretary under Jack Kemp at the U.S. Department of

Housing and Urban Development.

Elected governor in November, 1994, Keating won praise for his leadership following the Murrah Federal Building bombing in April, 1995. Notably ideological and partisan, Keating experienced a rocky relationship with the legislature during his first two years in office. He enjoyed considerably more policy success during the highly productive 1997 legislative session. The Legislature passed a one billion dollar road construction program which represents the largest public works program in state history. Keating signed on to Lieutenant Governor Mary Fallin's worker's compensation reform proposals and saw much of those recommendations enacted into law.

During 1997, the Oklahoma legislature also passed utility deregulation legislation and major corrections and criminal justice reform including truth in sentencing and a community corrections program. A somewhat controversial policy endorsed by Keating and passed by the legislature was the privatization of the University of Oklahoma's teaching hospitals. Funding for education programs fared well in the 1997 legislature although Keating failed to win passage of his education reform proposals regarding merit pay for teachers, charter schools, school choice, and a core curriculum mandate.

It is difficult enough for a Democratic governor to win passage of favored programs and policies in Oklahoma's Democrat-dominated legislature. As a Republican governor, Keating faces an even more daunting challenge. But Keating has firsthand experience as a member of the Oklahoma House and Senate, a wide range of policy initiatives ready for legislative consideration, and an impressive level of enthusiasm and energy to bring to the task. In spite of the generally weak position of the Oklahoma executive, Governor Keating, his cabinet members and staff, and Republican members of the Oklahoma legislature can anticipate at least some degree of policy success during the remainder of Keating's first term as governor.

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