

How an academic experiment evolved into an historic 44-year Kansas political odyssey

## **Nuggets on 10 governors from longest-serving legislator in state history**

By **Tim Carpenter** - December 28, 2020

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Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, a Topeka Democrat, began his political career in 1976 with a campaign for the Kansas House and survived an astonishing 44 years in the Legislature, a state record. (Tim Carpenter/Kansas Reflector)

TOPEKA — Rookie school teacher Anthony Hensley decided to offer his El Dorado civics students a taste of real-world politics by running for a seat in the Kansas House.

In that bicentennial year of 1976, Hensley hustled back to Topeka where he grew up to carry out this academic experiment. He filed to challenge an incumbent Democrat. He was 22 years old and stayed at his mother's house. With no political track record, initial prospects of success in the primary election weren't great.

"As the summer went on, I worked harder and harder," Hensley told the Kansas Reflector podcast.

I won the election. And, I can recall like it was yesterday that the one person that was most surprised was my mother. She kept saying, 'I can't believe you won. I can't believe you won.' "

Hensley, who at that moment launched a state-record 44-year career in the Kansas House and Senate, spent \$868 in that first primary campaign. It's an astonishingly tiny amount by today's standards.



Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, a Topeka Democrat, said he was surprised to lose a campaign for re-election in November to Republican Rick Kloos. (Tim Carpenter/Kansas Reflector)

In 2020, Hensley spent about \$120,000 on his re-election — and lost by 650 votes out of 31,000 cast. Republican Rick Kloos ousted Hensley by appealing to rural GOP voters in District 19 who championed the causes of President Donald Trump. Kloos benefitted from a national GOP investment of about \$145,000 on his behalf. He also conducted an unusual television and yard-sign advertising blitz that accentuated his connection to God's Storehouse church and thrift store in Topeka.

"Obviously, I was surprised. I didn't see it coming," Hensley said.

"There was a huge voter turnout in the Osage County area. I think there was a real Trump factor and all of that. I think there was a red wave down there. I lost that county by about 2,

900 votes. And, I didn't win enough in Shawnee County. I didn't have a large enough margin of victory to make up for losing Osage County by that much."

He will leave office in January, but his record of legislative service in Kansas is unlikely to be surpassed given the high rate of turnover in the Capitol.

It almost didn't end this way, because Hensley considered not running for re-election in 2020. He agreed to stick around one more term to help Democrats in 2022 with the Kansas Legislature's remapping of political districts — a process repeated every 10 years.

It's an epic opportunity for the majority party to alter district boundaries to damage minority party candidates in campaigns for 125 seats in the Kansas House, 40 Kansas Senate seats, four seats in the U.S. House and the state Board of Education's 10 seats. In 2012, the process in Kansas was so infected by political bickering the mapping had to be done by a panel of federal judges.

"There's no question that redistricting will be a major issue in this next term," Hensley said. "There's no doubt that it won't be a very good experience for Democrats."

### **Bennett: 'Almost arrogant'**

Hensley was introduced to the highest level of American political life through an American Legion Boys State visit to the White House for an audience with President Richard Nixon. He went on to meet most presidents since then, including Republicans George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush as well as Democrats Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. He hasn't met Trump and didn't vote for the GOP nominee in November.

"I think it's a good thing that ... we have this change," Hensley said.

"We're going away from a president who really went out of his way to divide this country, tragically divide this country, and pit people against each other and make scapegoats out of



people.

Senate Minority Leader Anthony

Hensley, of Topeka, said he was relieved President Donald Trump failed in his 2020 re-election bid and believes President-elect Joe Biden can work to bring common cause to the United States. (Tim Carpenter/Kansas Reflector)



He said it would be difficult for President-elect Joe Biden to bring unity to the nation given the residual influence of Trump.

As Hensley gained seniority in the House and Senate, he developed relationships with Kansas governors starting with Republican Bob Bennett who held the job from 1975 to 1979 and carrying forward to Democrat Laura Kelly, a former Topeka senator elected in 2018.

“Bob Bennett was very intelligent, but very aloof. Almost arrogant. He just became a very unpopular governor, mainly because of how he treated state employees,” Hensley said.

Hensley said few people gave Democrat John Carlin, who was speaker of the Kansas House, a chance of defeating Bennett. But Carlin was the last Democrat to serve two full terms as governor, holding office from 1979 to 1987.

“John Carlin pulled what was maybe one of the biggest upsets in Kansas political history,” Hensley said. “John Carlin was an excellent legislator and a really good strategist.”

The next gubernatorial election went to Mike Hayden, a Republican who also had been Kansas House speaker. He had the unfortunate timing of being in office while the state conducted statewide property reappraisal and classification. Hayden lost re-election in 1990.

“Yeah, he was a one-termer,” Hensley said. “The reappraisal issue was very punitive, particularly on Main Street — small business people.”

### **Finney: ‘Really tough’**

In the 1990 election, Democrat Joan Finney defeated Carlin in the Democratic primary and Hayden in the general election. Finney was pro-life, served as state treasurer for four terms and became the state’s first woman governor.

“She was really tough. I always said she was meaner than a junk-yard dog. But just an incredible politician who had a tremendous memory for people’s names,” Hensley said. Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley worked with 10 governors and described Democratic Gov. Joan Finney as “meaner than a junk-yard dog” and Republican Gov. Bill Graves as a “good guy” who could have spent political capital to cut the state’s sales tax on food. (Tim Carpenter/Kansas Reflector)

The state’s voters turned back to the GOP by electing Bill Graves, who had been secretary of state and part of the family’s prominent Salina trucking company. Hensley said Graves easily won both of his campaigns for governor, but was hesitant to make use of his mandate.

In a conversation long after leaving office, Hensley said, Graves expressed regret for not devoting a portion of the state's huge budget surpluses to remove Kansas' sales tax on food, which remains one of the highest in the country.

"Bill Graves didn't spend his political capital like he should have," Hensley said. "He's a good guy. There was a whole lot more I think he could have done."

Democrat Kathleen Sebelius, who had served in the Kansas House and as state insurance commissioner, was elected governor in 2002. She benefitted from a fractured Republican Party. Her father, John Gilligan, had been a Democratic governor of Ohio. Sebelius left office in 2009 before the end of her second term to work as secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in the Obama administration. She was in charge during rollout of the Affordable Care Act.

"She understood the legislative process very well. And, of course, her claim to fame was the 2005 school finance special session that we had, where we passed a bill that significantly increased money for local schools," Hensley said.

### **No fan of Brownback**

Republican-turned-Democrat Mark Parkinson, who finished first in his law school class at the University of Kansas, served in the Kansas House and Senate before agreeing to be Sebelius' lieutenant governor running mate in 2006. When Sebelius left, he became governor.

"It was a disappointment to me that Mark decided not to run for governor because had he run for governor I don't think we would have ever had Sam Brownback as governor," Hensley said.



Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley ends his 44-year career in the Legislature in January, but regrets Gov. Mark Parkinson's decision not to challenge GOP nominee Sam Brownback in the 2010 race for governor. (Tim Carpenter/Kansas Reflector) Hensley said he considered Brownback, who served in the U.S. Senate and was elected governor twice, the "worst governor that I've ever served with." He was critical of Brownback's income tax cuts and subsequent budget problems for education, transportation and other core functions of state government. Brownback departed early to take a job in the Trump administration and Jeff Colyer was sworn in as governor.

Colyer had been the Kansas House and Senate before serving under Brownback as lieutenant governor. He lost the 2018 GOP primary for governor to Kris Kobach, who lost to Kelly.

"Here again, you know, he's a nice guy, but he really kind of, I think, basically continued Brownback policies and wasn't able to win the Republican primary," Hensley said.

The retiring senator has been closest to Kelly, who served with him in the Senate from 2005 to 2019. She's concentrated as governor on budget, education and health issues along with the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's historical in Kansas, from the standpoint that she is the third Democratic female governor in Kansas. Joan Finney, Kathleen Sebelius, Laura Kelly. And, we are the only state in the country that can make the claim that we've elected three Democratic women to the office," Hensley said.

### **Rearview mirror**

Hensley transitioned to the Kansas Senate in 1992, after appointed by Finney to the unexpired term of Sen. Nancy Parrish. He came into the Senate with a group of 21 newcomers. No other member of that class remained in the Senate after 2012.



Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, a retired public school teacher, takes pride in working on bills in the Legislature that improved state aid to K-12 education. (Tim Carpenter/Kansas Reflector)  
In all, Hensley said he will have served with more than 150 senators during a 28-year period. He was leader of Senate Democrats for nearly a quarter century.

"I was involved in nearly every major issue in that two dozen years — Medicaid, school finance, redistricting, the budget, whatever the case may be," Hensley said.

"I look back in my years in the House, one of the accomplishments I'm most proud of is, I was directly involved in the 1992 school finance law, which is basically still on the books."

He expressed disappointment Kansas hadn't yet expanded access to Medicaid to as many as 150,000 people statewide. It's likely the GOP-led House and Senate will continue to block the Affordable Care Act program, which has been enacted by 39 states and the District of Columbia. In part, expansion is opposed by Kansas' GOP legislative leadership because it's among Kelly's top priorities.

In the end, he said, he looks to legislation on education funding as a measure of accomplishment that cannot be minimized.

"I was involved in 2019, when we did pass a school finance law that the Kansas Supreme Court has now found to be constitutional, and adequate and fair. And, school finance has always been one of the major issues that I have worked on. I think it goes without saying it's a natural fit for me, because I did spend 43 years in the classroom as a classroom teacher."

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