

## What Do Kansas Governors Do<sup>1</sup>

David Heinemann: The public image of a governor is usually one of posing in their office for photographs with constituents, shaking hands at receptions, making speeches at various events and ceremonial bill signings. Those images represent the public side of the job of being a governor. This video will look at the “real work” of being a governor through the oral histories of Governors Bill Graves and Kathleen Sebelius.

Graves and Sebelius entered public service in very different ways. Sebelius was immersed in politics from the age of five on when her father first ran for public office and he ultimately served as governor of Ohio.

*[Sebelius transcript page 1]*

*My dad, John, better known as Jack Gilligan, ran for office for the first time when I was five. So I really grew up thinking that's what families did in the fall. They went door to door. They put up yard signs. Nobody ever told me it was a volunteer activity.*

*He won some elections; he lost some elections, but he served as a member of City Council. He served as a member of Congress, and he ultimately was Governor of Ohio. That really taught me a lot about politics on the ground, about elections, about parties. He really built the Democratic Party in Cincinnati. There wasn't a Democratic Party in Cincinnati when he started to run.*

DH: Graves started working in the political arena by accident. He had grown up assuming he would work in the family's trucking business. He was pursuing a Master's degree in business management, when his father called to tell him he had sold Graves Truck Line and that “you're going to need to find something else to do with your life.” He ended up working for the George H.W. Bush campaign in 1980 because most other young people with political ambitions were working for “favorite son” Bob Dole. He was offered a job by Jack Brier, Secretary of State. In 1986, he ran for that office himself.

*[Graves transcript p. 5]*

*Well, you've got to get comfortable basically walking up to strangers and extending your hand and saying, “Hi, I'm Bill Graves. I'm running for Secretary of State. I'd appreciate your support,” whatever the pitch might be. But again I think it goes back to, all the way back to high school speech and debate. At Kansas Wesleyan, I actually did some theatre, and I loved performing on stage. I actually did some community theatre following that. I certainly had a comfort level which went a long way in helping me with public appearances and self-promotion.*

DH: Graves and Sebelius both served as Kansas Governors. Graves, a Republican, served from 1995 to 2002. He was followed by Sebelius, a Democrat. She served from 2003 to 2009. Graves

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<sup>1</sup> Original script written by Pat Michaelis. 02/24/2023. Edited and narrated by former Representative and Speaker pro tem [David Heinemann](#) who also served as videographer and member of the Kansas Oral History Board of Directors.

took office as the Republican Party in Kansas was beginning to split between moderates and conservatives. He described the situation he encountered.

*[Graves transcript. P. 9]*

*I thought, "Okay, we have some differences of opinion. Let's sit down, and let's try to work through the magnitude"—we had surplus of revenues. We were going to do some tax cuts. Let's have a conversation about a compromise, where we meet in the middle to make meaningful tax cuts, but not ruin sort of the immediate future of the State. Social issues, abortion was high on everybody's radar at the time. Guns were already emerging as an issue. There was plenty to disagree about. What was disappointing to me, Mike, was that however far you were willing to go to compromise, the goal post kept moving. If you said, "I'll cut taxes this much," then the response was, "Well, we need this much plus." "Well, okay. We'll do this much plus this much." They'd say, "Well, no, we need"—there was always sort of a bar too high.*

*My job was to take care of everybody in this state, to do the best I could to provide public policy for all Kansans, not just Kansans who voted for me, not just Kansans who were members of the Republican Party, all Kansans. So I didn't really hesitate or feel any reason not to reach out to members of the Democrats in the Kansas legislature and say, "Can we put a coalition together, if you will, of like-minded Republicans and Democrats and take care of the people's business?" And that's what we did.*

DH: Graves gave his cabinet officers the freedom to offer him suggestions about how they could improve services for the public.

*[Graves transcript p. 11]*

*I loved it when Rochelle Chronister walked in here and said, "I have an idea about"—we called it "privatization." It was really subcontracting some of the services for social service programs for Kansans. It was something we'd never done before. People had criticized the way the state was running some of those programs, and I said, "Let's do it."*

*Dean Carlson was front and center on coming up with a 13 billion dollar multi-modal transportation program. Steve Williams had a number of innovative little programs. I remember, he walked in and said, "You know, we have a lot of people that like to hunt in this state, but there's not enough public hunting ground. So I have this idea. Let's offer farmers a little stipend, and we're going to create something called the Walk-In Hunting Program, and if you participate and you let your land be available for guys to come and hunt on, we'll pay you"—I don't know. Was it a dollar an acre? It was some amount of money, but it was just sort of those little creative things that I would have never thought of those things.*

DH: One of the insights that Graves shared with his interviewer Mike Matson was about the entirety of state government in the context of the political tensions of the present. making state government work.

*[Graves transcript p. 14]*

*The other thing I'd say, Mike, is, and you know this, making state government work is hard. It's really hard work. These are big operations with a lot of people. They spend a lot of money. They touch a lot of people every day, and I think there are some Republicans who have decided that failing to be able to actually manage these programs, we'll just do away with the programs. That's how we'll solve our waste and inefficiencies problem. We just will not even have the program, and then there won't be a chance for waste and inefficiency. I don't view that as the right answer. The right answer is figure out where the waste and inefficiency is and fix it. Go find better people to do whatever it is you committed to do. So, yeah, I'm an Old School Republican. I'm still a Republican. I think that the pendulum will eventually swing back, but I don't know if I'll see it in my lifetime.*

DH: Kathleen Sebelius describes how Graves worked with her in the transition of their administrations.

*[Sebelius transcript p.8]*

*I worked very closely with outgoing Governor Graves who was totally spectacular at, say, departing Governor to work with me on—because he put forward the first budget, and I got to sort of amend it, but it was really his framework budget, and the allotments that you're referring to, the cuts that he made were cuts that he came to me with and said, "Why don't I do these now and kind of save you at least this chapter of pain?" And we worked together on "Don't cut so much here. How about there?" But he took those on himself, which was really a great gift, coming into an office so I didn't, as you say, had to start with slashing funds away. Then we came up with kind of an interesting scheme, which wasn't a scheme. It was a framework. The legislature, the law says that the Governor has to submit a balanced budget, and the notion was that I couldn't—at this point that legislature was less balanced than it was when I served in the legislature. There were more Republicans and fewer Democrats, and I knew what I could not do was get Republicans to spend money in areas where I wanted to spend.*

*So working with the Budget Director, we spent every dime. I put together a budget that spent 100 percent of every dime I could find. Then we had a little proviso that went into the budget that said, "If the legislature wants to cut funding to comply with the Balanced Budget Act," or whatever the official title was, we gave them a percent that you cut across the board, knowing that no one would ever do that. But the last thing that I wanted to do was give a road map of how to cut money out of programs that I felt were really important and hoping that that expanded spending would get us to the point where the economy would begin to tick upwards.*

DH: When District Court Judge Terry Bullock of Topeka ruled the school finance plan unconstitutional, Sebelius decided to call a special session [of the Legislature]. But first she traveled around the state to get input from the Kansans about what they wanted in their school finance plan.

*Sebelius transcript p. 11-12*

*We had hearings around the state. So this preceding the call for the legislature, did sort of hearings and town halls around the state to talk about what we had to do for school funding,*

*knowing that it was—I think school funding is the most personal issue. It also is an issue that's most important everywhere. And everybody knew if you close a school, you close a town, that it was important to balance rural/urban. It was important to have excellence in schools, and it was a real value that Kansans shared—Republican, Democrat, independent. I mean, people believed K through 12 education was really fundamentally the job of state government and something that they were willing to pay taxes to fund. That was critical.*

*So we called them back. I had an outline of a bill, knew what they had put together. But the Court wasn't shy about giving parameters: how much money, how it had to be done, and how it had to power equalized, how much you could balance rich versus poor, and put together a coalition again of some moderate House members, some of whom paid the price of their legislative seats by participating in that, including Bill Kassebaum, Nancy's son who was part of that coalition. But it was a really urgent need, and we could say, "Okay, we've got the Supreme Court on one hand. We've got schools that have to open in September. If you want your kid to go back to school in August, we have to come back this summer and get this done."*

*It was not easy, but again I think people understood. I think it was important to get their hometown constituents ready to roll—the School Board Association, the folks at the local level,*

DH: Near the end of the interview, Sebelius was asked to sum up her experiences as governor.

*Sebelius transcript p. 15*

*Wow. That's a hard thing to do. I would say that there's no question being a legislator made me a much better Governor because I knew how the legislature worked. I knew what people needed and wanted. It made me much more able to kind of put the coalitions together, build the program, identify policies where people would come together, and no question being Governor made me a much better Secretary.*

DH: The excerpts from these oral history interviews provide only a small sample of what a governor does. Both Graves and Sebelius had strong commitments to public service and to serving the interests of all Kansans. Please check out the [Kansas Oral History Project website](#) to access the full transcripts as well as interviews with other Kansas political figures.