

Summary of Meeting with Mar Asch

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, October 27, 2006

Guest speaker: **Marc Asch**, former legislator; outgoing president of Common Cause Minnesota

Present: Verne Johnson, Chair; Charles Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone), Wayne Popham (by phone), and John Rollwagen

A. Context of the meeting--The Civic Caucus is reviewing whether changes in Minnesota's elections system would help reduce polarization and paralysis in the state lawmaking process. Today we are meeting with Marc Asch, a Minnesota leader of Common Cause, a national organization with a comprehensive agenda for elections change.

B. Introduction of Marc Asch--Verne introduced Asch. Asch is the outgoing president of Common Cause Minnesota and served as its State Issues Committee Chair for six years. He co-owns and is president of a company providing high end Unix servers and components to the international market. Before coming to Minnesota he taught political science at Michigan State University. He also served on the faculty of Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, representing the school to the State Legislature and members of the U.S. House and Senate. He served in the Minnesota Legislature, representing a district in the northeastern part of the metro area, in 1993-94.

C. Comments by Marc Asch--In Asch's comments and in discussion with Civic Caucus members the following points were raised:

1. Changing role of Common Cause--Common Cause still has 3,400 dues-paying members in Minnesota, and probably is first or second in size among civic-related organizations in the state. The organization has evolved from having strong state chapters to mainly a national forum. Common Cause doesn't hold meetings in Minnesota. Its members here are part of the national communications network of Common Cause. To encourage broad participation without influence of money, its dues are low, \$35 a year. No one may give more than \$200 a year without approval by the national board.

Common Cause is a nonpartisan nonprofit advocacy organization founded in 1970 by John Gardner as a vehicle for citizens to make their voices heard in the political process and to hold their elected leaders accountable to the public interest. It now has nearly 300,000 members nationally, according to its website.

2. Success in Minnesota--In Minnesota, Asch said, the greatest success of Common Cause has been in campaign finance, led mainly by State Sen. John Marty. He mentioned limits on contributions to candidates, spending limits, and public funding,

although he's deeply concerned that these changes have been undercut by "soft money", in which organizations can spend money without limits on their own.

Asch noted the interest of the Civic Caucus in reducing polarization and paralysis in the political process. He said that Common Cause has focused on campaign finance and on voter access. The organization is working to reduce the threat of fraud in use of electronic balloting.

3. Instant runoff voting--Common Cause has looked at instant runoff voting for years and has approved the concept for states to consider, Asch said. The Minnesota Common Cause board did not support the amendment on the ballot in Minneapolis to provide for instant runoff voting, he said. With instant runoff voting a voter lists candidates in order of preference, with lower-ranked choices coming into play to make sure a winning candidate receives a majority.

4. Efforts to undercut power of incumbency, create more independence among legislators, and make districts more competitive--Asch said the reforms of providing a carrot of public subsidy along with a cap on spending are designed to make it possible for people to compete for office on a level playing field.

5. Shift of influence to legislative leadership from political parties--Asch said he agrees with what the Civic Caucus has learned in the last few weeks that the influence of political parties in campaigns for the Legislature in Minnesota has diminished in recent years. Legislative leaders through their respective caucuses now play a major role. The growth in influence of legislative caucuses results from the lack of regulation of soft money, in which large amounts of funds can be channeled into campaigns without giving the money directly to a candidate's campaign organization.

Years ago it was common for state legislative leaders to have their own funds, such as the Friends of the Speaker PAC, to distribute to candidates to insure loyalty. When such committees were banned about 12 years ago, the ability of the leadership to control was greatly diminished. In place of that the new structures allow each legislative caucus to collect and distribute money. There's no limit on the size of contributions to these units.

Contributions to the legislative caucuses usually give contributors the ability to stop legislation they don't want, as distinguished from the ability to achieve some new legislation.

To further illustrate the significance of the legislative caucuses in fund-raising, Asch recalled that the legislative caucuses spent something like \$200,000 on selected legislative races, where candidates themselves were limited to about \$35,000. These legislative caucuses have built up campaign organizations, staff, and offices at locations away from the Capitol.

Legislative caucuses operate outside their respective political parties. If a candidate from a political party failed to win endorsement, a legislative caucus of the same party could still provide financial support.

Changing the role of legislative caucuses is going to be difficult in the Legislature, Asch said, because it's in the interest of legislative leadership not to address the question. Moreover, members of the caucus--benefiting from the way caucus campaign funds are distributed--have no incentive to challenge the leadership. With legislative caucus income now exceeding \$1,000,000, the center of gravity has shifted from individual members to the caucus itself.

6. Significance of "independent" expenditures--Continuing the discussion, Asch decried the growth of independent campaign organizations that raise money on their own and then urge the election or defeat of certain candidates. Contributors can give much more to these organizations; if they give their money late in the campaigns, disclosure isn't required until after the election.

7. Possible changes--Asch favors a combination of public and private funding of campaigns. He likes public funding because it goes directly to the candidate's campaign. He'd like if about 60-70 percent of a candidate's campaign treasury would come from public sources. It's not reasonable to expect total public funding, although it would be good for us to learn more about the changes in Arizona and Maine, to see what could be applied in Minnesota. He also thinks it is useful for a candidate to ask neighbors for support. He noted that Minnesota provides donors with a dollar-for-dollar refund for contributions up to \$50 for political candidates.

8. Common Cause agenda--He summarized several changes that Common Cause recommends for Minnesota:

- Ban soft money.
- Require full lobbying disclosure
- Shift reapportionment from the Legislature to a multi-partisan commission.

D. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Asch for meeting with us today.

