Robert Bennett won the Republican nomination for governor in 1974 by 530 votes with about one-third of the total in a four-way race. This election marked the first time that the candidates for governor and lieutenant governor ran as a team and for a four-year term. Bennett and his running mate Shelby Smith faced a Democratic ticket of Attorney General Vern Miller and State Senator Jack Steineger. Bennett won a narrow victory—387,792 votes to 384,115—with the Prohibition candidate polling 11,968 votes, much more than the difference. Attorney General Miller’s strong antidrug campaign and the lengths to which he went may have made the difference in this election: He was ridiculed for hopping out of a car trunk in one raid. An issue of undetermined impact on the election was Bennett’s beard, and there was much comment about whether
he should keep it. Bennett was the first Kansas governor elected in the twentieth century with whiskers—the reverse of nineteenth-century style, when only one governor, Lyman Humphrey, was clean shaven and all others wore a beard or at least a moustache. Bennett was also the first governor to come directly from state legislative service since Payne H. Ratner in 1937, and he had more experience in public office than any Kansas governor except for Edmund Morrill, who was elected in 1894.

Robert Bennett served as a clerk for Sen. James A. Reed of Missouri after graduating from law school. He was admitted to the Kansas and Missouri bars and to practice in the federal courts. He founded the law firm of Bennett, Lytle, Wetzler and Winn in Prairie Village. As a member of the Prairie Village city council (1955–57) and mayor (1957–65), he gained his first experience with elective offices. His baptism into state politics occurred when he won a Republican primary race for the state senate by 54 votes out of 8,300 votes cast. He was elected to the Kansas senate for three terms, serving from 1965 through the end of 1974, during which time he chaired various committees and was president of the senate (1973–74).

Bennett’s long service in state affairs made him an astute student of Kansas government, and his handling of the governor’s office has been labeled “civics book” politics. (Oddly enough, this may also have been the basis of his political weakness, since it reinforced a perception that he was distant.) A conglomeration of executive offices, some previously elective, was replaced by cabinet-level departments. The power of Kansas’ chief executive to appoint and remove officers had been increased, but there were still many state officials whose appointment was not in the hands of the governor. Bennett slowly filled vacancies and positions. Throughout his four years as governor, Bennett sought to provide balance among his state appointments on the basis of race, sex, and geography. He appointed the first woman to the state supreme court and the first black to the court of appeals. He sought also to infuse new blood into state boards and commissions by not reappointing persons who had served two consecutive terms.

State government had grown to immense proportions by the time
Governor Bennett seated in front of his cabinet, a new feature in Kansas government: (left to right) W. Keith Weltmer, secretary of administration; Edward G. Bruske, secretary of economic development; F. Kent Kalb, secretary of revenue; Jim J. Marquez, secretary of corrections; James A. McCain, secretary of human resources; O. D. Turner, secretary of transportation; Dwight F. Metzler, secretary of health and environment; Shelby Smith, lieutenant governor; Robert C. Harder, secretary of social and rehabilitation services; and James F. McCormack, acting secretary of aging.

Bennett became governor. Bennett stressed economy, and early in his administration a hiring freeze was imposed on state agencies. However, the state of Kansas was also administering approximately 170 federal assistance programs of different magnitudes which involved about one-sixth of the state government’s work force. Local units of government, at the same time, also dealt directly with various federal agencies. Bennett’s frustrations in dealing with the fed-
eral government were evident; one commentator stated that “he sought to manage that which was unmanageable.”

Financing education and highway improvement continued to be important issues in Bennett’s administration and board of regents’s funding requests generally fared better than those coming from other agencies. Branch offices for the governor’s staff were created in Wichita and in western Kansas to stress Bennett’s concern for all sections of the state. His efforts to abolish the port of entry system and to make the meat inspection program more restrictive met with defeat in the legislature. Likewise, in 1978, Bennett’s support for re-instatement of a death penalty and construction of a medium security prison failed to pass, even though he turned to longtime friends in the legislature for backing. Similarly, his attempt to take highway improvements out of the political sphere may have cost him allies when he sought a return to the governor’s office.

Unlike most twentieth-century Kansas governors, Bennett had no speechwriters on his staff. He preferred writing his own speeches or speaking extemporaneously. He viewed his annual legislative message as his most important single act each year, and his formal messages to the Kansas legislature numbered well over one hundred. His subject matter for public speeches dealt with taxing and spending, cultural heritage, the value of political parties, and the role of individuals. Although not elected with a mandate from rural farm interests, Bennett, half-way through his term, became a symbolic advocate of Kansas agriculture. He spoke heatedly against the national farm policy, and he lent his support to state tax relief for farmers. He also served as a symbolic spokesman for Kansas energy producers in an effort to influence federal policy, during a period when energy issues regularly besieged all levels of government. Occasionally in his role as governor, Bennett would intentionally confront an audience, based on his concept of the governorship, in an effort to rise above special-issue politics and competing factions. He was aware that his vision of a broadly united Kansas, lacking in political factionalism, carried with it some immediate costs to his own political future.

Bennett led the Kansas delegation to the Republican National Convention in Kansas City in 1976. In the fall elections that year,
midway through his term, Republicans lost control of the house of representatives to the Democrats, while the senate remained Republican by a single seat. In 1978 Bennett ran for a second term as governor. More conservative in fiscal philosophy as governor than as state senator, Bennett had repeatedly expressed concern about legislative irresponsibility on spending. It was thus appropriate that his principal opponent should be John Carlin, Democratic speaker of the house of representatives. Bennett’s running mate in 1978 was Larry Montgomery of Dover, while Carlin was paired with Paul Dugan of Wichita. Straw polls indicated that Bennett was ahead until Carlin interjected the last-minute issue of “rising utility rates,” to which Bennett made no response. Bennett lost with 348,403 votes to 364,738 for Carlin, but the Republicans regained control of the state house of representatives. A comparison of the 1974 and 1978 election returns shows that Bennett lost most heavily in the counties containing regents institutions.

Bennett returned to his law practice in Prairie Village. In 1986 popular rumor put Bennett in the governor’s race again, but he never filed as a candidate.