



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on December 28, 2011

Nebraska Dem Senator Announces Retirement, Seat Vulnerable to GOP

"It's time for me to step away from elective [office](#), spend more time with my family and look for new ways to serve our state and nation. Therefore, I am announcing today that I will not seek reelection," he said.

According to [Fox News](#), Nelson's retirement is not entirely a surprise to his fellow Democrats, though they have adamantly encouraged him to seek reelection. *Politico* reports that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Nev.) and Chuck Schumer (N.Y.) mounted a "pressure campaign to keep Nelson from retiring."



Nelson had pondered his decision for some time, and experienced a number of changes of heart before ultimately opting for retirement.

News of Nelson's retirement was leaked to *Politico* before Nelson had the opportunity to inform his aides and top Senate Democrats of his decision, prompting him to issue a number of apologies.

In his [address](#) announcing his retirement, Nelson also took the opportunity to scold some of his colleagues, and give them some advice about bipartisanship:

I encourage those who will follow in my footsteps to look for common ground and to work together in bipartisan ways to do what's best for the country, not just one political party. Public office is a place for public service, not personal profit. It's about promoting a common good, not the agenda for the radical right or the radical left. It's about fairness for all, not privileges for the few, and it's about protecting the rights of individuals, even if it angers the majority.

There are indications that it is that very partisanship and the radical agendas of the Democratic Party that prompted Nelson's exit. Fox News explains:

Sources say the senator has been frustrated for awhile with Washington. He was roundly scorned for his role in the health care debate by Democrats, who were furious with his opposition to the so-called public option and requests for exemption on abortion coverage.

He was also criticized for threatening a filibuster and then ceding his opposition after news of a deal to include in the bill a "cornhusker kickback" — 100 percent [Medicaid](#) funding for his state on an indefinite basis. That portion of the legislation was tossed out in the final reconciliation bill, which Nelson opposed.

It was that sort of deal-making that altered Nelson's reputation, especially among members of his own state. A once-popular Governor, Nelson was actually booed while dining at a Nebraska restaurant following the healthcare debate.

Nebraskans, who tend to lean conservatively, stood opposed to many of the reforms in ObamaCare and launched a "Give Ben the Boot" campaign shortly after he voted in favor of the healthcare law.



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Even as the Democrats were increasingly becoming frustrated with Nelson, they did not wish to see him leave his seat in the Senate, particularly as the Democrats are fearful that they may lose their Senate majority in November.

Democrats are in a difficult position, as they need to hold on to 23 seats in November, while Republicans must defend only 10, and require only four additional seats to have the majority. Some contend that the Nebraska seat left by Nelson could turn Republican.

One Democratic aide admitted earlier this month that without Nelson running again, there is little chance Democrats will hold the seat. "There is no Plan B in Nebraska," he said.

"This virtually guarantees a Republican victory in 2012," said University of Nebraska Lincoln political scientist Mike Wagner. "There's almost no scenario in which a Democrat can win — especially at this late stage."

Nelson seemed to be doing well in his state's polls, and would more than likely have been able to retain his seat. But Republicans have been aggressively targeting him for his vote for Obama's signature healthcare law. Over the course of the last month, the *National Journal* indicated that Nelson has faced "a barrage of attacks from the opposition. Crossroads GPS decided to drop more than \$500,000 against Nelson in the state's two largest media markets. Americans for Prosperity purchased \$120,000 on cable television for anti-Nelson ads."

[Politico reports](#) on the vulnerability of the Democratic majority, "Other vulnerable Democrats, like McCaskill and Jon Tester of Montana, also face difficult-although winnable — reelection fights. There will also be costly races in Ohio, Florida and Pennsylvania, featuring Democratic incumbent Sens. Sherrod Brown, Bill Nelson and Bob Casey. Obama's reelection campaign is expected to spend heavily in those states, potentially giving a boost to Democratic incumbents."

Republicans who have been recommended for Nelson's seat include state Attorney General Jon Bruning, state Senator Deb Fischer, and state Treasurer Don Stenberg. Others include Nebraska state Representatives Lee Terry and Jeff Fortenberry.

Bruning already began his campaign against Nelson by launching an ad of his own earlier this month, wherein he contrasts himself with Nelson. Bruning is currently the frontrunner in the GOP primary. He commented on Monday, "Ben Nelson has been a dedicated public servant in the state of Nebraska for over two decades. I wish him and his family well in their future endeavors."

As for the Democrats, one name that has been offered is former Senator Bob Kerrey, who has already indicated that he would not rule out the possibility. Still, Kerrey has stated that it is "highly unlikely" that he would jump into the race, and told the *Nebraska Watchdog*, "It's not what I would consider being my logical career path."

Meanwhile, Senator Patty Murray, chairwoman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, seemed confident when she said that Republicans will have a "very divisive primary in the state, which will provide an opportunity for Democrats to remain competitive. We remain confident that we will hold the majority next year because incumbents have built strong campaign organizations in their states and we've recruited great candidates who are generating enthusiasm around the country."

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), who leads messaging efforts for Senate Democrats, voiced similarly optimistic sentiments: "I think we're very, very likely to keep the Senate and I think there's a darn good chance we stay the same or pick up seats."



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Nelson is the [seventh](#) Democrat to announce his retirement for this cycle, in addition to Independent Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman. Two Republicans have also announced their retirement, Arizona Senator Jon Kyl and Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison.

Photo of Ben Nelson: AP Images



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