LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Former Arkansas governor and U.S. Sen. David Pryor, a Democrat who was one of the state’s most beloved political figures and remained active in public service in the state long after he left office, has died. He was 89.

Pryor, who went undercover to investigate nursing homes while a congressman, died Saturday of natural causes in Little Rock surrounded by family, his son Mark Pryor, said. David Pryor was a heart attack and stroke survivor who was also hospitalized in 2020 after testing positive for COVID-19.

“I think he was a great model for public service. He was a great role model for politicians, but just for everyone in how we should treat each other and how we can make Arkansas better,” Mark Pryor, a former two-term Democratic U.S. senator, said.

David Pryor was considered one of the party’s giants in Arkansas, alongside former President Bill Clinton and the late U.S. Sen. Dale Bumpers. He also served in the U.S. House and the Arkansas Legislature, and remained active in public life in recent years, including being appointed to the University of Arkansas’ Board of Trustees in 2009. He also attended the inauguration of Republican Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders in January 2023.

"David would be like a fish out of water if he were out of public service," Bumpers, who served 18 years with Pryor in the Senate, said in 2006. "It's his whole life."

In a statement Saturday, Clinton called Pryor “one of Arkansas’ greatest servant leaders and one of the finest people I have ever known,” saying he “fought for progressive policies that helped us put the divided past behind us and move into a brighter future together.”

“David made ***politics*** personal — from his famed retail campaigning to his ability to calmly and confidently explain tough votes to his constituents,” Clinton said. “He was honest, compassionate, and full of common sense. He really loved the people he represented, and they loved him back.”

Another former Democratic Arkansas governor, Mike Beebe, said Pryor, his “close personal friend and confidant," was “exactly the kind of honest and pragmatic person who is always needed in public office.”

“His personal style of homespun humor, quick wit, and genuine warmth, combined with his deep knowledge, gave him the ability to pass progressive legislation that was so beneficial to our state,” Beebe said in a statement. “His top priorities of Arkansas Comes First and focusing on the problems our aging population and taxpayer reform made him beloved by his colleagues and his constituents.”

Warm thoughts and condolences came from both sides of the political aisle Saturday.

Sanders mourned Pryor's passing, saying his “charisma and moderate ***politics*** made him a force at the ballot box for decades.”

“While the Senator and I came up in different political parties, I, like all Arkansans deeply appreciated his diligent stewardship of Arkansas and our interests during his time in public life,” Sanders said in a post on X, formerly Twitter. "And we can all thank him for his role in burying the divisive racial ***politics*** that infected Arkansas government before his tenure.”

Sanders' Republican predecessor as governor, Asa Hutchinson, called Pryor “the quintessential public servant.”

“He gave up other opportunities to serve Arkansas throughout his life and the public debate was elevated because of his service,” Hutchinson wrote on X.

Arkansas Republican U.S. Sen. Tom Cotton called Pryor “a true gentleman and a statesman.”

“His example served and will continue to serve as inspiration for our fellow Arkansans,” Cotton said.

The founder and publisher of the Ouachita Citizen weekly newspaper, Pryor started his political career in 1960 with his election to the Arkansas House. He served there through 1966, when he was elected to Congress after winning a special election to the U.S. House.

During his time in the state House, Pryor gained a reputation as one of the "Young Turks" who were interested in reforming the state's political system. Pryor said years later that the reforms he wanted didn't come as quickly as he had dreamed in his younger days.

"I guess I was a young reformer at the moment," Pryor said in 2006. "I was going to change the world. I wanted it to change overnight, but it didn't."

He experienced his first — and only — political defeat in 1972, when he challenged U.S. Sen. John McClellan's bid for a sixth term in the Democratic primary. Pryor was able to force a runoff with McClellan, but he lost by about 18,000 votes. It was a defeat that stung Pryor decades later.

“Following the McClellan race, I abandoned ***politics***, or ***politics*** abandoned me,” he wrote in his 2008 autobiography, “A Pryor Commitment.” “I didn’t care who was governor or president. I avoided reading the paper for months on end. I just wanted to be left alone and, like General MacArthur, silently fade away.”

Elected governor in 1974, replacing Bumpers, Pryor served four years before being elected to the U.S. Senate, where Pryor won passage of a Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights in 1988. He called the legislation — which expanded citizens’ rights when dealing with the IRS — the “cornerstone” of his congressional career.

“I didn’t sponsor this bill to help Donald Trump or Lee Iacocca,” Pryor, who chaired the Finance Subcommittee on Internal Revenue Oversight, said at the time. “This is a bill that protects the average taxpayer.”

He also focused on helping the elderly and went undercover while serving in the U.S. House from 1966 to 1973 to investigate nursing homes. He said they commonly found up to 15 beds in one room.

“Even now, I recall clearly the loneliness, neglect, despair, anxiety and boredom — in particular the boredom — of those cold and sterile homes,” he wrote. “Essentially human warehouses for old people.”

Pryor decided to not seek re-election in 1996, and he retired from elective office at the end of his term in early 1997.

But he remained active in the public eye and in ***politics***. He served two years as the inaugural dean of the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service, located next to the former president’s library in downtown Little Rock. He also temporarily chaired the state Democratic Party in 2008 after its chairman was fatally shot in his office.

On the University of Arkansas’ Board of Trustees, Pryor was an outspoken opponent of a $160 million plan to expand Donald W. Reynolds Razorback Stadium in 2016 and criticized the “nuclear arms race” among college football programs.

Pryor and his wife, Barbara, had three children.