

Summary of Meeting with Barry Casselman

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437
Friday, June 7, 2007

Guest speaker--Barry Casselman, syndicated columnist on national politics

Present: Verne Johnson, chair (by phone); Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), John Mooty (by phone), and Jim Olson (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting --As part of a continuing set of meetings on the state's elections process, today the Civic Caucus looks at the precinct caucuses, the biennial, local gatherings of political party adherents that elect convention delegates leading to party endorsement of candidates.

B. Introduction of Barry Casselman --Paul introduced Casselman, a resident of Minneapolis, and author, journalist and lecturer who has reported and analyzed American presidential and national politics since 1972. He founded, edited and published his first newspaper when he was 29. He has been a contributor to many national publications. His regular op ed columns, distributed through the Preludium News Service, appear in Real Clear Politics and The Washington Times, and are nationally- and internationally-syndicated by them.

He has covered national presidential primaries, caucus and straw polls since 1976, and the Democratic and Republican national conventions since 1988. Since 1990, he has been the executive director of the non-profit International Conference Foundation, and has hosted more than 500 world leaders, foreign journalists and other international visitors. At the non-partisan Foundation, he organized a conference on "Locating the New Political Center in America" with Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and leading spokespersons of the Clinton administration as well as newly-emerged independent groups.

C. Remarks by Casselman and discussion --During Casselman's remarks and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Discontinue use of precinct caucuses in the system of party endorsement --Casselman said his main point--outlined in an article in the Citizens League publication, the Minnesota Journal, in January 2007--is that endorsement of candidates by political parties should be replaced by the primary election. He recommends that the official political party endorsement for candidates in Minnesota no longer occur at party conventions. Instead the result of the primary election in each political party would solely determine the nomination. Thereby, he said, every member of the party participates directly in the process via the primary election voting booth, not just the small numbers who attend precinct caucuses.

Precinct caucuses are dominated by activists for special interests of the far left and far right, he said. Consequently, persons elected as convention delegates by precinct caucuses tend to represent more extreme views. Particularly in the DFL, with its sub-

caucus approach, the system was designed to give a small number of persons more political power than their numbers justified, he said.

Moreover, he said, considerable pressure is placed on other candidates to pledge not to challenge the party endorsee in the primary election.

2. Future of precinct caucuses --Casselman has no objection to continuing precinct caucus gatherings as vehicles for discussion of issues. He believes the precinct caucuses--because of who attends and because of rules at the caucuses--should not be used as the legal, legitimate democratic vehicles for selecting candidates. Instead a candidate who wins an open party primary election clearly is entitled to official party nomination. The vast majority of states use the primary, not the caucuses, he said.

3. Estimates of attendance at precinct caucuses are usually inflated -- We never have had accurate records of how many people have voted at precinct caucuses, Casselman said. He believes that with few exceptions only about 1-3 percent of eligible voters show up for caucuses. He usually discounts published reports quoting party officials who give estimates of how many attend caucuses.

4. Pre-primary endorsement inevitable --An open primary doesn't preclude individuals from making endorsements. All sorts of interest groups will also endorse candidates before the primary, he said. He acknowledged that endorsements probably would also occur by groups within a party. But official party nomination would result from the primary election, where voters make the choice.

Casselman and members of the Civic Caucus discussed at some length what kind of pre-primary endorsements occur in other states where official party endorsement comes with the results of the primary. Some kind of indication of preference for certain primary candidates by leaders of a party would seem inevitable. Jim Olson said that in Illinois the county chairs of the party make some endorsements.

Asked after the meeting to clarify his thoughts on the future of endorsements if precinct caucuses no longer are required by statute, Casselman wrote: "If the legislature eliminated the precinct caucuses as a formal part of the election process, they will soon if not immediately disappear. Technically, any political party could keep the precinct caucus mechanism. But as I and others have pointed out, they are EXTREMELY unpopular as evidenced by their chronic low turnout. They exist now because the legislature says they must. Take away their legal mandate, and there is no motivation to keep them. As I also pointed out, endorsements are a natural matter and will continue, but mostly by interest groups. District conventions might continue, and regular state party conventions almost certainly will continue. These conventions might have an endorsing component, but any resulting endorsement would be informal and have much less impact on the party primary. However, considering the recent history of party endorsements, I think the major parties would choose NOT to make endorsements."

5. Disconnect between party endorsees and voter preference --In his Minnesota Journal article, Casselman noted that by 2010 the DFL will have been shut out of the governorship for 20 years "because it has turned away its traditional center-left liberal base for a more radical populist base."

He noted that the rise of the Independence Party--as a new home for disaffected DFLers--has split the DFL vote, thereby helping to elect Republicans. "Traditional center-right conservative Republicans have been similarly shut out of their party for most of the past three decades," Casselman wrote in the Minnesota Journal. He noted that in 1994 Arne Carlson, a moderate Republican, failed to win endorsement because GOP caucuses were controlled by the right wing of the party, but Carlson went on to victory in the primary and the general election.

Casselmann said he is a strong advocate for a two-party system in Minnesota. But third parties arise, he said, when you create a frustrated electorate.

6. Potential of concentrating party power in a few people --It was noted that Republicans in Minnesota didn't officially endorse candidates a few decades ago. But the party still needed a vehicle for endorsement. What happened is that a few people on party's finance committee ended up making the endorsement. Later, when the Republican Party moved to public endorsement, it became possible for moderate candidates such as Elmer Andersen to be nominated. The question arose whether the power of sub-groups within the party would again increase if official party endorsement didn't occur until the primary election itself.

7. Advancing the date of the primary --Casselmann said Minnesota should move its primary to a much earlier date, from September to May. He noted that the primary occurs in April in Pennsylvania.

8. Most Americans, Democrats and Republicans, tend toward the center --Most Americans, he said, are Democrats who are slightly to the left of center and Republicans who are slightly to the right. Unfortunately, he said, the precinct caucus system produces candidates who are far more to the left or right. As part of a movement to support center-oriented voters, he cited the Internet-based Unity 08 campaign that is seeking to nominate and elect a bipartisan team for President in 2008.

9. Possibility of multiple endorsements --It was noted that some proposals are being advanced to provide that if a candidate receives a certain percentage of votes at the endorsing convention--say, 20 percent--that all candidates receiving that percentage or higher, would be able to run in the primary and claim party endorsement. Casselman said he doesn't advocate such an approach.

10. Summary of Casselman's recommendations --He summarized that he is advocating the following approach: **(a)** eliminate the role of the precinct caucus in endorsing candidates for office. Precinct caucuses as statutory vehicles would be eliminated, he said, but the parties still could hold such meetings for discussions to take place. **(b)** move up the primary date. He doesn't envision that the political parties would make official endorsements of candidates before the primary. He acknowledged that leaders within the party might endorse unofficially. The party nominee would be the winner of the primary election.

Casselmann was asked what the purpose of the political party would be if his recommendations are adopted. The party would still be the place where policies and platforms are determined, he said.

11. Opposition to instant runoff voting (IRV) --Casselmann said he doesn't

support having voters rank candidates in their order of preference, as is provided in IRV. A person ought to go into the voting booth and not have to worry about casting second, third or fourth choice votes, he said.

In discussion it was noted that the IRV process guarantees the winner will receive at least 50 percent of the vote, but Casselman called that an artificial majority. If the two-party system is functioning in a healthy way, with open primaries, there should be no need for IRV for helping third parties, he said.

Continuing the discussion, it was noted that Casselman strongly favors giving more influence to moderate voters. It was pointed out that IRV seems to have the effect of encouraging candidates to appeal to moderates, not just the far left or the far right, because candidates would need second and third choice votes, not just first choice votes.

He repeated his conviction that the election system now is direct and simple and shouldn't be changed. Third-party candidates would seem to receive undue benefit, he said. However, it was noted that in a three-way race, the top two candidates remain eligible, with only the second choices reallocated from voters who backed the third-place candidate in initial balloting. Thus the only way a third-party candidate would survive is if that candidate were among the top two in the initial balloting.

12. Statutory term limits opposed --Casselmann likes the way Congress finally decided to limit the terms of committee chairs, but he doesn't like further tampering with the elections system.

13. Preserve independence of judges --He hasn't thought a great deal about changing the system for selecting judges, except that he likes the fact that direct election, not appointment, helps keep judges independent.

14. Repeal the electoral college directly, not indirectly --Casselmann said he is open to a constitutional amendment that would provide for direct election of the President. He doesn't favor an alternative--being led by Maryland--for individual states to pledge that their electors will support the winner of the popular vote nationally. You either keep the electoral college or you abolish it, he said.

15. Thanks --On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne and others thanked Casselman for meeting with us this morning.