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**Can Stars Change the System? Governor Jesse
Ventura and the Quest for a Unicameral Legislature**

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There has not been an amendment added to the United States Constitution since 1992. The last amendment, the 27th, addressed Congressional term limits and was originally proposed by the Founders in 1789. It has therefore been over fifty years since the last newly devised amendment, the 26th, which lowered the voting age to 18, was passed.¹ This long stretch has can be at least partially attributed to the high bars to clear for passage. While there are high barriers required of congressional and state approval, a major battle is also generating enough conversation for the proposed reform to be taken seriously. The difficulties with institutional reform are broader than the specific context of the United States federal governments, which has changed significantly in more subtle ways. Institutions are sticky; they resist changes, especially big ones.

During the same time period that national institutional reform through amendments has largely been stalled, political messaging has been profoundly altered by “celebrity politics.” Hollywood stars and gurus were increasingly relied on as donors, movers of public opinion, and advisors on marketing and communication. Presidents and other politicians also began to behave like actors, seeking to win the support of the public for performances and appearances. While celebrity politicians existed before the 20th century, the line between entertainment and politics blurred more than ever before. The game was increasingly played by those who looked good on television, carried themselves like movie stars, and were as comfortable on a talk show as in a policy meeting. The ultimate expressions of celebrity politics are when true celebrities, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, crossed from entertainment into political office. Those urging institutional reforms would much as everyone else in politics have to adjust to the developing era of celebrity politics, which presented challenges and opportunities.

¹ “America’s Finding Documents: The Constitution Amendments 11-27,” *archives.gov*, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/amendments-11-27>

This paper will examine the intersection of institutional reform and celebrity politics through the use of a case study. It will explore celebrity Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota and his quest to reform Minnesota's legislature from a bicameral system to a single-house system. The case reveals how celebrity politics have the ability to reinvigorate reform movements but are unlikely to result in their success. Celebrity politics galvanize public interest, create spectacle, and drive attention, all of which can with the right voice bring a reform issue into the public conversation. Yet the features of celebrity politics complicate the backroom negotiating and political compromise necessary to push an institutional reform past the finish line.

Background

Institutional reform is difficult. An institution is frequently theorized as a feature of political and social life, including both formal rules and informal norms, that cannot be changed easily or instantaneously.² Institutions carry a path-dependent inertia. Once everyone has adapted to a specific system, it is difficult to dislodge it and force everyone to learn a new system. Institutional development may include subtle changes within institutions, but reform to a major institution is often understood to require a "critical juncture," a time when exogenous conditions create an opening for wholesale institutional change.³

The history of one proposed reform in the United States makes this clear. The single-house, or unicameral, legislature, is not an especially popular idea in American state capitals. For the first one hundred years of American history, there was little deviation from the consensus that

² James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," in *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, ed. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-37, p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

two-house systems modeled on the national system were best.⁴ However, by the early 1900s, some reformers in the Progressive Era began to question this logic and argue for state legislatures to be condensed into a single house.⁵ The lone success story for the single-house movement was Nebraska, led by Senator George Norris, who over the course of his forty-year career in Congress became a Nebraskan legend. He advocated a unicameral legislature because he believed it would be easier to understand for the average person. A single house would eliminate conference committees which reconciled bills between the two houses, making the system more democratic and accountable.⁶ Nebraska became the first state to approve a unicameral legislature in 1934, and it was seated in 1937.⁷ The Nebraskan success story is usually chalked up to two factors. The Great Depression created the external conditions necessary because of the need for the state to save money, and the larger-than-life political influence of Norris was able to swing public and elite opinion.⁸

Other states attempted to pick up the reform shortly thereafter, such as Ohio and Missouri. A 2018 study by Adam S. Myers pointed to rural malapportionment as the differing factor, as rural regions in Ohio and Missouri were opposed to losing the extra influence they had acquired in a bicameral system. He also concluded an influential factor was partisan control consequences, as other states adopting the unicameral legislature would have resulted in diminished Republican control.⁹ This is consistent with a 2024 paper by Haffert et al. which

⁴ Adam S. Myers, "The Failed Diffusion of the Unicameral Legislature, 1934-1944," *Studies in American Political Development*, September 18, 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "History of the Nebraska Unicameral," Nebraska Legislature, accessed June 27, 2024, https://nebraskalegislature.gov/about/history_unicameral.php; Chuck Slocum, *A Pox on One House: The Architect of the Lobbying Effort for a Unicameral Government Explains What Went Wrong*, (Minnesota: Chuck Slocum, 2000).

⁸ Peverill Squire, *The Evolution of American Legislatures*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 268-269.

⁹ Adam S. Myers, "The Failed Diffusion of the Unicameral Legislature, 1934-1944."

found that parties frequently abstain from reforming institutions because voters punish parties for institutional reforms because they perceive any changes as for a partisan advantage.¹⁰

The growth of modern celebrity politics represented a changed landscape for reformers. Historian Alan Schroeder in his 2004 book *Celebrity-in-chief* explores how show business took over the White House. He explains how presidents came to see movie stars and celebrities as useful for messaging and reaching the people, while entertainers are lured by the access to power. Presidents in particular behave like movie stars—they focus intensely on their appearance, utilizing scriptwriters and hairstylists and playing a part with the help of their studio spin team.¹² He concludes by comparing the relationship between Washington and Hollywood to that of an unhealthy couple—Washington is infatuated with the glamour of Hollywood, but Hollywood offers no policy substance and needs Washington’s power.¹³ In Schroeder’s analysis, politicians should be careful not to be enamored with the glitz of stars, who can win applause but may not have the substantive ideas and skills needed for political change.

Schroeder’s work was built on by historian Kathryn Cramer Brownell in her book *Showbiz Politics*, which similarly traces the growth of Hollywood in American political life. Brownell emphasizes that beyond just the celebrity appearances with politicians and the celebrities who themselves ran for office, media strategies were increasingly shaped by those with Hollywood connections. Politics now meant treating politicians as celebrities by cultivating

¹⁰ Parties refrain even when the institutional reform would not benefit them, as the public still perceives the change as in their favor.

¹¹ Lukas Haffert, Amy Pond, and Tobias Rommel, “The Electoral Costs of Reforming Political Institutions,” Harvard Department of Economics, March 19, 2024, haffert-pond-rommel2024pe-seminar-reforms.pdf (harvard.edu).

¹² Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-chief: how show business took over the White House*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 303.

and maintaining a public image.¹⁴ Brownell writes that by the end of the 20th century, the line between entertainment and politics had “fully disappeared.”¹⁵

Mark Wheeler, a professor of journalism, explored the impact of the celebrity politics in his work *Celebrity Politics*. He supports the argument of political scientist John Street that celebrity politics can reinvigorate politics by galvanizing public interest and recapturing public agency.¹⁶¹⁷ He summarizes the field findings that celebrity politics is characterized by an emphasis on personality over policy and spectacle over substance. Good-looking people who can provide a sound bite are more successful in celebrity politics, but when the public only sees a celebrity they may miss the substantive politics.¹⁸ Celebrity politics teaches that the path to political success is through appeals for public opinion, soundbites, and the careful cultivation of a public persona.

This paper explores the intersection of celebrity politics and institutional reform. The infusion of Hollywood into political affairs was a major transformation, one which touched on every policy area. Celebrity politics has only continued to strengthen since the 1990s with the growth of social media and the candidacies of celebrities such as Mehmet Oz, Herschel Walker, and Donald Trump. This paper shows how celebrity politics unlocked new possibilities for a floundering institutional reform movement, the one pushing for a unicameral legislature in Minnesota. The election of a celebrity, professional wrestler Jesse “The Body” Ventura, to the office of governor and his personal appeal revived the unicameral effort. However, his continued

¹⁴ Kathryn Cramer Brownell, *Showbiz Politics*, (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), p. 156-157.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁶ For more on Street’s arguments on celebrity politics, see his 2004 article *Celebrity Politician: political style and popular culture*.

¹⁷ Mark Wheeler, *Celebrity Politics*, first proof, (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2013), 171.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

embrace of celebrity politics ended up dooming the campaign by limiting negotiation in favor of confrontation and spectacle.

To some extent, the problems of celebrity politics exist in every policy domain. Institutional reform is particularly influenced by celebrity politics for a few reasons. First, discussions of institutional reform are discretionary, not required for the functioning of government like budgeting. One well-connected celebrity can succeed in launching the conversation, but elected officials can walk away from negotiating at any time. There are not government shutdowns or timeline requirements to force the conversation to continue. Institutional reform efforts are also more difficult than reform efforts in other areas because of the higher barriers for approval and the natural inertia of institutions. Even minor negative effects of celebrity politics on negotiations can have a major impact. Institutional reform is also less divisible—either a legislature has one house or two houses, it cannot be negotiated to find a middle place as easily as a budget can. The reduced issue divisibility again makes compromise more difficult and the need for good relationships between parties and creative deal-making stronger.

Jesse Ventura's effort for a unicameral legislature represents the ideal case study for analyzing the overlap between celebrity politics and institutional reform. Ventura has been cited as an example of celebrity politics and "politainment" in scholarly literature, and as a member of the minor Reform Party he was dedicated to changing the systems of government in Minnesota.¹⁹

This paper draws on primary and secondary sources on the life and gubernatorial term of Jesse Ventura. His autobiography, *I ain't got time to bleed*; an exposé by one his former

¹⁹ David Schultz, "Celebrity Politics in a Postmodern Era: The Case of Jesse Ventura," *Public Integrity*, 3:4, 363-376, DOI: [10.1080/15580989.2001.11770886](https://doi.org/10.1080/15580989.2001.11770886); James A. Janack, "The Rhetoric of "The Body:" Jesse Ventura and Bakhtin's Carnival," *Communication Studies*, 57: 2, August 21, 2006.

employees, *Governor Ventura: 'The Body' Exposed*; and the work of political reporter Tom Hauser, *Inside the Ropes with Jesse Ventura*; provide the bulk of the biographical details. Primary sources include the records of the most major Minnesota newspapers, the *Star-Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press*. National press coverage of Ventura provides a broader perspective. Some of these newspaper and magazine sources are available online, others can be found at the Minnesota Historical Society State Archives in St. Paul. Also housed at the Minnesota Historical Society are the records of the advocacy group the Minnesotans for a Single-House Legislature (MSHL), which include memos, mailing materials, communications, and other primary sources on their strategies for pursuing a unicameral legislature. To my knowledge, this is the only time the MSHL records have been studied or primary research has been done on the Minnesota effort for a unicameral legislature. These sources combine to provide the story of how Ventura's celebrity politics boosted the unicameral effort and yet ultimately doomed it.

The Mind's Beginning

Ventura has never been afraid to ruffle feathers, figuratively and literally. As a professional wrestler, his colorful costumes often included a bright-colored feathered boa.²⁰ He donned a costume the night of his inauguration in front on a crowd of 14000, proclaiming for one night "The Body" was back.²¹ While boa-wearing is rarely a cause for political concern, some of his colorful comments were much more damaging. One of his favorite stories, relayed in his

²⁰ Paul Gray, "Body Slam," allpolitics on cnn.com, originally *TIME*, (CNN, November 16, 1998), <https://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/time/1998/11/09/minnesota.slam.html>.

²¹ Chuck Haga, "Person to person: Ventura connects," *Star Tribune*, April 13, 1999, A12, Star Tribune online archive.

autobiography, was of visiting a brothel in Nevada right before he shipped out with the Navy, saying he was the only one to leave making a profit, having sold a wrestling belt.²²

As governor, his wave-making statements continued. He attracted controversy due to a February 2000 appearance on *the Late Show with David Letterman*, where he reiterated his criticism of single mothers, saying it is not the government's fault their husbands or boyfriends ran off, and said he liked Minneapolis better than St. Paul. This was in part, he claimed, because the streets make no sense in St. Paul and mused they might have been designed by the perpetually drunken Irishmen.²³ In September 2000, just as Ventura was prepping for the unveiling of his legislative plan dubbed the Big Plan, an interview of his with *Playboy* was released, which quickly became infamous. Ventura managed to hit a number of controversial topics in the interview, as he described organized religion as a "sham" for the "weak-minded," described a Navy sexual harassment scandal as much ado about nothing, said drug offenses and prostitution should not be jailable offenses, implied suicide might be better than being depressed for the feeble-minded, and said fat people are to blame for their condition.²⁴

This interview, in which Jesse went to war "on every front imaginable," reveals one of his defining characteristics, his public combativeness.²⁵ In his autobiography he describes learning to fight on the streets on Minneapolis and the intense, amoral mentality cultivated in the Navy SEALs out of necessity for survival in the horror of war.²⁶ This fighting mentality carried over to his time in professional wrestling, where his role as a "heel" meant he played the villain;

²² Tom Hauser, *Inside the Ropes with Jesse Ventura*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 234.

²³ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 238-239, Dan Creed, *Governor Ventura: 'The Body' Exposed*, (Hunter Halverson Press LLC, 2003), 83.

²⁵ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 238.

²⁶ Jesse Ventura, *I ain't got time to bleed*, (Villard: 1999), 50, 80.

Jesse relished the opportunity to upset the crowd with outrageous taunts and dirty moves.²⁷ It is expected that political fights will break out for time to time, but Ventura brought a level of pettiness and playground insult to Minnesota politics. He fought most bitterly with the press throughout his tenure, dubbing them “rats,” “snakes,” and most frequently “jackals.” At one point, he introduced press buttons labeling them “media jackal” and tried to media members to wear them. At one appearance before schoolchildren, he taught them to all say “jackal” in unison.²⁸

In many cases, Jesse was aware that his comments may cause offense, but refrained from issuing full apologies.²⁹ His unwillingness to back down endeared some to his authenticity—he actually picked a favorite city between the two Twin Cities, much as a normal person would, rather than giving a politician’s equivocating. He often said what he thought, no matter the consequences, helping cultivate an image of honesty and reminding people that as governor he was a real person, not just another “suit.”³⁰

Ventura was capable of charm and frequently starred in his public appearances. He was an entertaining storyteller who had lived a full life. He often had a story to fall back on, or an example from his life to support his point. He enjoyed referencing movies, and they appeared to be a substantial influence on his worldview.³¹³² He put on quite the show for guests, with

²⁷ Ibid., 92-93.

²⁸ Creed, *Governor Ventura: ‘The Body’ Exposed*, 90.

²⁹ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 248-250; for example Robert Whereatt, Conrad deFlebre, and Dane Smith, “My fault is honesty: Governor stands by Playboy interview amid criticism, *Star Tribune*, October 1, 1999, A1, Star Tribune Online Archive.

³⁰ Dane Smith, Robert Whereatt, and Patricia Lopez Baden, “Aftershock,” *Star Tribune*, October 31, 1999, A17, Star Tribune online archive.

³¹ For example, in his defense of his *Playboy* comments, he mentioned lines from the movies *A Few Good Men* and *History of the World, Part One*.

³² Smith, Whereatt, and Baden, “Aftershock,” A18.

everyone from Vice President Al Gore to the Japanese ambassador coming away impressed.³³ He was a media sensation, making well-publicized and well-received appearances as a celebrity in places as varied as the Washington D.C. governor's meeting to singing "Take me Out to the Ballgame" at Wrigley Field in Chicago.³⁴ As governor he hosted a radio show, went on a highly profitable book tour, flew around the country to appear on talk shows and interviews, served as a referee for a WWF professional wrestling matches, and lived a life of fame fueled by his sense of comedic time and grand entrances.³⁵

Few gave him a chance when he first declared his candidacy for governor, but he pulled off a stunning upset. He announced his candidacy in July 1998, running unopposed for the Reform Party nomination.³⁶ His new mission came with a new nickname, as a question about whether he would be taken seriously as "The Body" led to him responding that he was now making his living with his mind, hence "The Mind" was born.³⁷ The Mind was serious about the issues, arguing for a tax cut to give the budget surplus back to the people of Minnesota and making the case that he unlike the career politicians was best-equipped to actually get things done.³⁸ His campaign was helped by the perception from both of the major candidates from the two parties that a third-party candidate could not win.³⁹⁴⁰ As the election approached, Ventura went on a Drive to Victory bus tour, basking in his growing fame, which did enough to see him

³³ Creed, *Governor Ventura: 'The Body' Exposed*, 37, 29.

³⁴ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 103-104; Robert Whereatt, "Ventura sings state's praises in Chicago," *Star Tribune*, May 4, 2000, A1, Star Tribune Online Archive.

³⁵ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 169-170, 221, 103.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁹ In Minnesota the two major parties are the Republican Party and the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL for short), the affiliate of the national Democratic Party.

⁴⁰ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 16.

elected governor. Polling would later find much of his support came from people who rarely voted.⁴¹

Despite understandable questions about Ventura's ability to govern, the Mind by nearly every account got off to a strong start. Veterans of state government praised his remarkable cabinet, which he assembled by finding the brightest and best administrators regardless of ideology and partisan background.⁴² The president of a Minneapolis-based good-government watchdog called it the "the best cabinet Minnesota has seen in 25 years."⁴³ The Mind also won points from observers for visiting employees in every state agency and being a quick study in committee meetings.⁴⁴ His early success carried over to the legislative arena, where he "came as close to a perfect score as any rookie governor could reasonably expect," working with a tripartite government to win a record amount in tax relief, money for light-rail, education funding, and tobacco settlement endowments.⁴⁵ Ventura had no fellow partisans yet walked away with virtually every important item on his list, winning the respect of former officials of both parties as a centrist mediator.⁴⁶ This victory, though, came because of back-room deals, conference committees, and hard negotiation, not appeals to his fans or a new revolutionary process, foreshadowing Ventura's troubles to come.⁴⁷

His relationship with the legislature had begun to deteriorate by May 1999. Ventura surprised the legislature by using his line-item veto to strip \$160 million from provisions in more than 40 bills, then added insult to injury by using a red pig stamp to label the vetoed provisions

⁴¹ Ibid., 22.

⁴² Mahtesian, "Can he govern?," 38.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Patricia Lopez Baden and Dane Smith, "Tax deal pays off for Ventura, who played the middle," *Star Tribune*, May 13, 1999, A1, A9.

⁴⁷ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 156-157, 166-167.

pork. Legislators felt betrayed, especially those in rural areas and Senate democrats who believed Ventura had not communicated his intentions to veto during negotiations.⁴⁸

The red big stamp was an example of Ventura employing celebrity politics. His attitude was one honed by his years as a professional wrestler, one of “total confrontation.”⁴⁹ He admitted he was trained as a professional wrestling villain, and that being outspoken and bombastic was what he knew.⁵⁰ As governor, he remained the celebrity winning public attention. Ventura intertwined politics and entertainment more than any before him in American history, holding a day job of governor while moonlighting as a wrestling referee on the weekends. He won support from the politically disengaged because of his celebrity, giving him approval but not support for substantive issues. His governing strategy included a commitment to issues but also a heavy dose of showmanship, often targeted at political opponents. Ventura was the walking embodiment of celebrity politics: a celebrity trained to entertain serving as the most important figure in Minnesota politics, interested in sound bites, appearances, and public appeals.

To Build a (Single) House

Ventura’s election had far-reaching consequences. The national Reform Party, which had only been founded in 1995, had been floundering but received a new burst of energy with Ventura’s victory. Others from the entertainment industry, such as the future governor of California and former bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger, would have a recent blueprint to political success. Closer to home, Ventura’s surprising win marked a fundamental shift in the

⁴⁸ Patricia Lopez Baden and Conrad deFlebre, “‘Cutting pork,’ Ventura vetoes \$160 million,” *Star Tribune*, May 26, 1999, A1, A 10; Patricia Lopez Baden, “Outstate areas feel sting of vetoes,” *Star Tribune*, May 27, 1999, B1, B5.

⁴⁹ Mahtesian, “Can he govern?,” 38.

⁵⁰ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 401.

political climate in Minnesota. His election served as the catalyst for the revival of the push for the unicameral legislature.

The idea of a unicameral legislature was not new in Minnesota. In the 1930s, Governor Floyd B. Olson endorsed it to no avail, around the time Nebraska embraced the single house.⁵¹ Beginning in the 1950s, a Minnesota county government official named Harry Newby began a campaign to recruit others, eventually in 1971 winning the agreement of Republican State Senator George Pillsbury, who became the public founder of the effort.⁵² The issue periodically was raised by committees and the “unicam” won the approval of five state governors. Despite this high-ranking approval, it never gained any serious traction where it needed to, in the halls of the state capitol building.⁵³ Governor Arne Carlson in 1995 announced support for the unicam in his State of the State address, and two years later the advocacy group Minnesotans for a Single-House Legislature (MSHL) was co-founded by Pillsbury along with Democratic former legislator Gene Merriam.⁵⁴ The group brought on the revered former governor Elmer L. Anderson to be honorary co-chair, and they quickly got to work. In 1998 a unicameral bill was raised in the legislature but died in committee, and the latest defeat left the MSHL wondering whether the group should disband.⁵⁵

Ventura’s election revived the listing MSHL. The Minnesota Independence Party was a longtime supporter of the unicam, and when it merged with the national Reform Party it continued to support it in the party platform.⁵⁶ However, the remote possibility of a third-party

⁵¹ Robert Whereatt, “To new group, one house beats two at the Capital,” *Star Tribune*, July 31, 1999, A1.

⁵² Slocum, *A Pox on One House*; Robert Whereatt, “new group,” A9.

⁵³ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*; Associated Press, “Former state senators seek unicameral legislature,” *Star Tribune*, December 16, 1997, B3, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁵⁴ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Robert Whereatt, “A little success could translate to a lot of clout for Independence Party,” *Star Tribune*, May 27, 1996, A10, Star Tribune online archive; “about the ip,” Independence-Alliance Minnesota timeline, accessed June

candidate winning an election virtually assured this support would remain inconsequential. The election of a governor who firmly supported the initiative breathed new life into the cause, especially when coupled with the election of Republican unicameral supporter Steve Sviggum to the Speaker of the House position.⁵⁷ Ventura clarified that he remained committed to his campaign support for the unicam in his first State of the State address, where he mentioned it as part of his vision as the new governor.⁵⁸ A unicameral bill was once again raised in the first legislative session with the Mind as governor, but it once again went nowhere, despite his other victories.⁵⁹

In order for the efforts of Governor Ventura and the MSHL to be successful, they would have to ramp up their organization and messaging for the upcoming legislative session. In April, the MSHL hired as general manager Chuck Slocum, a business executive with experience in political reform efforts.⁶⁰ They developed an 18-month action plan which established a website, hot line, volunteer network, educational materials, outreach strategies, and public opinion research.⁶¹

The strategy of the MSHL and Ventura would be to proceed in steps. Passing a unicameral legislature would require a constitutional amendment, which could be approved via referendum. The MSHL decided their best option would be to convince the legislature that the

27, 2024, <https://mnip.org/our-values/about-us>; [Chuck Slocum, email to Rick McCluhan, Reform Party, and Doug Friedline & Phil Madsen, Ventura Organization, December 6, 1999.] Minnesotans for a single-house Legislature Records. Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵⁷ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

⁵⁸ Jesse Ventura, "State of the State Address," given March 2, 1999, available through the Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, [000242\[1\].pdf \(mn.gov\)](#).

⁵⁹ Patricia Lopez Baden and Dane Smith, "Tax deal pays off for Ventura, who played the middle," *Star Tribune*, May 13, 1999, A9, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁶⁰ "Long-time public affairs specialist Chuck Slocum hired to direct Single-House effort," *Single House News*, Volume 1, No. 1, July 1999.

⁶¹ Slocum, *A Pox on one House*.

issue was significant enough that the people should decide, and to put the referendum on the November 2000 ballot. The MSHL set the overall theme of their messaging should be fairness, “let the people decide” on the unicameral legislature.⁶² This move allowed for a gradual convincing of the public—first that the issue was worth a referendum, then to actually vote for the single house in November. It also was more consistent with polling; most people did not jump to support the unicameral legislature, but a majority certainly believed the people should decide rather than the legislature.⁶³

Supporters of the unicam believed it would help make government more efficient and accountable. Just like George Norris before them, they were particularly frustrated by the conference committees. In the bicameral system, separate versions of a bill would pass the house and senate and then have to be reconciled into a new bill by a joint committee. The new bill would then have to be voted on in this conference committee. Single-house advocates saw this as wasteful and unnecessary. These committees operated without the public access that the main session had but wrote the ultimate laws.

Single-house supporters also were frustrated by the insider gamesmanship that two houses allowed. Bills could be voted on and passed in one house with the knowledge that the other house would never pass it, allowing for wasted time on bills that everyone knows would never pass. The confusing legal process gave more power to lobbyists, they argued, as they alone really understood the legislative process and which buttons to push.⁶⁴

⁶² [“Confidential Prospectus: A Plan for a Single-House Legislature,” *Minnesotans for a Single-House Legislature*, 1999, 3, 6.] *Minnesotans for a single-house Legislature Records*. Minnesota Historical Society.

⁶³ Associated Press, “Poll finds 35% back unicameral idea, 37% oppose,” *Star Tribune*, October 12, 1999, A8; Associated Press, “St. Cloud State poll finds support for unicameral vote,” *Star Tribune*, December 17, 1999, B3, *Star Tribune Online Archive*.

⁶⁴ Robert Whereatt, “One house or two?,” *Star Tribune*, September 5, 1999, B1, *Star Tribune Online Archive*, Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 215.

There were also financial considerations. As a candidate Ventura had complained about high taxes; as governor he sought to eliminate bloated government where he could. To him and others, the two bodies doing exactly the same thing were redundant. Merging them into one would save \$20 million a year, by one estimate Ventura used.⁶⁵ This money could be returned to the people of Minnesota or go to support some of Ventura's other initiatives, rather than paying for unnecessary work.

Ventura used many of these same arguments and connected this message back to his gubernatorial campaign. Ventura linked his support of the unicameral legislature to his campaign that called for greater participation in government. He argued that just as his campaign had largely been about encouraging people to vote, a single-house legislature would simplify the legislative process and make it easier for the common person to understand it. It also would force votes onto the floor, allowing people to see how their representatives voted, and let new members unfamiliar with the system trying to pass their promised plans do this quickly.⁶⁶

While Ventura believed in the unicam, he also had political and institutional reasons to support it. Ventura was widely popular, with polls finding support for him in 1999 in the 70s, although in the reality of celebrity politics much of that could be attributed to personal fame rather than support for a policy agenda.⁶⁷ He had faced some criticism for not taking an active role in staking out a direction for the state and not living up to promises of government reform.⁶⁸ The Reform Party movement needed to find unique issues ignored or botched by the two main

⁶⁵ Ibid., 215; Jean Hopfensperger, "Ventura pushes savings of unicameral legislature," *Star Tribune Metro/State*, October 21, 1999, B3, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁶⁶ [Single House Press Conference, February 7, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Policy Management Department Records. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives, Unicameral folder.

⁶⁷ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 98.

⁶⁸ Smith, Whereatt, and Baden, "Aftershock," A1, A18.

parties to grow support; by staking out the unicameral legislature Ventura was demonstrating his commitment to the ideals of the minor party.⁶⁹ Obtaining the unicameral legislature would allow him to deploy the political capital he had acquired and justify his promises of reform.

It is also no coincidence that so many former governors supported the unicameral legislature, while the legislature had been more skeptical. Governors were often frustrated by negotiating with two bodies, which aside from simple scheduling and logistical issues could also be controlled by different parties, as was the case for Ventura, or have different versions of the same bill, which then had to be reconciled in conference committees. A governor with a single-house system would be able to negotiate every bill in good faith, knowing that was the final version and was being voted on with the intention of passing it into law, a much simpler task. Ventura was frustrated by conference committees and the backroom dealing that concealed from the public the final stage of legislation and could confound the governor.⁷⁰ Legislators, on the hand, were in no hurry to eliminate their own jobs, as most unicameral plans called for a reduction of total seats. They benefited from having more institutional knowledge of the more complex bicameral system and could use any inefficiency to blame their political opponents and retain office.

Celebrity politics resurrected the unicameral legislature movement in Minnesota. Five traditional non-celebrity governors had tried to reform the institution, only to see their attempts go nowhere. The institutional reform was revived solely because of a celebrity candidate, who was willing to make the single-house legislature a crucial part of his plan for the state and use his celebrity to gain public interest and support. The strategy of the MSHL was one of public awareness and outreach—drawing on Ventura’s fame and the arguments of reformers to convince

⁶⁹ Dan Hofrenning, “Two generals without an army,” *Star Tribune*, October 7, 1999, p. A23, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁷⁰ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 216.

a critical mass that the time was right for institutional reform. There was no critical juncture of exogenous circumstances; the plan called for celebrity to move the masses.

The Big Push Behind the Big Plan

The public campaign began on August 17, 1999. Ventura barnstormed around the state the way a candidate would, visiting four cities to promote the unicameral legislature. He pledged to work against the legislators who refuse to support the unicameral referendum.⁷¹ The day also brought news of an organization in opposition, Opponents of a Unicameral House, or OUCH, which surely was painful to hear for Ventura.⁷² The public move by the governor launched widespread interest in the topic, while privately Ventura was taking steps to organize the campaign. He tapped Planning Director Dean Barkley as unicameral “czar.” The House Government Operations Committee and Veterans’ Affairs Committee announced it would launch a fact-finding trip to Nebraska to study its unicameral system and hold a series of public meetings on the topic.⁷³ Ventura took to calling the unicam his “top legislative priority” for the session, mentioning it repeatedly in public appearances.⁷⁴

His embrace of such a nerdy institutional reform issue impressed reformers and won positive media attention nationally. *The New Yorker* ran an article in September offering that normally the task of convincing legislators to eliminate some of their own jobs would be impossible, but Ventura had “hold of a terrific idea.” It continued that he was as popular in

⁷¹ Robert Whereatt, “Ventura throws muscle into unicameral quest,” *Star Tribune*, August 18, 1999, p.A1, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

⁷⁴ Patricia Lopez Baden, “Ventura wants more bang for the state’s bucks,” A17.

Minnesota as George Norris was when he convinced Nebraska to embrace the unicam, and Ventura had a real chance because of his willingness to push for the issue and the surprising number of legislators already on board.⁷⁵ He was paired with other wacky political figures Warren Beatty and Donald Trump as an underrated appreciated celebrity political philosopher who had the chance to bring about real reform to American government.⁷⁶

Ventura appropriately took to calling the unicameral legislature his “legacy issue.” Other governors left legacies of programs, budgets, or buildings; Ventura sought to leave the lasting legacy of reform. If successful, it would mean another stunning triumph for the near-novice politician. It could unleash a series of other state efforts to adopt the unicam and seek other ways to improve government responsiveness. A triumph on the unicameral legislature would leave Ventura “the most consequential and accomplished governor in the nation, and not just the biggest, the baldest, and the baddest.”⁷⁷

As the push was ramping up, though, the mouth got in the way of the Mind. The MSHL engaged in a media blitz, included an effort at the State Fair to spread the word, opinion pieces, and media opportunities.⁷⁸ Ventura, though, continued to behave as a celebrity, and his interview with *Playboy* leaked on September 29, 1999, hurting his approval poll numbers and losing the respect of Minnesotans.⁷⁹ This story, which contained his insulting words about organized religion and those with mental illness, dominated the news for most of the month of October,

⁷⁵ [Henrik Hertzberg, “The Talk of the Town,” *The New Yorker*, September 6, 1999, faxed by Paulette Will to Ruthy Diercks, 1], Minnesotans for a single-house Legislature Records. Minnesota Historical Society.

⁷⁶ Matthew Miller, *Los Angeles Times Syndicate*, “Beatty, Ventura, and Trump are philosophers,” *Star Tribune*, October 13, 1999, A15, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁷⁷ Hertzberg, “The Talk of the Town,” 2.

⁷⁸ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*; [Field Report email from Jim Goff to George Pillsbury, Gene Merriam, Stan Donnelly, and Chuck Slocum, June 16, 1999], Minnesotans for a single-house Legislature Records. Minnesota Historical Society.

⁷⁹ Whereatt, deFlebre, and Smith, “My fault is honesty.”

distracting from the Governor's "Big Plan" for the state.⁸⁰ For legislators, this left them with less pressure from their districts to support the Governor's initiatives. One of his comments in the interview, that it was "good to be king," enforced for some that Ventura did not understand democracy.⁸¹⁸² Removing a legislature to make it easier for him to rule seemed to fit with this undemocratic, monarchical attitude. Legislators were less likely to want to serve a self-styled king than work as partners with a trusted leader. The relationship between governor and legislature therefore took another Body blow.

There were other early warning signs for the movement. Doubters questioned whether leaving it in the hands of the votes made sense constitutionally, since without approval of a specific system, a second referendum could be required. Ventura's celebrity lifestyle—a national profile, appearances with actors and other stars, and frequent vacations also made it more difficult for him to put in the leg work necessary to convince voters, and he needed to invest time into convincing the legislators.⁸³ A question-and-answer session with students at Hamline University revealed a mixed response to the idea, and Ventura drew criticism for telling high school students more about his unicameral plan than listening and for his comments telling them to find their own way to pay for college.⁸⁴ The state Republican Party and DFL party both voted against the unicam in their internal policy voting, suggesting the default position for the two parties was to support the status quo.⁸⁵ Other groups, such as Common Cause-Minnesota, which

⁸⁰ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 237.

⁸¹ Ventura defended himself by saying that the "good to be king" line was a joke referencing a movie, Mel Brooks's *History of the World, Part One*. (Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 249).

⁸² Wy Spane, "'Keep it Simple, Stupid': When you KISS the king, you get a frog," *Star Tribune*, October 7, 1999, P. A23. Star Tribune Online Archive; Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 244.

⁸³ David Schimke, "Burning Down the House," *Star Tribune City Pages*, October 13, 1999, 10. Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁸⁴ Jean Hopfensperger, "Ventura pushes savings of unicameral legislature," B3; Ben Kwan, Jeanna Dornfeld, Katie Jumbe, Emily Parker, "Talk of the Town," *Star Tribune Variety*, December 7, 1999, E2, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁸⁵ Albert H. Quie, "Many here support 'one house,'" *Star Tribune*, December 11, 1999, A29, Star Tribune Online Archive.

had previously supported the single-house legislature, and the Minnesota League of Women Voters, came out against the unicam.⁸⁶

Arguments in opposition focused on the benefits of the current system. They argued above all that the current system had no serious issues; Minnesota usually received good marks for state governance and the state was running a budget surplus. A unicameral legislature was a solution without a problem.⁸⁷ Unicameral opponents also argued that the single-house system would concentrate power, remove checks and balances, and allow for quick passage of shoddy legislation.⁸⁸ They also used the argument that rural areas would lose representation in a unicameral system, the same factor that had doomed unicameral reform movements in other states, even though there was no basis for this in Minnesota.⁸⁹ Those in opposition to the single house took aim at the existing model, that of the Nebraska legislature. Sometimes these were historical points, such as the claim that Nebraska only adopted it during the Great Depression as a cost-saving measure or that it was adapted at the same time that Nazi Germany and fascist Italy adapted the unicameral legislature.⁹⁰ Other comments were more flippant, such as one legislator remarking he had “never seen a law to emulate in 17 years from Nebraska.”⁹¹

Despite the hiccups for the unicam supporters, there was still a path to success. Polling in late 1999 and early 2000 showed competitive degrees of support for the unicam, but more importantly high support for placing a referendum on the ballot, which was all the movement

⁸⁶ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

⁸⁷ Robert Whereatt, “One house or two?”; “Forum greets governor with skepticism,” *Star Tribune*, January 19, 2000, B1, B2. Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁸⁸ Whereatt, “One house or two?”; Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Whereatt, “One house or two?”; Robert Whereatt, “To new group, one house beats two at the Capital,” *Star Tribune*, July 31, 1999, p. A9. Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁹¹ Robert Whereatt, “new group,” A9.

was looking for at the moment.⁹² Unicameral supporter Steve Sviggum was the speaker of the house, and he confidently predicted he could forward the bill to a floor vote by the end of February. Roger Moe, the DFL leader of the Senate, opposed the unicameral legislation and predicted it would not have the necessary votes but vowed not to prevent a floor vote if it had sufficient support.⁹³

As the session kicked off, the influence of Ventura would be key. His popularity had recovered from the hit it took after the *Playboy* interview, rebounding in January 2000 to 68% in one poll.⁹⁴ However, legislators were less afraid to risk confrontation with the Body, with some on the eve of the session in late January promising a “showdown with the governor,” including on his “pet project,” the unicameral legislature.⁹⁵ Ventura by virtue of his position needed the legislature more than they needed him. They institutionally followed his lead, but without a political party Ventura had fewer avenues for advancing his views. The Reform Party’s endorsement of the unicam meant nothing to the legislature, and many disliked him for his comments, arrogant attitude, and line-item vetoes the previous session. Ventura would have to work hard behind the scenes to repair their relationships and explain how passing the unicameral bill would be beneficial for the legislators to reach his goals. The fact that more were embracing a showdown worked for Jesse the entertainer, but not for Jesse the Mind. He would have to develop a serious strategy for wooing the legislators, not just continue with public posturing.

The showdown kicked off soon. The bill to be debated was the “Sviggum-Spear” plan, developed by House Republican Speaker Steve Sviggum and DFL Senate President Allan Spear,

⁹² “Confidential Prospectus,” Minnesotans for a Single-House Legislature.

⁹³ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

⁹⁴ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 285.

⁹⁵ Robert Whereatt, “A promise of rebates, a possibility of strife,” *Star Tribune*, January 31, 2000, A6, Star Tribune Online Archive.

and called for a 135 member-single house, to be introduced in 2003.⁹⁶ At the same time as the Sviggum-Spear plan began its march through the two houses, the legislature and Ventura were fighting worse than ever. The biggest clash came after the governor combined the commerce department and the public service department without legislative approval and attempted to appoint Reform Party member Steve Minn to lead the combined agencies. The Senate took the rare step of bipartisanly rejecting the appointments by margins of 2 to 1.⁹⁷ They argued Ventura and Minn had not consulted the public or the legislature before merging the departments, and that Minn was unqualified and had acted unethically.

The move angered Ventura, who chose public confrontation. He saw the Senate as applying a double-standard and labeled his opponents “butt-kissing” insiders.⁹⁸ The debate had an intensely personal dimension to it, with the legislators communicating they were tired of being disrespected by Ventura.⁹⁹ The proverbial gloves came off as “lawmakers [showed] that not only is that aisle easily crossed, but on at least one topic—Ventura—they can unite.”¹⁰⁰ He had come into the office with a certain amount of goodwill, but by mid-February that goodwill was largely gone, complicating future negotiations.¹⁰¹

At the same time as the tension with the governor rose, the legislature maneuvering began on the unicameral bills in both houses. The MSHL goal was passage through the House in

⁹⁶ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

⁹⁷ Robert Whereatt, “Senate rejects Ventura Cabinet pick for 2 posts,” *Star Tribune*, February 25, 2000, A1, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁹⁸ Ibid., Robert Whereatt, “Angry over Minn vote, Ventura says Senate uses double standard,” *Star Tribune*, February 26, 2000, B5; “Minn’s Rejection,” Editorial, *Star Tribune*, February 27, 2000, A26, Star Tribune Online Archive.

⁹⁹ Doug Grow, “Teaching a lesson to Minn, Ventura,” *Star Tribune*, February 6, 2000, B2, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹⁰⁰ [Debra O’Connor, “The gloves come off: Legislators take on Ventura this session,” *Pioneer Press*, February 5, 2000]. Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹⁰¹ Robert Whereatt, “Ventura adjusts role in Act II at Legislature,” *Star Tribune*, February 20, 2000, A6, Star Tribune Online Archive.

February.¹⁰² Ventura promoted the bill as part of his bus trip around the state, where he was received warmly as a celebrity. The warm reception did not extend to the unicameral legislature, which usually received polite applause but not overwhelming support.¹⁰³

The bill failed to make the progress its backers hoped it would in February. In mid-February, the bill moved out of the initial committee and on to an unfriendly financial committee, marking the first time since the 1970s that a unicameral bill had moved out of the committee.¹⁰⁴ There it languished for weeks. In the Senate it passed the committees without recommendations; the Senate leadership under opponent Roger Moe was content to vote it down if it got to a floor vote. Moe consistently stated his opposition to the bill and warned the unicam backers would not have the votes, but remained committed to holding a floor vote if it passed the House.¹⁰⁵ However, in early March by a 5-5 vote the bill was rejected by a House financial subcommittee, ending the hopes for a quick move to a floor vote.¹⁰⁶

It was clear that Ventura would have to step up his inside game in order to push a revived version of the bill through. The MSHL leadership continued to pressure Ventura to keep up the hard work. General manager Chuck Slocum sent an email with talking points for Stan Donnelly, another single-house backer, ahead of a meeting with the governor. Slocum warned that if

¹⁰² [Message from MSHL co-chairs to Minnesota Leaders, August 1999], Minnesotans for a single-house Legislature Records. Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁰³ Nan D. Williams, "Senate puts sales tax rebate into rotation," *Star Tribune*, February 13, 2000, B5, Star Tribune Online Archive; [Jim Ragsdale, "That Old Ventura Magic," *Pioneer Press*, February 10, 2000,] Minnesota Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Whereatt, "Unicameral proposal takes step forward," *Star Tribune*, February 15, 2000, B1, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Whereatt, "Unicameral proposal is kept alive," *Star Tribune*, February 24, 2000, B5, Star Tribune Online Archive; Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Whereatt, "One-house legislature bill fails in committee," *Star Tribune*, March 10, 2000, A1, Star Tribune Online Archive; Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

Ventura starts to believe that the unicameral plan is doomed this session, he may start doing “irrational” things such as “trash talking.”¹⁰⁷

In a confidential internal memo, the chief lobbyist for the unicameral effort Jim Erickson wrote the most important element that will affect each legislator’s vote is “the governor’s direct influence” and that there is only so much that can be done publicly— “only a coordinated, inside game can win.” Erickson appreciated that Ventura had taken the unicameral idea so far, but the public action was not enough at this point, with the bill losing once. A shift in strategy was in order: “The Governor can and must be far more effective in the inside session “end-game” than it now appears he will chose or be allowed to be.”¹⁰⁸ Others agreed; it was around this time that Steve Sviggum, the speaker of the house and the leader of the unicameral effort there, began urging Ventura to host the house Republican caucus to sway them on the issue.¹⁰⁹ Ventura could have begun a full-on charm offensive, winning the votes he needed.

One option that would be on the table for the session was linking the issue to others. Ventura could threaten to veto key bills if his unicameral bill was not passed and arrange a compromise. Slocum suggested as the going got tough that Ventura could use the unicameral bill as a piece in the session’s “final deal.”¹¹⁰ Opponents had already made it clear that this might be necessary for Ventura to get his pet project passed. However, Ventura stated from the beginning that he was not interested in linking the issue, saying as a constitutional issue it should stand by

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ [Jim Erickson memo to Stan Donnelly, March 7, 2000], *Minnesotans for a single-house Legislature Records*. Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁰⁹ Rochelle Olson, “Ventura remains firm on limit he wants for tax cuts, spending,” *Star Tribune*, April 19, 2000, B5, *Star Tribune Online Archive*.

¹¹⁰ [Charles A. Slocum email to Jim Erickson, March 4, 2000], *Minnesotans for a single-house Legislature Records*. Minnesota Historical Society.

itself and he was not going to make it part of “any poker game.”¹¹¹ Despite this stance, the potential for linking the bill to others hovered over the discourse and remained a possibility. In any case, the lack of progress made it clear to those advising Ventura on the issue that he should start making overtures to legislators and brokering deals, as they had reached the limit of what public agitation could achieve.

Instead of making overtures to legislators and brokering deals, Ventura doubled down on messaging to the public. On his radio show he urged voters to let their legislators know they supported the unicameral legislature.¹¹² Ventura understood that more pressure was needed, but he did not invite the Republicans immediately to come over or preach patience, instead choosing to put the issue back in the headlines and raise the ire of legislators by trying to deploy their voters against them, a confrontational strategy. In essence, he continued to govern as a celebrity, trying to gin up a public response rather than make unglamorous personal appeals. Despite originally saying he would have a bus tour every other month, he went on a bus tour for the third month in a row.¹¹³ During his tour, he criticized the legislators for their lack of action, eventually labeling them while emotionally choked up “gutless cowards.”¹¹⁴

Ventura’s latest verbal blunder was catastrophic. Rather than shmoozing with the legislators and pampering their egos in private negotiations, Ventura publicly labeled them cowards. Sviggum remarked these comments would hurt the unicameral cause and said he needed help from the governor’s office in order to pass the bill. Other legislators reacted

¹¹¹ [Patrick Sweeney, “One-house legislature debated,” *Pioneer Press*, February 8, 2000] Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹¹² Bill McAuliffe, “Raise unicameral voice, Ventura urges public,” *Star Tribune*, March 11, 2000, B5, Star Tribune Archive.

¹¹³ Bill McAuliffe, “Town that would be Ventura welcomes governor and his quest,” *Star Tribune*, February 11, 2000, A16, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹¹⁴ Bill McAuliffe, “Ventura takes his complaints on tour,” *Star Tribune*, March 16, 2000, B1, Star Tribune Online Archive.

similarly in disgust.¹¹⁵ The rhetorical warfare with the legislators would continue to escalate, with a GOP representative calling Ventura a “moron” in April.¹¹⁶ Ventura’s “gutless cowards” remark would come back to haunt him as the latest example of Ventura’s deteriorating relationship with the legislature.

Ventura stuck with the public strategy, holding a Capitol Rally for the unicameral legislature on April 2. The rally was well-publicized and drew about two hundred supporters, but compared to other events this attendance was lackluster.¹¹⁷ For example, a rally for education funding a month later drew hundreds of students skipping school and featured people addressing an issue that directly affected them, without encouragement from the governor.¹¹⁸ A poll released the same day as the single-house capitol rally found that support for the unicam had dropped, with 57% now supporting the two-house legislature and just 27% the single-house legislature, even if the governor was only pushing for a referendum at the moment.¹¹⁹ It was clear that despite his best efforts, Ventura had not succeeded in winning overwhelming support which would swamp the legislature. It became even more crucial to maintain good relations with the legislature.

Sviggum tried to revive the bill, but it too was foiled in house committees. Rather than being sent to the committee Sviggum had hoped for, it was sent to an unfriendly one likely to kill

¹¹⁵ Robert Whereatt, “Ventura hurting single-house cause, House speaker says,” *Star Tribune*, March 17, 2000, B5, Star Tribune Online Archive; Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 299.

¹¹⁶ Rochelle Olson, “A porcupine welcome mat,” *Star Tribune*, April 2, 2000, B5, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹¹⁷ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

¹¹⁸ [Brian Bakst, “Hundreds rally for education funding,” *Legal Ledger*, May 4, 2000] Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹¹⁹ Robert Whereatt, “57% say they favor 2-house Legislature,” *Star Tribune*, April 4, 2000, A8, Star Tribune Online Archive.

it once again.¹²⁰ Sviggum still could have attempted to push it further and expend more political capital, but the Mind was about to burn another bridge with a key block in the legislature.

Ventura was no stranger to controversial statements, but he also fundamentally governed from the center. He was difficult to predict, talking about personal responsibility yet giving money for social services, dismissed the health care insurance program as socialized medicine but ended up protecting the tax that pays for.¹²¹ On many issues he was unafraid to stake out confidently a view, but on the thorniest of all in America—abortion—he had little to say. This would come to a head when Minnesota Republicans passed one of their priorities, a “right to know” bill which would require a 24-hour waiting period for those requesting an abortion. The Republicans sought the measure as an incremental move which could decrease abortion and also pass in a divided government. They believed they had a deal with Ventura to pass the bill, especially considering his own staff had helped to draft it, but he instead shocked them by deciding to veto it. While this controversial move won him some praise from pro-choice circles, it drew the anger of House Republicans who believed he had betrayed their trust, and reflected the error of Ventura’s decision-making in negotiation.¹²² Sviggum stated that the level of distrust in Ventura was so high that he was considering asking for Ventura’s agreement to a session-closing deal in writing, a stunning public insult.¹²³ He also asserted that he was unwilling to push for the governor’s pet project anymore, seemingly ending the chances for the unicameral bill.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Robert Whereatt, “Bill for unicameral legislature receives a setback in House,” *Star Tribune*, April 12, 2000, B5, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹²¹ Mahtesian, “Can he govern?,” p. 40.

¹²² [Steven Dornfeld, “Major blunders by governor, staff caused train wreck on abortion bill,” *Pioneer Press*, April 17, 2000.; Laura Billings, “Abortion bill took guts, Mr. Governor,” *Pioneer Press*, April 18, 2000; Patrick Sweeney, “Unicameral issue looks dead for the session,” *Pioneer Press*, April 18, 2000.] Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹²³ Robert Whereatt, “House GOP voices distrust after veto,” *Star Tribune*, April 18, 2000, A1, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Ventura by vetoing the abortion bill demonstrated the challenges in his strategy. Rather than pragmatically accepting that he needed these Republican votes to pass the unicameral and accepting a compromise abortion bill that was unimportant to him but very important to Republicans, he chose to veto it. The fact the bill was passed and then vetoed demonstrated how Ventura mismanaged the situation. It would have been one thing to say from the beginning that he would not sign the bill, but he led the Republicans to believe he would and they subsequently passed it expecting his signature. It showed the difficulties of not having any co-partisans in the legislature. Few of the Republicans were ideologically or institutionally bound to him. His remaining option was to pragmatically offer trades with the two major parties. The Republicans, once the trust was broken, had freedom to abandon him completely.

Ventura again showed here an unwillingness to play a “poker game” with the unicameral issue by linking it with others, and it was not the only way he was holding back. The idea of him calling a special session solely for advancing the unicameral issue was also raised, but he committed to not calling it, again tying his hands and limiting his bargaining power (although at this point, he may not have had much credibility left to make threats anyway).¹²⁵ Ventura accepted that the single-house idea was probably dead for the session and the lingering fallout from the break in trust would prove difficult to overcome.¹²⁶

Throughout this crucial period, Ventura continued to govern by the strategy of celebrity politics. His major work on the unicameral effort was not in drafting legislation or negotiating with the legislature, it was in a high-profile bus trip where he was behaving as a celebrity. The public was enthralled with him as a person and his image as a wrestler-governor but did not have

¹²⁵ Rochelle Olson and Robert Whereatt, “Ventura firm on passage of light rail,” *Star Tribune*, April 22, 2000, A12, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

the interest in his institutional reform issue. His public image was not one of a conciliatory nice guy politician, it was one of an unapologetic truth-teller unafraid to confront. He still was playing the “heel,” albeit in a new space. The same strategies that made him a successful wrestling heel made him into a successful public image, a character. This character image was built on confrontation through sound bites, quips, and interviews. Unfortunately for passing policy, he had antagonized the people he needed to woo, the members of the state legislature. He also made mistakes unrelated to his celebrity status. His failure to relay his intentions on the abortion bill harmed relations with the legislature unnecessarily and are likely a consequence of his status as a relative political novice. Yet this too is a risk of celebrity politics. Celebrities who run from office are likely to have less extensive political experience, and so may therefore make more mistakes in deliberations that cost support from elected officials.

Crunch Time

As time in the legislative session wound down, Ventura was facing the prospect of the session being remembered most for his fights with it over Minn and abortion rather than his Big Plan. He finally made an effort to repair his relationship with some key legislators, deciding to hold that meal with the majority House Republicans that Sviggum had been urging to him have. He had the Republicans over on April 26, months after the session started and with just weeks until the session ended.¹²⁷ There he made his last pitch to give the unicameral bill one more chance and attempted to ally with the GOP against the DFL, painting the unicameral opposition

¹²⁷ Laurie Blake and Mike Kaszuba, “Light rail takes key step ahead,” *Star Tribune*, April 27, 2000, A13,

as primarily from the DFL.¹²⁸ A few days later, he met with Senate DFL members, again the majority party in its respective body, trying to win their support. Ventura used similar talking points for both meetings: that the people deserve a chance to weigh in, that passing the referendum bill is not setting anything in stone, and that it would save money.¹²⁹ But these meetings came months after when Sviggum's request, and only after the bill had seemingly been defeated. Sviggum said the meeting helped warm relations with the House, setting the stage for one more try.¹³⁰

Sviggum tried once more to resurrect the bill in the House on May 1, and its final fate would be decided as the session wound down in the early part of May. DFLers in the House criticized Sviggum for giving the bill extraordinary treatment and abusing his power, while he argued that the governor's "marquee issue" deserved another chance.¹³¹ Sviggum returned to the argument he had made before the abortion bill dispute, that the House should pass it as a courtesy to the governor.¹³²

If Ventura was pleased with a such move, he did not let on his press conference on May 2, instead choosing to only briefly touch on the unicameral bill.¹³³ Ventura could embrace an opposite strategy here—downplay the chance of success publicly and avoiding more trash-

¹²⁸ [Governor Jesse Ventura Talking Points, House Republican Caucus Breakfast, April 26, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Policy Management Department Records. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives, Unicameral folder.

¹²⁹ Ibid., [Governor Jesse Ventura Talking Points, Senate DFL Luncheon, May 1, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Policy Management Department Records. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives, Unicameral folder.

¹³⁰ [Jim Ragsdale and Patrick Sweeney, "Ventura pushes unicameral at GOP breakfast," *Pioneer Press*, April 27, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹³¹ Robert Whereatt, "Sviggum gives unicameral bill new life in House committee," *Star Tribune*, May 2, 2000, B5, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹³² [Patrick Sweeney, "Unicameral bill may finally reach floor vote," *Pioneer Press*, May 2, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹³³ ["Gov. Jesse Ventura's press conference, 5/2/2000, *Legal Ledger*], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

talking while being highly engaged privately to ensure the passage of the bill. As it turned out, much his time was devoted to the distracting arrival in Minnesota of President Bill Clinton, who was visiting to plug charter schools as part of his education agenda.¹³⁴ As time wound down, Ventura failed to focus on his legacy issue and instead was meeting with the biggest celebrity in the country, the President. While it is unreasonable to expect him to ignore the president completely, it only reenforced the image of him as more concerned with fame than governing.

When the day of the last chance for the unicameral bill approached, one could reasonably expect that Ventura would be doing everything he could to advance his “top legislative priority” for the session. He could be calling legislators, hosting key members, offering deals, and threatening to call a special session.

Instead, in a highly unusual move, he was not even in the state. He was in Washington, D.C. for a White House conference on China policy.¹³⁵ He defended himself by pointing out that he was available by phone and could still be heavily involved in the legislative process, but it was at the very least a symbolic blunder.¹³⁶ He was lambasted for this move, with one legislator calling it “outrageous” and Sviggum saying the governor should be there and lamenting that he and Senate leader Moe only met with Ventura once during the session.¹³⁷ Ventura’s response, that speaker Sviggum has never been invited to the White House and so would not understand what it is like to be involved with more than just “local politics,” also did him no favors. His new image as a Washington elite dealing with China trade was a far cry from his campaigning as a man of

¹³⁴ [Allie Shah, “President plugs charter school,” *Star Tribune*, May 5, 2000, A1, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹³⁵ [Jim Ragsdale, “Ventura on trade mission in Washington as legislators labor,” *Pioneer Press*, May 9, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ [Conrad deFiebre and Robert Whereatt, “Ventura’s in Washington, D.C. but ‘will be available’”, *Pioneer Press*, May 9, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives; Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 311.

the people.¹³⁸ Ventura seemed to be saying he was too big for the state, that he could not even put in the time necessary to support his only major policy initiative. Rep. Tom Rukavina summed it up: “On the last day of the session, when it’s crunch time, he’s out in Washington promoting himself again...The guy who’s pushing [the unicameral provision] doesn’t give a damn. Why should we?”¹³⁹

The final chance for this bill still had a chance of working. Analysis revealed that the necessary votes were there based on people had previously committed to supporting the unicameral bill or were undecided. However, instead the bill by a vote of 76-54 was sent to a hostile committee.¹⁴⁰ Sviggum indicated he would not revive it, ensuring it was over.¹⁴¹ Months of effort by Ventura and the MSHL group had been for naught, as the unicameral effort went down without a fight. No floor vote was held in either chamber, frustrating the hopes for last-second changes, and making the task of identifying its opponents less clear.

Ventura reacted angrily to the project’s failure. He denounced it as the usual “two-party tricks” and declared war on those who did not support his top legislative priority.¹⁴² Legislators continued to fire back with complaints about his absence for the final days of the session, and the end of the session would be followed more Ventura vetoes, again angering the legislature.¹⁴³

Ventura in crunch time retreated somewhat from celebrity politics. He attempted to mend fences and reduce the all-out confrontation. His meetings with the legislators turned down the

¹³⁸ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 311.

¹³⁹ Robert Whereatt and Dane Smith, “Long night at the Capitol,” *Star Tribune*, May 10, 2000, A16, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹⁴⁰ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

¹⁴¹ [Patrick Sweeney, “Unicameral: Bill’s biggest backer calls it a day,” May 10, 2000, *Pioneer Press*], Minnesota Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

¹⁴² Robert Whereatt, “Ventura not happy unicameral plan was hung out to dry,” *Star Tribune*, May 11, 2000, A15, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹⁴³ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 311.

temperature but did not make for splashy media attention or adoring crowds. Here he showed the ability to restrain the celebrity politics, something which could have been helpful earlier in the legislative process. On the day of the final vote, though, his choice to go to Washington D.C. demonstrated his national ambitions. For many the trip was an example of Ventura caring more about his celebrity than his own state. While this may show a particular strand of celebrity politics, it also suggests Ventura may not have embraced all the media strategies of Hollywood insiders. Other politicians could have chosen to make a big scene on the last day of the session in St. Paul and use a political stunt to enforce in the public's mind that Ventura was a fighter. This part of the story suggests Ventura was capable of being more than a celebrity in politics, but his response afterward declaring war and denouncing two-party tricks showed he still deployed primarily the confrontation wrestling playbook.

A Pox on One House?

The unicameral backers did not give up immediately. In June, the Minnesota Planning group who had helped launched the movement earlier in the 1990s developed a questionnaire for gauging Ventura's interest in the issue moving forward.¹⁴⁴ However, the primary driver of the unicameral legislature—Ventura—had moved on. No serious effort was made to mount a unicameral bill for the next session, and Ventura instead moved on to trying to reform the

¹⁴⁴ [Minnesota Planning memo to Steve Bosacker, June 4, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Policy Management Department Records. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives, Unicameral folder.

legislative sessions from every year to every other year.¹⁴⁵ That effort was also derailed by legislative maneuvering.¹⁴⁶

Chuck Slocum, the general manager of MSHL, issued a report on the group's efforts in late 2000. He titled it *A Pox on One House*, a reference to William Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*, where two rival family houses fight each other to the detriment of the city and a dying character summons a plague on both houses, often remembered as a pox on both houses. In its original context, the phrase is used to summon a plague on the houses which have caused so much violence. Slocum used it not to curse the unicameral legislature, but instead to imply a fated collapse—one house was a plagued idea never likely to succeed. Yet Slocum shows in his report that it was passable, based on MSHL estimates of legislator support. At the end of the report, he lists the lessons from the failure of the unicameral effort.

His first takeaway was that “it is not always your enemies who do in” and criticized Ventura. He blamed him for failing to engage in the one-on-one courtship process of encouragement for legislators “that the most successful governors do naturally based on years of political experience.” The governor did not use his resources wisely, and Slocum specifically called out his “gutless cowards” remark and fiasco with the abortion bill that broke the trust of House Republicans.¹⁴⁷ Ventura taunted the legislators instead of working with it, daring them to pass the unicameral bill rather than convincing them to.¹⁴⁸ These maneuvers may have made for good headlines and furthered his image as a fighter and an entertainer, but they failed to sway the

¹⁴⁵ Robert Whereatt, “Visions of tax cuts lie ahead,” *Star Tribune*, December 24, 2000, A12, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹⁴⁶ Associated Press, “Proposal to alter session duration heads to House,” *Star Tribune*, March 29, 2001, B11, Star Tribune Online Archive.

¹⁴⁷ Slocum, *A Pox on One House*.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

people responsible for voting on the single-house proposal. His threats would be long-forgotten months later by the time those legislators were up for re-election.

Slocum also pointed to other factors that led to the defeat. He argued that supporters of the unicameral bill in the house could have done more if they had really wanted to, but they seemed content to have the bill go away without political embarrassment.¹⁴⁹ Their lack of interest in an issue is likely at least partially the result of Ventura's actions—why should they be heavily invested if the main proponent is taunting them from Washington? The MSHL banked heavily on leadership in the House and Senate being able to sway its members, and the Ventura voters being able to rally the reluctant by enthusiastically hopping on board with the governor's signature issue. Instead, the leaders were unable to cajole the skeptical and the groundswell of enthusiasm never materialized.¹⁵⁰ Ventura's personal celebrity ensured the politically disengaged supported him, but that support did not extend to the unicameral legislature in the wave that the MSHL needed.

One potential option that Slocum did not bring up that could have changed the outcome was linking the unicameral issue to others. Ventura easily could have linked the abortion bill, for example, to the unicameral issue, offering House Republicans a trade that would likely have sent the unicameral bill off to the Senate, where another deal could have been reached with the Democrats. One on hand, Ventura's instincts to not play games with the bill reflect his genuine conviction behind his reform principles—he wanted people to decide on the bills on their merits, not engage in secret transactional deliberations hidden far from public view. This idealistic approach, when coupled with the idealistic approach to politics that left the unicameral backers

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

vulnerable to smears, limited the reach of the unicameral movement. This somewhat complicates this example as a case, as this specific strategic decision could have been consequential, and is not directly related to Ventura's celebrity politics. It does likely reflect Ventura's status as a political novice, though, again a potential consequence of choosing celebrities for political office.

Ventura's brand of celebrity politics was responsible for the revival and the collapse of the single-house effort. It is clear that without Ventura, the bill never would have made it as far as it did. The unicameral bill got further than it ever had, before or since. Ventura's willingness to aggressively tout it through publicized bus tours and press conferences accomplished much. His personal celebrity meant people came to hear him speak who likely would never come for any other governor, and they heard his message.

But he also earns the lion's share of the blame for its failure, which fell short of MSHL expectations. His celebrity image of a confronter and a fighter limited his options for negotiation and bruised the egos of those actually deciding the issue in the legislature. Ventura's strategy of public conversation was one of a celebrity politician but not sufficient to pass the legislation he wanted. He was not involved enough in the legislative process. His nominal unicameral ally Steve Sviggum could not resist a dig at Ventura on the fateful day of the defeat of the final unicameral bill, when Ventura was taking heat for being in Washington, D.C.: "The governor has not been that engaged in the Legislative session, so whether he's here or not does not make any difference."¹⁵¹ The legislature felt ignored, disrespected, and taken for granted. The unicameral

¹⁵¹ [Tom Webb, "Ventura riding high in D.C.," *Pioneer Press*, May 10, 2000, 15A], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Press/Media Files. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives.

bill might have passed if Ventura just “had shown lawmakers even a minimum of courtesy,” as they saw no reason to work with him if they got nothing in return.¹⁵²

Part of the story of Ventura’s celebrity were his national exploits. Political scientists have found that governors with perceived national ambitions are less successful at passing legislation.¹⁵³ Legislators were irritated by Ventura’s frequent jaunts outside the North Star State. For Ventura, the irritation was likely worse than for the average ambitious governor. While he was gathering national buzz for a presidential run scarcely a year into his term, annoying enough for legislators as it is, he also promoted his personal brand unlike anyone else. He was spending time away from his constituents schmoozing with Hollywood stars, campaigning with fellow Reform Party celebrity Donald Trump, and participating in wrestling matches.¹⁵⁴ He faced legal challenges for his enrichment outside of government, and some felt he cared more for his own personal advancement and financial gain than the people of Minnesota.¹⁵⁵ Ventura’s national ambitions also hurt him with the “fourth branch of government,” the media. Ventura grew increasingly irritated with local media, preferring national media and at times refusing to speak with local media officials responsible for setting the line in Minnesota.¹⁵⁶ The press understandably was irritated in turn with the Governor, and a crucial blow for the unicameral movement came when the Twin Cities’ main paper, the *Star Tribune*, came out against the unicam on February 20.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Ibid., Mahtesian, “Can he govern?,” p. 41.

¹⁵³ Thad Kousser and Justin H. Phillips, *The Power of American Governors: Winning on Budgets and Losing on Policy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 252.

¹⁵⁴ Hauser, *Inside the Ropes*, 284, 322, 212-214.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 217.

¹⁵⁶ Creed, *Governor Ventura: ‘The Body’ Exposed*, 89-90; Smith, Whereatt, and Baden, “Aftershock,” A17.

¹⁵⁷ “Unicameral: A solution to a nonexistent problem” *Star Tribune Editorial*, February 20, 2000, A24.

This case has significant limitations. A different celebrity, one trained not as a professional wrestler but rather as a friendly actor, might have had different instincts for negotiation. Ventura's unique background makes extrapolation difficult. What can be consistent, though, is the logic and development of celebrity politics. Any politician embracing celebrity politics may be able through personal popularity to raise a reform issue. Continuing to play to the public at the expense of deal-making reduces the chances of eventual success.

Ventura showed moments of breaking with his public persona, suggesting he was capable of tamping down the celebrity politics. He had negotiated well in his first year on mandatory and more easily divisible issues, for example winning compromises on the budget. He was serious about the issues, even a nerdy institutional reform issue, meaning there was a Mind behind the Body. He understood eventually that he had to meet with legislators, even if he showed an aversion to linking the issue to others. He was not always governing as if he was on a reality show. Yet the influence of his celebrity and his training as a wrestler and performer are clear on his conduct over the course of the reform effort.

It is possible that the available sources do not reveal the full extent of Ventura's effort, and that he was calling legislators often and holding unreported meetings. Based on the statements of those such as Slocum and Sviggum, as well as an email which demonstrated that Ventura had to be told firmly to contact legislators, it is unlikely any secret meetings where he attempted to convince the legislature took place.¹⁵⁸ Ventura failed to find the creative deal-

¹⁵⁸ [Memorandum from Laura Offerdahl to Governor Ventura, archived May 22, 2000], Minnesota. Governor (1999-2003: Ventura). Policy Management Department Records. Minnesota Historical Society. State Archives, Unicameral folder.

making and positive relationships necessary for celebrity politics to overcome the challenges of institutional reform.

Ventura's celebrity was responsible for his win in the gubernatorial election. It revived a listing institutional reform effort in Minnesota and got the country talking about the unicameral legislature. Celebrity power can do this. It is not far-fetched to say a celebrity politician might represent the best chance to end the United States's drought without a constitutional amendment. Yet the same celebrity instincts and methods that won Ventura power and the institutional movement a chance made the process of governing difficult. The Body remained a "heel," trained to confront and talk to the public, not other elected officials. Slocum and the activists dedicated to the unicameral reform learned an important lesson: Live by the celebrity, die by the celebrity.