

When Preston E. Smith won the gubernatorial election in 1968, he became the first West Texan to hold the state's top executive office. His victory at the polls also was the first time since 1857, the year that Hardin Runnels defeated Sam Houston, that a lieutenant governor was elected governor directly after serving in the former office.

Smith, born on March 8, 1912, in Williamson County, had decided at the early age of eight that he would one day become Texas' governor. Son of a tenant farmer, he had to work at numerous jobs throughout his high school years and while attending Texas Technological College to finance his education. Having received his business administration degree in 1934, Smith soon put it to good use and opened a movie theater in Lubbock, a business venture he was able to expand into a six-theater chain by 1944.

That same year he was first elected to state office as a member of the Texas House of Representatives. From this first house race to his successful reelection bid for governor in 1970, Smith used a unique campaign style. He always approached politics on a personal level, working to communicate effectively with both his constituents and his colleagues in the legislature on as much of a one-to-one basis as possible.

One of the key elements of his campaigns was a regularly updated card file that was maintained on all of Smith's personal acquaintances, associates in government, and political contacts, an invaluable aid in his personal mailing approach to political races. His well-planned political organization also included the practice of appointing chairmen throughout the state in as many small communities as possible to conduct his campaigns for him at the grass-roots level. Finally, Smith accepted as many speaking appointments as his schedule would allow, especially while serving as lieutenant governor, feeling that this was the best way to both ascertain voter opinion on issues as well as inform his constituents about the intricacies and problems of state government.

Smith served in the House of Representatives of the 49th Legislature and was reelected to two consecutive terms. While a representative, he promoted farm-to-market roads, more small town hospitals, better schools and teachers' benefits, and the permanent building fund for state colleges.

Smith later won a seat in the senate in 1956 and served three consecutive terms in the office. As his last term was ending in 1962, he ran successfully for lieutenant governor and presided over the senate of the 58th through the 60th legislatures. During his six-year tenure in the office, Lieutenant Governor Smith worked to attract new business, industry, and investments to the state. In 1968 he was elected governor and was reelected to a second term two years later.

Although no longer in elective office, Smith maintains a lively interest in the political affairs of the state. He served for four years on the Coordinating Board, Texas College and University System, to which he was appointed in 1981 and which he chaired until 1983.

A realtor in Lubbock, Smith is active in civic affairs and serves as a consultant to the Texas Tech University Board of Regents and the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center. He also serves his community and state as a member of the Lubbock Chamber of Commerce, the Lubbock Kiwanis Club, and numerous other local and statewide organizations.

Smith and his wife of 60 years, Ima, are the parents of a grown son and daughter.