

Ben Barnes, who was chosen speaker of the house in 1965 at the age of 26, was the youngest occupant of that office since Ira Evans had presided over the house of representatives during the 12th Legislature of 1870 to 1871.

Born on April 17, 1938, in Gorman, Texas, Barnes attended The University of Texas School of Business and the university's School of Law. He became interested in politics while working for the state health department as a student and ran successfully for a seat in the house of representatives following his graduation. As a resident of De Leon in Comanche County, Barnes served in the 57th through 60th legislatures.

While a representative, Barnes served as chairman of the house rules committee and vice-chairman of the banks and banking committee, in addition to serving as liaison between Governor John Connally and Speaker Byron M. Tunnell. Barnes backed Tunnell's campaign for a second term as speaker in 1965, planning to seek that office himself in 1967. Just before the opening of the 59th Legislature, however, Tunnell accepted a position on the Railroad Commission of Texas, and Barnes became speaker ahead of his intended schedule.

In 1967, Barnes won a second term as speaker in the 60th Legislature. The following year, he was elected lieutenant governor. Winning a second term in that office as well, Barnes presided over the senate in the 61st and 62nd legislatures.

As speaker, Barnes established the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and secured a minimum wage for farmworkers. He also supported passage of the Consumer Credit Code, of clean-air and water-quality legislation, of legislation establishing programs for the elderly, and of legislation to aid the mentally ill and handicapped. As lieutenant governor, he successfully backed an increase in the minimum wage, legislation in the area of mass transportation, and legislation creating the Texas Rehabilitation Commission. Throughout his four terms in the two offices, Barnes also was interested in the issue of higher education. During that time, Texas increased its appropriations for higher education more than threefold, rising to near the top in its ranking among the 50 states in expenditures for higher education. Several new universities and graduate schools originated as a result of increased appropriations.

Barnes, who was named one of "Five Outstanding Young Texans" by the Texas Junior Chamber of Commerce in 1965 and one of the "Ten Outstanding Young Men in America" by the United States Chamber of Commerce in 1970, also has distinguished himself nationally in many capacities. He served as chairman of both the Southern Legislative Conference and the National Legislative Conference. He also has been a member of the Executive Committee of the National Conference of Lieutenant Governors, the National Conference of State Legislative Leaders, and President Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. Additionally, the former legislator has served as the United States representative to the NATO Civil Defense Committee Conference in Brussels and as a special representative to the United Nations in Geneva in 1968.

In 1972, Barnes made an unsuccessful race for the office of governor, then retired at the end of his second term as lieutenant governor to actively pursue his many professional interests.