

This music major leads the Arizona House of Representatives

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New state House Speaker J.D. Mesnard brings his policy-wonk background to the job, and makes a nod to his music background by outfitting his office with a piano.



(Photo: Rob Schumacher/The Republic)

This is the second of two stories looking at the new leaders of the GOP-controlled state Legislature. Both [Senate President Steve Yarbrough](#) (/story/news/politics/legislature/2017/01/21/steve-yarbrough-arizona-legislature-senate-president/96781828/) and House Speaker J.D. Mesnard come from the same southeast Valley district, live within a half-mile of each other and are in their final term in office.

Perhaps it was inevitable that J.D. Mesnard became speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives.

The Chandler Republican, 36, has been involved at the state Capitol for nearly half his life, starting as an intern, serving as a policy analyst and then getting elected to office. Earlier this month, members of the House elected him speaker by acclamation, reflecting wide agreement that he was the best candidate for the job.

It's a post Mesnard has thought hard about: He issued a 17-page document entitled "A Vision for House Leadership" as he made his bid in late fall for the top spot in the House. It was full of wonky musings on the role of the speaker and other players in the House, and outlined his plan for changing how the 60-member chamber operates.

"I love the state Legislature," he wrote in the document's conclusion. "I love the policy-making process and the personnel. As the branch closest to the people, it is the institution to which I am principally devoted."

In the early weeks of his tenure, there are already signs of change: He's modifying the rules on strike-everything amendments, making it harder for a bill on a given topic to morph into something totally unrelated; he's re-established budget subcommittees to examine more carefully agency operation; and he's shown some love to the minority party, increasing their operating budget and even stopping by a meet-and-greet for freshman Democrats.

"I'm the House speaker," he said, when teased about kibitzing with Democrats.

Not that he's used to the title. Earlier in January, as he waited for an elevator, a lobbyist called out a greeting of "Mr. Speaker" and received no response.

He tried again.

Mesnard finally turned around, saying sheepishly he's not used to being called that.

Conservative track record

In his six years as lawmaker, Mesnard has championed some of the more controversial measures that are now state law.

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A self-described "traditional conservative," he sponsored the bill that enacted corporate tax cuts, which still are phasing in. Mesnard said it's a sound policy to help spur business. Critics have complained the millions of dollars of reductions to state revenue.

Arizona House Speaker J.D. Mesnard

He's taken on election-law changes that Republicans say make the process more fair and that Democrats argue disenfranchise voters and make the process harder to track.

"Mr. Mesnard has been on a jihad to gut the right of citizens to respond to things they don't like in government," said attorney Tom Ryan, a resident of Mesnard's southeast Valley district who watches Capitol developments closely.

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Mesnard promoted bills that toughened the process for citizen initiatives to qualify for the ballot, and last year sponsored bills designed to "fix" a controversial campaign-finance measure. Those last-minute changes effectively thwarted efforts to ask voters to overturn a law that protected certain so-called "dark-money" groups from having to disclose their donors.

And he gets credit - or discredit - for the expansion of the state's Supreme Court. Mesnard argued the five-member panel needed two more members to deal with growth in the population and cases. Critics noted the court's caseload had not increased, and complained the bill catered to Gov. Doug Ducey, giving the governor the ability to pack the court with justices favorable to his agenda.

Policy wonk

Mesnard arrived at the Legislature in 2002 as a policy intern. Kimberly Yee, who is now a state senator, picked him for the education-research staff in the state Senate. His work also impressed Ken Bennett, who hired him as a policy analyst when Bennett was elected Senate president.

"He was absolutely not my traditional hire," said Yee, R-Phoenix. "What was I doing hiring a music major?+

But she said she was impressed with his interest in not just the legislative process, but also in the political process needed to turn a bill into law.

From there, Mesnard moved to candidate status, running for the Legislature in 2010. He has won election to the seat four times; this is his last term, due to term limits.

The son of a now-retired fighter pilot, Mesnard was born at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. He moved to Arizona two decades ago and attended Arizona State University, where he earned a degree in music composition. He followed that with master's degrees in business and public administration.

Politics, or at least government service, runs in his family: His mother, Nora Ellen, sits on the Chandler City Council. His wife, Holly, worked in Bennett's secretary of state office.

In addition to trying to strike a more inclusive tone - by listening to Democrats, promising to involve lawmakers in the usually secretive budget process and pledging to end the "binge voting" that has happened near the close of recent legislative sessions - Mesnard is hoping to keep a relaxed attitude.

Late last year, in addition to outfitting his office with the standard photos and certificates lawmakers love to display, he moved a Wurlitzer spinet piano into his office. It might help take the edge off tense days, he said, and it could spark the creation of a legislative music group.

Keeping his day job

Mesnard is keeping his job as an adjunct professor of politics at Mesa Community College. Former student Mike Martinez said the course Mesnard taught on political issues inspired him to get involved. At Mesnard's urging, he got a job as an intern at the Legislature, jumped into Democratic politics and now serves as the chairman of the Maricopa County Young Democrats. Last fall, he ran for a seat in the House.

"If I had won, we kind of vowed to work together," said Martinez, who lost in his primary race.

Martinez said he expects Mesnard to keep that spirit of working across the aisle as he navigates a legislative session that will call for tough choices on education funding and balancing the state budget.

And Martinez expects the habits he saw in the classroom to shape Mesnard's two years as House speaker: Mesnard was friendly and approachable, but also disciplined and not easily swayed from his beliefs.

"He was one of the few people where I couldn't argue my way up a grade," said Martinez, who said he got a B in Mesnard's class due to attendance issues.



A Vision for House Leadership

A Comprehensive Plan for Reconstructing the Institution of the House and Establishing Caucus-Driven Leadership

Representative Javan D. Mesnard
District 17

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A Vision for House Leadership

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