

Summary of Meeting with David Dillon, Independence Party

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, April 4, 2009

Guest speaker: David Dillon, entrepreneur and former Independence Party candidate for the Minnesota's third congressional district.

Present: Verne Johnson, Chair; Wayne Popham (phone), David Broden, Marianne Curry, Paul Gilje, Jin Hetland, Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald

A. Context of the meeting—Election reform has been an ongoing interest of the core and electronic members of the Civic Caucus. David Dillon can speak with the experience of a third party candidate for major office, and advocate for election alternatives such as Instant Runoff Voting.

B. Welcome and introductions—In introducing Dillon, Verne is happy to draw attention to the famed race of 1952, when an underdog Verne Johnson, expected to come in third of three, beat Gerry Dillon, David Dillon's father, for the state House. No hard feelings, and they had a great professional relationship from then on.

C. Comments and discussion--During Dillon's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. On the quality of political candidates--A member opened with this question: Do you think that you can increase the likelihood of third parties winning major office?

Our top priority, Dillon replied, should be opening the election process so that the most able members of our community are encouraged to run and can have a chance to win, should they present a serious candidacy. Right now the best people are not finding their way onto the ballot. The caucus process doesn't give them a chance, and most people do not take part in them.

Does the population in general have less sense of civic duty, or feel a need to understand candidates separate from their party?

Dillon said that people are busier in a modern economy and have more opportunity for entertainment today, and so are less involved with the meat of politics. There are more single-issue voters. Pragmatic, centrist, and independent voters are discouraged by the caucus process. They elect to stay home until election day, which allows for the parties to put forth more radical candidates.

You can think of races in Minnesota where candidates better representative of their parties were blown out at the caucus level because of candidates who had more appeal among the far left or far right base attending the caucuses.

2. How to get better candidates: Ranked Choice Voting or Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)--The Chair asked: We are cursing the darkness—is there a way to light a candle?

Dillon offered that Ranked Choice Voting is an important mechanism for opening up elections to candidates who do not wish to run as part of the other two major parties. With Ranked Choice Voting voters rank candidates in order of preference, with voters' second and third choices used as needed to provide the winning candidate with a majority vote.

Ranked Choice Voting will encourage better candidates, Dillon said, and encourage more attention to be paid to those outside of the principal political parties.

A member voiced his concern about Ranked Choice Voting: I see, he said, Ranked Choice necessitating a need to form coalitions, leading to a dynamic we see presently in the Knesset in Israel (at this time Netanyahu was in the final stages of piecing together his coalition government). This is the wrong road.

Another member worried that people would be confused about Ranked Choice Voting.

How about Ranked Choice Voting in the primary, a member asked, but not for the general election?

Dillon responded that he is not opposed to that idea, and that he is generally conservative: crawl, walk, run. It is good to try the system at a smaller scale, first.

3. More pay?-- Dillon said that in general compensation for public office is inadequate to attract many really talented candidates. There are always a few but if we want to encourage more of our most talented citizens to run for office, we need to stop asking them to make a large personal financial sacrifice in order to serve. Particularly so when competitive pay for public office would have an infinitesimal effect on the overall budget.

Another reason people don't choose to run is exposure of one's family to unfair public scrutiny.

4. On the Independence Party--The Independence Party faces some challenges, Dillon said, both from within and without.

Branding is not well understood, but is crucial for political parties. People are so busy that brand becomes highly relevant for a political party because it can be the short hand that people have time to absorb that speaks to a range of issues. The Independence Party has potential here.

The problem is that the party is unable to control its own brand: Candidates can run on a ballot under the Independence Party name, even if the party decides to endorse a candidate of the other major parties—which it sometimes does. The Independence Party endorsed Tinklenberg, for example, for Congress, and might well have endorsed one of the two Senate Candidates if it had had the ability to control its own ballot line. But others chose to file for those offices on the Independence Party ballot. The result was that candidates appeared on the Independence Party ballot for offices where no Independence Party endorsee appeared.

When the Independence Party chooses to endorse a candidate of another party, then the Independence Party should have the right to block—or in Dillon's words, to "roll up" its ballot line for that office—to prevent non-serious candidates with a few dollars for a filing fee from running as an Independence Party candidate for the office in question, Dillon said.

The Independence party's brand is weak. A brand takes a consistent message. It takes years to build a brand, which includes not allowing non-serious candidates to represent it. The party needs to be able to control its ballot line. This would be good for both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party and encourage them to run fewer extreme candidates.

A member asked, How does the Independence Party approach the hot single-issues of abortion and gay marriage? Dillon responded that the Independence Party rests, essentially, on two pillars: Fiscal responsibility and social inclusiveness.

5. On the caucus process--Extremists in both parties run the caucuses, Dillon said. Being 'pro-gay marriage' can alone doom an otherwise strong Republican candidate. Being 'pro-maintain the right to a secret ballot' in union elections can doom a Democrat. This is just not right.

Because extremists are the gate keepers in the caucus, he continued, we need to shore up the middle or else the best people will look at the situation and, as they are now, and decide not to run.

A member asked whether the solution, as Dillon sees it, is to drive parties to the center or to start a third party?

Neither, exactly: The goal should be to get the most able people for the job, regardless of party.

A member asked, Should we get rid of the caucus system?

Sure, Dillon replied, but that's not a legislative question—it is something the parties need to consider.

6. On term limits-- Term limits are another problem, he said. What about that, a member asked—why doesn't the Independence party take on term limits? It's back to the branding question, Dillon said. As good and powerful as brands are, most people don't know that they are worth billions but can only say one or two things. Think about major products—Coke, Ford—they can claim one or two things at most. Rarely three. Never more.

But term limits are a serious concern, because they affect the quality of our public servants. We need people who ground themselves in real life, instead of the synthetic life of politics.

7. Final thoughts--The Chair asked Dillon if he had any final thoughts that he would like to share.

In parting, he said, he would like to emphasize the importance of providing the Independence Party control over its ballot line, giving them the opportunity to roll it up for an office if it so has endorsed another party's candidate. This will provide Independence Party centrists the real opportunity to influence for the common good, placing their endorsement behind a superior candidate of another party if they so choose. Otherwise they risk remaining the image of a spoiler.

Term limits are important, as is Ranked Choice Voting. These are tangible things that can be done, now.

D. Closing

Thank you, from the Chair.