



JOURNAL

A Public Policy Monthly from the Citizens League

INSIDE

This month, the Minnesota Journal focuses on the first question from the Minnesota Anniversary Project agenda: "How can politics become more useful in solving citizens' shared problems?" We start to answer that question with our lead article on legislative redistricting, and in an expanded Perspectives section. To make room for the discussion, two of our regular features, Take Note and Facts Unfiltered, do not appear in this issue. They will return in February.



Restoring competition and taming polarization: Common sense reform of Minnesota's legislative redistricting process

by Arne Carlson and Walter F. Mondale

Representative democracy relies on competition to motivate government officials to respond to the interests and wishes of citizens. But the vast majority of legislative elections in the United States are not competitive today. This relative lack of competitive elections is one of the most glaring limitations of American democracy, fueling partisan polarization, muting government responsiveness to constituents, and contributing to significant congressional corruption.

We are alarmed at the contemporary patterns of weak electoral competitiveness in the United States and in Minnesota, and we've outlined several new approaches to redistricting that, if adopted, will reduce the staggering number of "safe" legislative districts. Although several factors have weakened electoral competitiveness, the process of drawing legislative districts is a significant contributor—and one of the few that can be remedied. With the process of redistricting starting in 2007 and culminating in 2011, Minnesota has an opportunity to offer bold leadership and to pioneer new approaches to districting that encourage competition and dampen extremism.

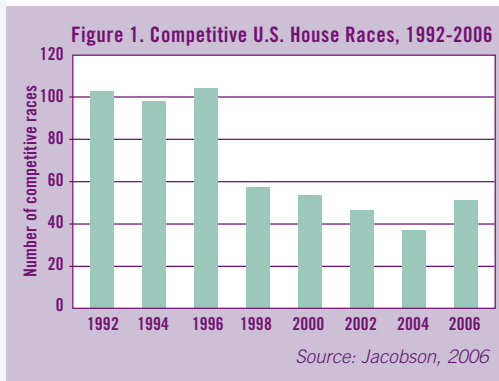
The erosion of competition

Legislative elections have now reached a sad state—their outcomes are commonly known well before the ballots are counted. Despite tidal wave conditions in 2006 that saw unusually strong public disapproval of the Republican Congress, president, and direction of the country, there were no tidal wave results.

Indeed, the country and Minnesota dodged a searing political crisis because current maps of legislative districts helped Republicans nearly hold their majorities despite the strong public disapproval of their leadership. Out of 85 million votes in 2006, the Republicans came within 86,000 votes in 16 races of holding the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. Republicans could have kept their majority in the Minnesota House if just 6,333 votes had changed columns in 17 close races. They could have actually taken the majority from Democrats in the Minnesota Senate if 19,369 votes in 11 Senate districts had flipped parties.

Overall, the incumbents in Congress and the Minnesota legislature won more than eight out of 10 reelection battles and by victory margins that average about 25 points.

- Ninety-five percent of incumbents in the U.S. House of Representatives won their general election races (380 of 401 representatives).
- Nearly three-fourths of U.S. House elections (317 districts, 73 percent) were decided by 20 or more points.
- One in eight districts (55) were essentially throw-away elections, with only one major party candidate on the ballot.
- In 2004, only five incumbents running for reelection lost their seats.
- Only 15 of the 435 House of Representatives seats switched parties from 1998 to 2004.



The dying out of competitive legislative races represents an alarming new pattern.

The number of competitive U.S. House races in 2006 was about half the level that it was in the early 1990s (see Figure 1), including the last "tidal wave" election (1994). In 2006, only 51 races were classified as competitive and fewer than 15 percent of representatives (63) were elected by margins of 10 percentage points or less. By comparison, about a hundred seats were in play in 1992, 1994, and 1996.

The lack of vigorous competition is also evident in Minnesota, despite DFL wins in Congress, the state House and Senate in 2006. Persistent and gaping margins of victory by incumbents are making a travesty of our democracy.

continued on page 6

2
Connections

3
Viewpoint: Now playing on the Capitol stage in St. Paul.

4
Politics and problem solving: a look back at some at some Citizens League reports

10
Perspectives:
Politics shouldn't be a spectator sport
By Mark Ritchie
Politics is everybody's work
By Mary Anne Kowalski

End the precinct caucus system now
By Barry Casselman
Accommodating the uninformed electorate
By Bruce Kennedy

Faith communities as stewards of democracy
By Brian Rusche

CONNECTIONS

Building a League of Citizens



"In too many cases our high school students are bored, checked-out, coasting, not even vaguely aware of their post-high school plans, if they have any, and are just marking time," said Governor Tim Pawlenty in his State of the State speech on January 17. Look for more from us on this issue as we start to tackle student motivation as a part of the Minnesota Anniversary Project.

Proposed Study Topics

The Policy Advisory Committee will consider these proposals in the coming months. Go to www.citizensleague.org/blogs/policy to read them and make your own suggestions.

- Citizens League Book
- Water Quality
- Education Competitiveness
- Campaign Finance
- Youth Development
- College Retention
- Local Government Spending Comparison
- Open Source Government
- Immigrants and K-12 Education
- Immigration and Higher Education "Solutions" Committee

Uncivil Discourse and the Rise of the Outrage Industry

Wednesday, Feb. 7

McGuire Theater, Walker Art Center

Registration 5:30 p.m.; program at 6:30; reception at 7:30

Citizens League members encouraged to bring a nonmember.



Join Citizens League board member **Nate Garvis**, vice president for Government Affairs at Target Corporation, for an engaging discussion of the ways outrage is becoming an industry in and of itself, intent on keeping us angry. The resulting polarization has become a powerful force with social and economic consequences. Going beyond a statement of the problem, Garvis will suggest ways to weave ourselves back together so we can tackle today's complex issues with sustainable results.

Presented in partnership with the Walker Art Center and sponsored by Phillips Distilling Company. Intended as an opportunity for people to get to know the Citizens League, we ask that members bring a non-member as your guest. Space is limited, so please register in advance at www.citizensleague.org, or by calling 651-293-0575, ext. 16.

New members, recruiters and volunteers

New and rejoining members

Charles H. Backstrom
Laura Bishop and Charles Weber
Bryan Bohlman
Dixon Bond
Mary Kay Brenner
Thomas Darling
Kay and Kim Gudmestad
William and Kay Hempel
Audra Keller
Corey and Lori Magstadt
Michael Moriarity
Michael and Debra Newman
Richard and Nancy Nicholson
Karen Panton
Heather Peterson
Patricia Ross and Dave MacCallum
Jennifer Reedy
Mark Scally

Kim Hunter & Associates
Lyman Lumber Company
McKnight Foundation
Minnesota Business Partnership
North Central Mineral Ventures
NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center
Pohlad Family Foundation
Portico Healthnet
The Rodman Foundation
St. Paul Travelers Foundation
Target Corporation
Thomson West

Recruiters

Ben Cox
Robert Donnelly
Steven and Mary Swain Goldstein
Dave Hutcheson
Doug Robinson
Judy and Daniel Titcomb

Firms and organizations

Becker Consulting
Blandin Foundation
Bush Foundation
City of Bloomington
Cogent Consulting, Inc.
Corporate Incentives, Inc.
Ecolab
Flannery Construction, Inc.
Idealogics

Volunteers

Cal Clark
Ben Cox
Marco Lanz
Rachel Satterlee
Lauren Satterlee
Sean Skibbie
Matt Smith
Eric Willette

Member Poll

What political reform would best improve public problem solving in Minnesota?

- Our electoral systems need reform—like Instant Runoff Voting, initiative & referendum, campaign finance reform or legislative redistricting.
- Our legislative systems need reform—like a unicameral legislature, term limits or internal administrative changes.
- Citizens need more ways to get involved through the places where they already spend their time.
- Actually, I think Minnesota's political institutions work well.
- Something else (tell us why!).

Go to www.citizensleague.org to vote!



Shakespeare was right: All the world *is* a stage

And it's time to remodel our political theater

by Sean Kershaw

The curtain has risen on the Minnesota Legislature—our annual political drama—and the reviews are coming in strong. Performances by the governor and legislative leaders are noted as “restrained but thoughtful,” and “showing great promise and maturity.” After last season, when many performers were booed off the stage, the audience is eager for less overacting, more teamwork, and fewer distracting pyrotechnics. Expectations are high, with the citizen-audience hopeful, but ready to walk out if they don't like what they see.

This session will almost certainly bring better political performances. Minnesota is on the verge of a new era of good governing and policy leadership. But unless we re-emphasize the *purpose* of politics and use it to develop new political *practices* that work at individual and institutional levels, we won't make good on the good will and work we have seen so far—or address the policy priorities we care about.

Act I: The political tension builds

Politics is how we get things done in public life. It's how we achieve our public policy goals. As Mary Kowalski and Brian Rusche remind us in this issue, politics is “the work of the citizen.” It's practiced on institutional “stages” everywhere—in the workplace, in congregations, and in communities—not just at the Capitol.

Devaluing politics gets us nowhere. As long as people say they are about “policy not politics,” or “principles not politics,” we'll be stuck with unimplemented policies and unprincipled politics. No wonder citizens are frustrated—as our recent Minnesota Anniversary Project (MAP 150) poll demonstrated.

The Citizens League has made it a priority to find new ways to practice politics, and our MAP 150 agenda is a step in that direction. The economy, technology, and culture have changed dramatically. The world is “flat.” Monolithic hierarchies have been replaced by hyper-connected networks and the “wisdom of crowds.” Technology has given individuals and institutions new

As long as people say they are about “policy not politics,” or “principles not politics,” we'll be stuck with unimplemented policies and unprincipled politics.

insight and information, and new powers and responsibilities. We need new political practices that work in this new landscape.

Act II: The spotlight on St. Paul

Take education policy for example. Nearly every month I receive another blueprint for education reform—and these plans get better and better as we learn what works. But most languish on the shelf, held up by ideological interest groups who often benefit from the current system and think it is someone else's job to change. Watching this drama play out each year is like watching a melodrama that has passed its prime: the same tired villains and hackneyed heroes, and the same insufficient ending.

Meanwhile, Minnesota citizens wait in the wings off stage—increasingly frustrated by politics and educational outcomes and not liking their opportunities to participate in the production.

In education and in other areas, political reform efforts usually focus on the Capitol players. For example: changing our reapportionment process so districts are less homogenous and elected officials are less impervious to competition (see Carlson/Mondale, page 1); or reforming the caucus system, which drives citizens out of the process and turns the two largest parties into cartoonish versions of their ideological extremes (see Casselman, page 9).

These electoral political reforms are almost certainly necessary, but they are only the start. Education reform depends as much on the actions of students, parents, teachers, administrators and business/community

leaders in their everyday roles and institutions as it does on elected officials in St. Paul.

Act III: The resolution

Maybe politics isn't working “up there” at the Capitol because it isn't working “in here” in these institutions where we spend time.

If all institutions have a democratic role in education (as I said last month), and if politics is how we implement better public policies, I believe new political solutions begin by finding better roles for these citizen-actors. We need to write a new political script that emphasizes the roles and opportunities parents, students, businesses, teachers, and community leaders have in education policy and practice. For example, what practices and responsibilities will increase my role in education policy implementation as a parent and as an employer? What new political practices will help students be “co-producers” of their education? How can businesses like Kowalski's Markets and nonprofits like the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition impact education policy and outcomes?

Developing these new forms of participation is a political challenge, and a real opportunity for political entrepreneurship. Citizens have a lot more authority and opportunities in our roles in these institutions than we do trying to influence 201 elected officials and an army of interest groups at the Capitol.

Perhaps we are not even watching a drama on stage—but watching the curtain go up on a gigantic mirror. The best way to change politics (and therefore policy) is to find out how to get out of our seats and become part of the production. Our political frustrations will ease, and our policy outcomes will improve, when we embrace our roles as actors in this important Minnesota policy process—not critics and passive victims who complain in the car on the ride home. ●

Sean Kershaw is the Executive Director of the Citizens League, and can be reached at skershaw@citizensleague.org or 651-293-0575x14. You can also comment on this Viewpoint at: www.citizensleague.org/blogs/sean.

How can politics become more useful in solving citizens' shared problems?

This is the first question on our Minnesota Anniversary Project agenda, but it's not a new issue here at the Citizens League. Over the past 55 years, we've covered a number of topics related to this question. Here are four summaries of Citizens League reports spanning the past 30 years. The full reports are available online at www.citizensleague.org.

More and smaller contributors: public regulation of financing local political campaigns (1974)

The 1974 Minnesota Ethics Act although helpful did not go far enough. The Act was most effective in requiring the disclosure of campaign funding. However, the Act placed limits on expenditures while only putting modest restrictions on contributions.

The problem is not spending. Many perceive spending by candidates, particularly those in close races, as excessive. However, spending helps generate more interest in the race and encourages voter participation. Moreover, spending limits often work in favor of the incumbent and against the challenger.

The problem is contributions. The integrity of campaign efforts depends heavily on the way they are financed and conducted. Large contributions by single financiers amount to the greatest loss of voter confidence. The concern caused by large contributions is more relevant because of fears associated with the governing process. The concern is that contributions of possibly more than \$100 are made either to receive or pay for a favor, to buy preferential access, or for insurance that the interest of a contributor will be favorably considered when decisions are made.

Initiative and referendum: "No" for Minnesota (1979)

As a system for making law, initiative and referendum compares unfavorably with Minnesota's present system in two key respects. First is the process for developing proposals. The legislative system provides an open and public process for participation in drafting, amending and taking final action. Developing proposals through initiative can be closed and private, and, if enough signatures are obtained on a petition for the original proposal to appear on the ballot, the only choice available will be "yes" or "no." Second is the process for making the decision. Before a vote is taken in the Legislature, intensive debate occurs in committee and on the Legislature floor among a precise group of decision-makers known to everyone. In the initiative-referendum system, no deliberation occurs among the voters on the question, nor is the group of persons who will vote really known.

This is not to say that our present legislative system of law making is free of defects. It is not. The Legislature usually has an extremely difficult time dealing with issues involving its own operations, such as size, salary, per diem, campaign finance, and, particularly, reapportionment.

Power to the Process (1984)

In general, Minnesota's Legislature was held in high esteem by scholars and analysts who compare legislatures, but most Minnesotans do not think highly of their Legislature and do not fully understand how it functions. A few specific findings:

- Most aspects of the Legislature's work are open; but that openness breaks down in several places, most notably caucus decisions and end of session compromises.
- There is no single path for a proposal to become law.
- The addition of new provisions in conference committees is a significant and growing issue in policy-making.
- Omnibus spending bills hinder legislative accountability and mix policy and appropriations.

The party caucus: an inquiry (1991)

The Citizens League believes the primary purpose of the caucus ought to be providing an opportunity to expand informed participation in the political process, rather than conducting the work and advancing the agendas of the major political parties.

Participation at the precinct caucus is low. Low participation is problematic for several reasons—foremost because the success of our democracy depends on the concern and involvement of our citizens in its governing. Second, low attendance may result in candidates that do not reflect the views of the full party membership (or even a majority), or that are dominated by single-issue viewpoints. Further, low attendance limits the parties' ability to nurture and recruit future candidates for public office.

Recommendations:

- Limits of \$100 should be placed on contributions to a candidate from individuals and organizations. The restrictions should provide exceptions for candidates contributing to their own campaigns and political parties contributing to candidates they have endorsed.
- Political parties and candidates should play a larger role in funding campaigns. Contributions to political parties should remain unregulated. Only modest restriction of \$.05 per resident in an election district should be placed on the amount a political party can contribute to campaigns. Candidates should have broad limits on the amount they can self-finance, again equaling \$.05 per resident.
- Funding practices that encourage large contributions should be outlawed. Candidates should not be allowed to transfer money to other candidates. Loans from individuals or organizations other than financial institutions should be

banned. Earmarking contributions made to organizations and political parties for a particular candidate should not be allowed.

- Incentives should exist to encourage voter contributions and participation in local elections. The state tax credit should be extended to cover contributions to local campaigns. Political parties, schools, and the public media should undertake educational programs to alert people to the need for contributions and the availability of the tax credit.

Given that large contributions undermine confidence in the system, this report attempts to strike a balance between the ability of individuals and organizations to financially support whom they please, and to effectively maintain the integrity of the system.

But the initiative and referendum process has defects of its own. Initiative and referendum campaigns are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by special interest groups. Wealthy, well organized interest groups thus can gain a disproportionate advantage in determining the outcome of ballot issue elections.

And, experience from states that have used initiative and referendum over the past 50 years suggests that many of the hoped for benefits do not really occur.

Conclusions

- It is unlikely that initiative/referendum would reduce the emphasis on single-issue politics. Ballot propositions tend to become major issues in political campaigns. If any result is likely, it is that initiative and referendum would tend to enlarge rather than diminish the role of single issues in political campaigns.
- Neither does it seem likely that initiative/referendum would open up the political process to more or new kinds of people. Only a minority of eligible voters turn out for elections on ballot propositions, and those who participate tend to be the same people who already participate in politics.

- Those who believe that initiative/referendum would be used to advance the philosophical or policy preferences which they hold will be disappointed. The experience in high-use initiative states indicates that those provisions will be used for both conservative and liberal measures.

- Experience in other states does not suggest that initiative/referendum would reduce voter distrust of government. Studies show that distrust is more related to economic conditions than to government process, and it isn't likely that a new law making process will offer magic solutions to our economic problems.

Initiative and referendum is not worth the risk it involves. It ought not to be adopted in any form in Minnesota. This includes even the indirect form, which filters proposals through the Legislature first. It does have the virtue of requiring legislative attention to a proposal, but no such problem of legislative inattention is deemed to exist in this state, where almost anyone who has an idea can get a bill introduced.

The most common proposals for legislative change, making the Legislature smaller, full time or unicameral, would not address the main problems identified.

- Current legislative practice in the conference committee process, the omnibus spending bills, and the observance of rules undermines credibility and policy making.
- Problems in the processes for conference committees and budgeting can be corrected by leaders, caucuses and better application of the rules.

Recommendations

- Changes to caucuses and leadership roles: Senate majority leader should have the same type of authority as the speaker of the House; majority and minority caucuses should make their own committee assignments; the Legislature should formalize the budget resolution process; and, legislative fundraisers during session should be limited to caucuses and not held by individual members.

- Changes in the conference committee process: limit the authority of conference committees to include new items; develop and adopt rules for germaneness; make stricter separation of policy from appropriations the norm.

- Procedure changes should include joint hearings on appropriations to reduce the time needed to review what state agencies do; an interim agenda to better prepare for limited legislative time; and pre-filing of agency and local government bills.

- There should be a new, nonpartisan joint staff office for research that includes House Research, Senate Counsel and Research and the fiscal analysts from each body under the auspices of the Legislative Coordinating Commission.

- Institutionalize orientation and continuing education for legislators through efforts such as the pre-session Minnesota Horizons program.

Lack of information and the procedural complexity of the caucus are detrimental to attendance. Most people may have a vague idea of what caucuses are but are unfamiliar with their purposes and procedures. Little is done at the caucus meeting itself to alleviate the apprehensions of those unfamiliar with caucuses; newcomers are more likely to feel overwhelmed than welcomed at the caucus.

Conclusions

- The caucus system ought to be retained, albeit with some changes.
- Greater participation at the precinct caucuses is a desirable goal, but the system has features that discourage participation.
- Party platforms have become less meaningful and are too long.

Recommendations

For the major political parties:

- Simplify and clarify the caucus by making the rules, procedures, and agenda more understandable and as simple as possible.
- Improve how the caucus is publicized and work toward improving people's understanding of the caucus.
- Make strong efforts to encourage all conveners to receive training prior to serving as caucus conveners.
- Make better use of the half-hour waiting period at the start of the caucus.

For the state:

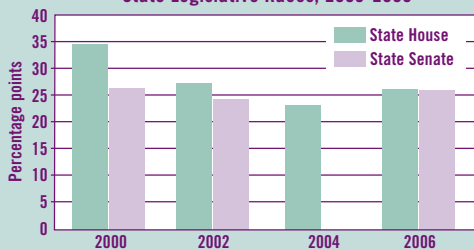
- The Legislature require a state role in publicizing the party caucus.

Restoring competition

continued from page 1

With two open congressional seats and a Democratic Party pickup in another district (the 1st), the average margin of victory across all of Minnesota's eight congressional races was still an absurd 25 points in 2006. In the closely watched 5th District, the DFL's Keith Ellison won by 34 points, and in the 6th District Republican Michele Bachmann won by 8 points in what was supposed to be a squeaker. The incumbents won by about 30 points or more in five of eight races.

Figure 2. Average Margin of Victory in Minnesota State Legislative Races, 2000-2006



Note: The Minnesota Senate was not up for election in 2004.

The lack of competition in 2006 fits into a longstanding pattern. Since 1970 the average margin of victory in Minnesota congressional races is 29 points. Only once in that time has the margin of victory fallen below 20 points (in 1994, the winner's margin was 17 points).

Minnesota state legislative races also reveal anemic competition. In 2006, 84 percent of incumbents remained in power (49 of 58) and 89 percent of open seats (8 of 9) remained with the controlling party in that district. Despite 10 state Senate seats changing parties, the average victory margin actually increased from 24 points in 2002 to 26 points in 2006.

In the state House, 89 percent of incumbents retained their seats (96 of 108) in 2006, and 70 percent of the open seats (16 of 23) remained with the controlling party. And these elections are regularly won by more than 20 points on average (see Figure 2). Most House and Senate districts remain very uncompetitive and several seats (especially those held by the DFL) became even more uncompetitive in 2006.

The need for reform

Redistricting reform is needed to systematically create competitive and fair legislative districts. Weak and declining legislative competitiveness compromises

democratic representation, giving incumbents an unfair advantage and shielding them from constituent discontent. Skewed legislative districts free safe incumbents to pursue uncompromising, hard line party doctrine and contribute to partisan polarization. The reality is that many legislative districts are ideologically extreme and legislators in those districts intent on winning reelection view taking extreme positions as a "smart" strategy.

Reforming the redistricting process is a practical and important step for restoring democratic accountability and dampening today's hyper polarization. Reform is particularly important in Minnesota; the current system is ad hoc and plagued by mishap. Minnesota can do better.

Under the current process, the legislature is responsible for formulating a plan to draw district boundaries at least every decade following the U.S. Census. The speaker in the state House and the majority leader in the state Senate are expected to appoint a redistricting committee that introduces bills, holds hearings, designs a bill, and works to enact it.

But the normal legislative process does not work. The Minnesota Supreme Court had to bail out the legislature in 1991 and 2001 when the state's chief justice appointed a special redistricting panel to hear lawsuits and to design congressional and state redistricting plans.

Gridlock and lawsuits overwhelm the process when different parties control the governor and legislature—the situation during the last four redistricting cycles as well as much of the next. The casualty is careful study and planning. The irregularity of the current process was in full display in 1991 when the legislative redistricting plan became law after the governor improperly vetoed it. And now that the courts step in to rescue the lawmaking branches, each political party neglects the normal process and instead focuses on winning the court battle.

The time to act in Minnesota is now. The legislature will begin in 2007 to make preparations for redistricting including the procurement of equipment, software, and data.

Reforms in Minnesota

In states where parties split control over the lawmaking branches (the most common situation), bipartisan collusion invariably results. When one party controls both

branches, districts are drawn in bias against the "out" party. Given the vulnerability of legislative elections to rigging against competition, it is important to set up a redistricting process that is not directly controlled and guided by sitting legislators.

There are several approaches to redistricting, with a number of variants. Redistricting commissions have been created in six states for congressional redistricting and approximately a dozen states for the drawing of state legislative districts. They end the conflict of interest inherent in sitting legislators drawing their own districts.

A second approach—typified by Iowa—uses a nonpartisan legislative support staff agency guided by certain criteria, including population equality, unity of counties, compactness, and contiguity. Although this approach has been hailed by some as removing politics from the redistricting process, our analysis demonstrates that the competitiveness of Iowa's legislative races are not impressive compared to other Upper Midwestern states. Iowa may be handicapped by the fact that its staff agency is not permitted to look at data on the competitiveness of previous elections.

One of the biggest challenges in reforming the redistricting process is to incorporate competition with other constitutionally protected considerations (compactness, contiguity, population equality, and respect for communities of interest). The U.S. Supreme Court does not recognize competition as a constitutional requirement but states have incorporated it in their redistricting guidelines. Arizona recently revised its constitution to make the creation of competitive districts an explicit consideration.

Minnesota has long been a leader in reforming government to be more open and responsive. But the current approach to redistricting is broken and too often the result is an insulated and out of touch political aristocracy. We can do better, and Minnesota can lead the way in strengthening our democracy.

In the coming months, we look forward to developing proposals for reforming Minnesota's redistricting process on a non-partisan basis. Please join us. ●

Former Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson and former Vice President Walter F. Mondale co-chair the Advisory Board for the Humphrey Institute's Center for the Study of Politics and Governance.

PERSPECTIVES

Expanding Minnesota's Conversation



Politics shouldn't be a spectator sport

We can get more Minnesotans off the couch and into the arena

by Mark Ritchie

Politics can become more effective in solving common problems when more citizens take a greater role in politics. Unfortunately, it seems that for too many people, politics has become a spectator sport—they watch, but do not become actively involved. When more people learn about issues, run for office, work for candidates, lobby their school board, city council or state legislators, and of course vote we will have a better informed and more responsive government.

When you get your driving license, learners permit or state-issued ID you should be simultaneously registered to vote.

As a group, senior citizens prove that government responds to those who are involved. They have organized over the years through various groups—from the Senior Federation and AARP to retiree groups within unions and other professional associations—and it has paid off. As a result of their active civic engagement, government programs designed primarily to address the needs of senior citizens, like Social Security, are high priorities for most elected policymakers.

The good news is that there are ways that we can make it easier for everyone to take a greater role in government—to express their opinion and to ensure that it is heard.

First of all, we can make it easier to participate in elections. For example, if you have a driver's license or a state ID card, between them the state and federal governments have all of the information needed to determine if you are eligible to vote—whether you are a U.S. citizen, are at least age 18, and if you have lost your civil rights due to a felony conviction. You should not have to waste time standing in another line and filling in another hard-to-read form to register to vote. It should be

automatic—when you get your driving license, learners permit or state-issued ID you should be simultaneously registered to vote. We should be able to make this and other changes with adequate safeguards to make sure that only eligible voters are registered.

Instituting this form of efficient voter registration would not only make it easier for citizens it will also save local and county-level governments millions of dollars by eliminating needless duplicative data entry and form processing. Civic groups and others who currently run voter registration drives will be able to focus their efforts on the small percentage of the population without state-issued IDs, freeing up staff time and resources that could be devoted more productively to voter education. I will be working with legislators, the Department of Public Safety and other affected government agencies to implement some form of automatic voter registration here in Minnesota.

Secondly, we can encourage participation by providing voters with the information they need to make informed voting decisions. Many states print and distribute voter guides with information about how and where to vote and information about candidates and ballot questions. Minnesota should do the same.

Voters should have access to information beyond that found in TV and radio attack ads. Voter guides provide candidates with the opportunity to present their case directly to the voters. We may be overwhelmed with information about candidates for the U.S. Senate, but it's hard to find even biographical information about judicial candidates. Partnering with media, religious organizations, political parties, businesses, trade unions, veteran's organizations and other civic groups, guides could be produced, posted on the Web, and sent to each household before major elections.

A third concern is keeping our elections clean, fair, and competitive. Other states, like Arizona, Maine, and Connecticut are

cutting the ties between political donors and elected officials by moving to public financing of state-level campaigns. Some states are developing new approaches to re-apportionment to ensure that state and federal elections are actually competitive—not locked up by one party through gerrymandering. Minnesota has fallen behind the rest of the country on these issues and needs to get moving.

Finally, we have to make sure that citizens trust that their votes are being counted properly. We have the best system of election administration in the country, with paper ballots and hand-counted audits and recounts, but there are ways that we can make our system more secure. We have to pay close attention to the trust level of our voters, because it is their confidence in the system that largely determines whether they choose to participate or not. If voters think that voting is being manipulated by computer hackers, they are not going to feel very motivated to participate in the system and will not trust the outcome.

As secretary of state, I will make sure that our government does its part to make it easier for citizens to register and vote, help educate the public about candidates and issues, and make sure that everyone feels confident about the security of our voting system. But at the end of the day the only thing that really matters is whether citizens join in the process. With nearly 40 percent of eligible Minnesotans not voting in the last election we have work to do. ●

Mark Ritchie is the Minnesota Secretary of State.





Politics is everybody's work

Civic organizing has made our company stronger and more sustainable

by Mary Anne Kowalski

Like a lot of people, I used to think politics was just about government, elections, and politicians. The word conjured images of power brokers and back room deals and had little, if anything, to do with me.

As a leader in the Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative (MACI), my understanding of politics has deepened and changed, and it is changing the way we do business at Kowalski's Markets.

MACI is a cross-sector initiative that builds the civic capacity of leaders and their institutions. Under the organizing leadership of Peg Michels, MACI leaders use the authority and power they have in their own institutions to reconnect citizens to policy making.

My husband Jim and I own nine grocery stores in the Twin Cities and we have been in business since 1983. When we were first introduced to MACI, we were in the process of developing a plan for passing the business on to the next generation. We built our company on strong civic values and we wanted to pass on those values. The principles and practices used by MACI seemed like they would help us achieve our succession goals. I have since learned that civic organizing, the approach used by MACI, offers us much more. It is making us a stronger, more sustainable company—and a company that is fulfilling its obligations as a civic institution in a democracy.

This type of change starts with individual leaders. I spent time looking at my own self-interest, my life work, and how I use politics and power. I began to see myself connected to a bigger purpose. I could not save the world. I could not vote for just the right candidate, give to enough charities, or save our education system. What I could do was accept and embrace the role I had as a leader and as a businesswoman in the place where I had the most influence, inside my own company.

In 2002, we started a three-year MACI pilot project within the company. Key employees took a 12-week course called Civic Organizing 101. In the course, they are introduced to “big ideas” about democ-

racy, justice, power, and politics. From the start we tied the work we do within Kowalski's to a bigger purpose, to the common good. These are some of the steps we have taken:

- We have restated our identity and operating principles to integrate democratic ideals with company goals. Our new identity explicitly states our obligation to the common good.
- We have set the expectation that everyone in the company has a role in helping to define problems, to contribute to finding solutions, and to strive towards the common good. In the process, employees learn that politics is the process of determining the right action and that political competency is required to get things done.
- We use disciplines that further build civic capacity. Employees take the time to think and write about what matters to them and what they value so they can define their life work. They learn how to manage their time in a way that achieves company goals and supports what they say is important. Employees learn to articulate the ideal, assess what is really happening, and then identify opportunities and barriers for closing the gap between the two. They learn how to organize one-on-one meetings and other public meetings so that energy is focused on the public purpose that furthers company goals and objectives. And they use evaluation to develop policies to sustain what works.

These efforts have helped us create a civic infrastructure within the company. Employees feel greater ownership in achieving company goals. They are active

decision-makers in the company and as a result we are making better decisions and producing a better product at less cost.

The work we are doing in the company is making a difference outside the company, too. Steve Beard, a manager with the company, says it this way, “I used to go as a consumer to my child's parent conferences. I expected the teacher to define the

I spent time looking at my own self-interest, my life work, and how I use politics and power. I began to see myself connected to a bigger purpose.

problem and find the solutions. I would listen but I didn't really participate. Then I would complain to my wife and coworkers about what wasn't working. I don't do that anymore. I know now that I have an obligation to bring resources to the table to help solve problems wherever I have a role.”

Even before our work with MACI, Jim and I established a good reputation and developed a company culture that worked. What was missing was an intentional infrastructure that could sustain what we built and a purpose that made a difference in the larger world. The Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative has helped us put that in place.

And now I know that politics is essential to making Kowalski's work and to making a democracy work. At Kowalski's, politics is our everyday work. ●

Mary Anne Kowalski is co-owner of Kowalski's Markets. She is the lead organizer for Civic Business, a demonstration project of the Minnesota Active Citizenship Initiative.

Empower the majority

End the precinct caucus system now

by Barry Casselman

There is one vital political election reform in Minnesota which is long past due. The precinct caucus system, changed in the early 1970's by reforms of then Congressman Don Fraser and Senator George McGovern, has been a failure since those reforms were made.

Most states have abandoned precinct caucuses in favor of primaries. Minnesota kept both, but as David Lebedoff, long-time DFL activist and once senior advisor to Gov. Wendell Anderson, has articulately demonstrated in his writings—from *The New Elite* (1981) to *The Uncivil War* (2004)—the McGovern-Fraser rules brought about the rise of single-issue politics on the far right and the far left, and chased away the mainstream voters from the political process.

At the state level, the reformed precinct caucus system was established under the rubric of improving elections. From the beginning, however, the system which has applied to both major political parties, gave mathematical advantage to small groups on the left and the right, and marginalized the traditional liberal and traditional conservative voters who make up the majorities in both parties.

Elected at the precinct level every two years, activists on single issues turn out, and DFL and Republican moderate voters who seek consensus stay away. In fact, usually only about 1 or 2 percent of eligible party voters even show up for the caucuses. Yet it is these activists, at higher and higher levels leading to the state conventions, which make the endorsements and control the party apparatus. No one can seriously argue that this is a democratic system.

On the Republican side, the 1980's saw the purge of long-time party leaders by activist far-right conservative groups. Moderates were increasingly left out of the party decision-making, and Republicans lost a series of elections locally and in the state. On the DFL side, the party had refined the system to include a walking sub-caucus modification that gave small but organized groups even more power, and further pushed traditional liberals and moderates out of the way.

By 1994, the statewide DFL was clearly moving off center. Moderate Republican

Gov. Arne Carlson was not endorsed by his party for re-election because the GOP precinct caucuses were controlled by the right wing of the party, and the DFL moved to the left by nominating a populist state senator. Carlson won the primary, and swept to re-election in November. Voter dissatisfaction became so great in 1998 that an independent centrist candidate, former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura, was able to win an upset victory over the two major party candidates.

By 2002, the DFL was so far off center that one of its most prominent members, former Congressman Tim Penny, left the party to join a newly invigorated Independence Party, and after leading in the early polls, received almost 17 percent of the vote for governor, enabling conservative Republican Tim Pawlenty to win the governorship. The pattern repeated itself in 2006, with former DFLer Peter Hutchinson receiving 6 percent of the vote, enabling Pawlenty to win re-election by a narrow margin. Exit polls indicated that Hutchinson took about twice as many votes from DFLer Mike Hatch than he did from Pawlenty, more than double the margin of victory.

In short, the DFL will have been shut out of the governorship for 20 years by 2010 because it has turned away its traditional center-left liberal base for a more radical populist base. The presence of the centrist Independence Party, with major party status, makes the DFL's prospects equally bleak after that.

Traditional center-right conservative Republicans have been similarly shut out of their party for most of the past three decades, and only scandal and DFL extremism has enabled the GOP to win assorted victories in statewide race over the past 40 years.

At the core of this weakness, in my opinion, is the current precinct caucus system which was created for single-issue party activists who, as I have said, manipulate the system so that those who hold political views not shared by most Minnesotans in either party are enabled to win party endorsement and nomination. The years

when Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Wendell Anderson, Rudy Perpich, Harold Stassen, Luther Youngdahl, Elmer Anderson, Bill Frenzel and Al Quie were able to fashion bipartisan consensus are gone.

Only the two current U.S. senators, DFLer Amy Klobuchar and Republican Norm Coleman, represent some of the old spirit on consensus politics in Minnesota.

The largest losers over time have been the candidates of the DFL Party. If the Fraser-McGovern reforms of the precinct caucuses were not in place, there would be no serious Independence Party today. Moderates such as Penny, Hutchinson, and Coleman could have remained in the DFL, and the party could have won elections when the political cycle went its way.

I have two solutions, one for the whole state and one for the DFL.

First, the precinct caucus system should be abandoned immediately. Ideas about proportional voting should be dismissed as elitist and anti-democratic, and self-defeating. The primary system should control who runs for office in Minnesota. It may not be perfect, but it is the fairest and most democratic process available.

Second, as it did in 1944, the DFL Party should merge, this time with the Independence Party. As happened in 1944 under Humphrey and his allies, the left wing of the party should be allowed to go their own way. The Green Party, for example, much more reflects the values of the populist left than does the DFL.

Only when these two changes are made, in my opinion, will balance be restored to Minnesota politics and governance. The need for this balance is long overdue. ●

Barry Casselman was one of the pioneer community newspaper editor/publishers in the Twin Cities, and his newspaper *Many Corners* was published from 1973-86. Since then, he has become a weekly nationally-syndicated columnist writing on national politics.





Accommodating the uninformed electorate

Hard lessons I learned on the campaign trail

by Bruce Kennedy

Last year I ran for secretary of state. It was an educational experience. Unfortunately, much of what I learned was disappointing.

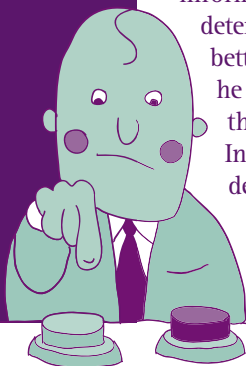
My booth at the state fair beckoned citizens to “Stop Complaining About Politicians—Do Something!” It was a little disconcerting that, of the few hundred who stopped by, many thought I was Mark Kennedy (“Hey, loved your commercials!”). Few knew what the secretary of state does or who held the office, and some thought I was trying to replace Colin Powell.

The primary election was held a few days later. Voters in all three major parties were winging it. In the Republican attorney general race, perennial candidate Sharon Anderson got 42 percent of the vote—the endorsed candidate would likely have lost had his name been Jeff Polochko instead of Jeff Johnson. Dick Franson, elected alderman once in Minneapolis in the early '60s, who has since lost 20 races for various high offices, got 29 percent of the vote for DFL secretary of state, about 75,000 votes (and then campaigned for Republican Mary Kiffmeyer). Independence Party endorsee for attorney general, John James, a graduate of Harvard Law School, barely prevailed over three non-lawyers (well, one was a lawyer on suspension for ethics violations).

Remember, primary voters are alleged to be better informed.

Just weeks before the election, half of the electorate did not recognize the name Peter Hutchinson.

Should we care? In “The Wisdom of Crowds,” James Surowiecki argues that an informed majority can determine objective facts better than experts. But he does not extend his thesis to politics. Instead, he argues that democracy is a good in and of itself, even if it doesn't always make the right choices.



I understand his reluctance to apply his theory to value judgments such as who is the best leader. But I agree with E.B. White who said that democracy is the recurring suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time. (Note the requirement of “more than half of the people,” which will not be met by our current system until we require a majority to win. And the most efficient and economical way to accomplish that is through instant runoff voting.)

But we could further improve our leadership if we reduce “bad voting.”

Here are some examples of bad voting:

- Guessing. Voters choose between unknowns. Candidates who have a “bad name” are at a disadvantage even if they have good leadership qualities.
- Name recognition. Newer or third party candidates, no matter how willing and able, get short shrift.
- Couch potato voting. Voters who rely on advertising rather than seeking out independent information take our power away and give it to the interests who fund the ads.
- Misrepresentations. Voters who can't or won't distinguish accuracy from exaggeration give an advantage to less scrupulous candidates.

Accommodating the electorate

I have an autistic son. Growing up, his behavior was often unruly, and we had a hard time influencing him with either positive or negative reinforcement. So we frequently gave up trying to change his behavior at all. Instead of trying to persuade him to stay out of the medicine cabinet we just put a lock on it. This, we learned, is called an accommodation.

Sometimes an accommodation is an admission of failure. You cease to challenge the human being to a higher standard. You work around. You adopt “realism.” You make the most of a bad situation.

Our Constitution is an accommodation. James Madison wrote, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” He looked at human deficiencies and tried to frame a government with checks and balances to minimize harm. He didn't base its structure on what he wanted humans to be,

but on what we are, or optimistically, what we could be.

Here are some accommodations which could improve our electoral system.

- Remove the perennial candidates by requiring more to get on the ballot than a small fee.
- Give primary voters a break by indicating the endorsed candidate.
- Provide an oval for “No Choice” for folks who feel they have to make a mark in every single race, even if they don't know the candidates.
- Reduce voters' workload by appointing more offices. Do we really need to vote on soil and water supervisors—or for that matter, secretary of state or state auditor?
- Emphasize quality, not just quantity. High turnout is great, but especially when people know who they are voting for.
- Teaching people that they have to educate themselves thoroughly on every race is like preaching abstinence. We should give voters a condom by suggesting that they find a party, a union, or even a person who shares their values to make recommendations. Anything but voting based on ads, which just feed the beast of big money in politics.

Which brings us to campaign funding reform. We wouldn't need it if voters knew the candidates without being bombarded by ads, lawn signs, and other “name recognition” tactics. Should an accommodation be made because people cannot resist well-funded candidates? Do we have to protect voters from themselves by funding all the candidates or controlling those who have funds? Ouch.

We should never give up trying to motivate people to put a higher priority on informed participation. But we need to have a frank discussion about what accommodations should be made to enhance our electorate's capacity to choose leaders. ●

Bruce Kennedy, a Roseville attorney, is a member of the Citizens League Policy Advisory Committee. His “Better Elections” blog is at www.bk4sos.org.

What's the right role for religion in politics?

Faith communities as stewards of democracy

by Brian Rusche



The role of religion is taking on a higher profile in the world's politics. Media coverage ranges from issue-based prayer vigils at our state Capitol to religious identity as the dominant descriptor of warring factions around the globe. Rather than engaging in a false debate on whether or not religion has a role in politics, we should talk about the right role for religion in politics and the role of politics in faith communities.

As we see in many places in the world, religious forces that push for purely sectarian values can debilitate, or even ruin, the ability of a people to govern for the good of all.

Political tension, in the end, is about values and values are very often rooted in religion. Religious communities are centers of spiritual development that explore community values and often give impetus to political action. Faith communities are a forum for some of the most serious debates about values and policy choices. One would expect that deep and spiritual discernment about God's intended future for humankind would logically lead to intense discussions regarding current social policy choices.

Religious life and public life inevitably mix and, in America, we are blessed with a complex set of legal rules to paint boundary lines between "church" and "state." These boundaries have allowed both sectors to thrive. For most of America's history public debate has flourished and strengthened our democracy because it has floated above religious sectarian divides. All the while most Americans consider themselves religiously affiliated and our social landscape is full of diverse, vital congregations that increasingly contribute to policy-making. But policy-making, Americans agree, comes out of the workings of our democracy—not religious edicts, religious tests, nor anything that reeks of theocracy.

As religion becomes more prominent in the politics of our day, what can faith communities do to make sure that religion and religious values help our politics become more functional?

First, faith communities need to recognize that, like all other institutions, they are stewards of our democracy. The way in which they organize for issue-related work needs to strengthen our democracy. Citizen participation, value-driven debates, a vision for the common good, and respect for minority opinions are important ways to acknowledge that democracy demands more than pushing a particular religious tenet.

Interfaith work, such as the policy agenda advanced by the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition, is particularly healthy for our democracy because it is in interfaith settings that diverse faith groups work out differences, intentionally look for common ground, and then make a unified, civic contribution to the public debate.

Second, faith communities should honor religious pluralism and enter the public debate with religious inspired but essentially common good arguments. When religious leaders enter the public square they become civic leaders with an important and unique perspective. But once in the public square, religious leaders are obligated to make arguments that appeal to non-believers or people of different faiths. This is not to sanitize or dial down the soaring rhetoric, searing images, or urgent, prophetic calls to follow God's calling, but to take the additional step of interpreting the argument in clear, secular, civic terms. No one did this better than Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I urge you to take some time to appreciate both the spiritual depth and the civic strength of Dr. King's writings and public speech.

The world's major religions teach the unassailable human dignity and worth of

each human being. To uphold human dignity religious leaders and faith communities should clearly speak out to protect religious choice, religious freedom, and demonstrate their commitment to democracy. Democracy, when we all contribute to its workings, is a means whereby each person becomes more fully human by contributing to the governance of the whole community. The health of our democracy,

The health of our democracy, it seems to me, is more important to human dignity and human freedom than many of the issues around which some religious communities have organized.

it seems to me, is more important to human dignity and human freedom than many of the issues around which some religious communities have organized.

It's been eleven years since the nation said goodbye to Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, but her advice to faith communities still rings in my ears: "You would do well to pursue your cause with vigor, while remembering that you are a servant of God, not a spokesperson for God ... and remembering that God might well choose to bless an opposing point of view for reasons that have not been revealed to you."

Humility, respect for others, inspiring visions of the common good, an active commitment to the workings of democracy ... these are the ways faith communities can make our politics more functional and give us greater capacity to address our shared problems. ●

Brian Rusche is a member of the Citizens League and Executive Director of the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition, an interfaith social justice lobby sponsored by the Minnesota Council of Churches, the Minnesota Catholic Conference, the Jewish Community Relations Council, and the Islamic Center of Minnesota.

2/7

Uncivil Discourse and the Rise of the Outrage Industry

Presented in partnership with the Walker Art Center and sponsored by Phillips Distilling Company

Join Citizens League board member **Nate Garvis** for an engaging discussion of the “outrage industry.” Garvis will examine the ways outrage is becoming an industry in and of itself, intent on keeping us angry and polarized, and suggest ways we can weave our communities back together so that we can tackle today's complex issues with sustainable results.

This event is free. We ask that members who plan to attend bring a nonmember as your guest.

Wednesday, Feb. 7. Registration 5:30 p.m.; program 6:30 p.m.; reception follows.

Registration and more information online at www.citizensleague.org, or call 651-293-0575, ext. 16.

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555 North Wabasha Street, Suite 240
St. Paul, MN 55102

The Minnesota Journal
Publisher – Sean Kershaw
Editor – J. Trout Lowen
Managing Editors – Bob DeBoer and Victoria Ford
Contributing Editor – Ted Kolderie
The Minnesota Journal (ISSN 0741-9449) is a publication of the Citizens League, a nonprofit nonpartisan Twin Cities public affairs organization, 555 North Wabasha St., Suite 240, St. Paul, MN 55102. Phone: (651) 293-0575. Fax: (651) 293-0576. E-mail: info@citizensleague.org. Website: www.citizensleague.org. Mary Pickard, chair. Articles and commentary are drawn from a broad range of perspectives and do not necessarily reflect Citizens League positions on policy questions. The Journal is published 11 times a year. Periodicals postage paid at St. Paul, MN and additional offices.
Annual subscription rate for nonmembers is \$40 for 11 issues. Orders may be placed at (651) 293-0575 or by mail at the above address.
Postmaster: Send address changes to the Minnesota Journal, 555 North Wabasha St., Suite 240, St. Paul, MN 55102.