

Summary of Meeting  
Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437  
Friday, February 2, 2007

**Guest speaker:** Former State Rep. Dan Dorman, Albert Lea Republican

**Attendance:** Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), John Mooty (by phone), Jim Olson (by phone), John Rollwagen

**A. Context of the meeting:** As part of its review of the elections process and its connection to polarization and paralysis, today the Civic Caucus is looking at the role of the legislative leadership in Minnesota in running campaigns for legislators.

**B. Welcome and introduction**--Paul welcomed Dan Dorman, who retired voluntarily from the State Legislature in 2006. Dorman has commented frequently on Civic Caucus summaries and participated in many surveys conducted by the Civic Caucus. Dorman owns a tire and auto service business in Albert Lea, MN. First elected to the Minnesota House in 1998, he served for eight years on the Tax Committee and was chair of the Capital Investment Committee for the last two years. He has a BA political science from the University of Minnesota.

**C. Comments and discussion**--In Dorman's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

**1. Shift in responsibility for conducting legislative campaigns**--In years past political parties played a much larger role in individual races for the State Legislature, Dorman said. But active participation in parties declined at the local level. Moreover, the people who remained active tended to be more extreme in their views. As the base for conducting individual races at the local level declined, the legislative caucuses at the state level stepped in. What this means, of course, is that the local legislative races now are conducted more from central offices of the legislative caucuses in St. Paul than at the local level.

**2. Change in the significance of the impact locally of a statewide decision**--As a consequence of the shift, we now see that the impact locally takes on less significance. To illustrate this point, Dorman referred back to when the State Legislature, at Governor Ventura's urging, replaced most school property tax levies with state aid. But, Dorman said, the Legislature did nothing to halt the right of school districts to conduct excess levy referendums. He recalled making a motion to discontinue the excess levies after six years, but he only received about 13 or 14 votes in support out of a total of 134 House members. Thus, he said, it is clear that the Legislature never intended to provide 100 percent of school funding from the state, with no local funding. But if you listened to the tone of many campaigns last year, Gov. Pawlenty and Republicans were to blame for the need for excess levies.

**3. A disconnect between issues at the local and state level**--What is happening now, he said, is that candidates for office in a legislative district are trying to reflect views of voters in the district, but the state-wide legislative caucus is running the campaign based on statewide interests, which might be different from those at the local level.

**4. Control of spending campaign dollars is highly centralized**--A Civic Caucus member noted that yesterday's paper reported that the four legislative caucuses (House and Senate DFL caucuses and House and Senate Republican caucuses) spent

a combined \$8.5 million on legislative races in 2006. That is over \$40,000 a seat, and since at least 1/3 of the seats are not competitive, it would be over \$60,000 per seat in which a caucus got involved. Each caucus sets up a campaign committee. A small group of legislators in each legislative caucus makes policy and oversees the staff. Other legislators have very little impact on the work of the caucus campaign committees.

The legislative caucuses usually concentrate their funding on races that are the most competitive. However, Dorman noted that the legislative caucuses will also spend money on selected "safe" seats, depending upon the desires of the group that is overseeing the distribution of the funds.

**5. Impact on how individual legislators vote**--With campaign financing heavily concentrated in the legislative caucus, it is now extremely difficult for an individual legislator, who was elected with financial support of the caucus, to do anything but vote for the caucus position in the Legislature. Consequently, the campaign financing system re-enforces the strength of the caucus and, thereby, contributes to polarization. Dorman recalls that some members thought that incoming freshmen should not be able to vote for leadership for the next two years since the current leaders had played such a big role in getting the new members elected. Such a rule would further concentrate power by making it hard to change leadership from session to session, he said.

**6. Distortion of candidates' positions in campaigns**--With the legislative caucuses heavily involved in local races, local candidates find themselves having to defend state-caucus-prepared campaign brochures attacking the opposition, even though the local candidates and own campaign committee might not want to make such attacks, let alone support them.

In the 2006 campaign for Dorman's seat, for example, the candidates were Matt Benda (Republican) and Robin Brown (DFL). Brown won. During the campaign Benda found himself being challenged about a claim against his opponent about illegal drugs that appeared in a legislative-caucus-prepared brochure. Benda didn't agree with the claim and tried disclaim any connection with the brochure.

Dorman mentioned another instance where two Republican legislators from different districts were subjected to negative brochures, even though one, Jeff Anderson, had voted no on a controversial tax bill and the other, Greg Davids, yes. Anderson was criticized in a brochure for voting against a jobs program that was part of the bill, and Davids was criticized for voting yes, because of a provision cutting local government aid. They were attacked no matter which way they voted.

**7. Concentration of legislative campaign power in a very few people**--A Civic Caucus member drew attention to a chart distributed at today's meeting that summarizes the receipts and expenditures of the four state legislative campaign caucuses during 2006. Reports from these four groups had been published in the last couple of days by the Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board. The member noted that today's discussion reveals how power over these funds is concentrated in a few people but that the impact is felt throughout all state legislative races. The member said it seems clear that an individual legislator under the current system has little option but to "fall in line" with the recommended caucus positions in the Legislature.

Not falling in line is hard, because you get blasted from both sides, Dorman said. After six years he was burned out and very cynical. He did not want to run for re-election in 2004. But his wife and two lobbyists who he respects predicted that the

Republicans were going to get hammered in 2004 and that Dorman would be able to have an impact. He is glad that he ran and was given the opportunity to put together two bonding bills, both of which passed by wide margins.

**8. Question about the sources of information for "questionable" state-caucus-prepared brochures**--The legislative caucuses hire staff, public relations consultants and polling consultants, who are the key individuals in determining the content of brochures in individual races. Individual candidates play no role in deciding what these brochures will say, since they supposedly are paid for as "independent expenditures", unconnected with a candidate's campaign. The only option a candidate would have is to ask that a legislative caucus not be involved in the campaign at all.

Candidates tend to throw their hands in the air and say, "it was not me", but in most cases they can influence the tone by talking to the caucus before the heat of the campaign. In most races for example, the Republicans and Democrats send out the same kind of "stuff". He requested that the Republican caucus not do that in his race, and they respected his wishes.

**9. Concentration of funds in selected races**--A Civic Caucus member noted that the dollar amounts are very substantial--totaling \$8.5 million by the four caucuses in 2006. Dorman commented that you must realize, too, that these funds can be distributed selectively to the races that are most highly contested. Certain parts of Minnesota, such as the central cities, the Iron Range, and some western suburbs, have very few close races. So the money doesn't have to be spent there. Dorman recalled a race in the Moorhead area a few years ago where \$250,000 was spent on each candidate--a total of \$500,000 for one legislative seat. In 2006, in the race for Dorman's seat, he said that the DFL and GOP caucuses each provided at least \$40,000 in independent expenditures, which exceeds the amount a candidate can raise and spend.

**10. Where the money comes from**--Contrary to strict contribution limits to an individual candidate's campaign, no limits exist on how much can be given to a legislative caucus, Dorman said. Moreover, if you're a representative of a business, employee association or other organization, you'll put your money where it can produce the most results. The legislative caucus is a much more powerful agent in determining whether a lobbyist's interests are considered than is an individual legislator.

**11. Importance of 1999 Federal court decision**--A 1999 U. S. District Court decision threw out limitations on independent expenditures. Before that time, according to David Schultz of Hamline University, political parties and caucuses were not allowed to make independent expenditures on behalf of candidates. According to Schultz, Minnesota caucus and party independent contributions were less than \$1 million in 1998 and soared to more than \$8 million in 2002.

**12. Possible changes in state law**--Dorman suggested that perhaps the state's political party endorsement system should be altered to allow multiple endorsements from the same party to be on the primary ballot. Perhaps, he said, any candidate receiving at least 25 percent support at an endorsement convention could appear on the ballot as an endorsed candidate of that political party. Also, he said he is more open to instant runoff voting, where voters rank candidates in their order of preference, than he was in the past.

He said a limit on the amount that a legislative caucus can contribute to an individual candidate would be helpful, if it could pass. He acknowledged that any changes would have to be passed by the body directly affected by the changes, the Legislature itself, which reduces the likelihood of passage.

There is another way that the power of legislative caucuses could be limited, he suggested. While they can legally spend, they could agree not to. But he acknowledged that would be wishful thinking.

**13. Coordination between the Governor and the legislative caucus--**

Dorman said he has somewhat of a jaded view of the relationship, because he has felt the Governor is more interested in working with the legislative caucus when such coordination benefits the Governor. The Governor seems less interested in supporting coordination that would benefit the legislative caucus, he said.

**14. Question of precinct caucuses--**

Responding to a question about changes in the precinct-level meetings that the political parties hold every two years, Dorman said he wishes more people would attend, but he is not sure how to improve the caucuses. Asked about totally open primaries, without party endorsement, Dorman said that wouldn't be worse than what we have now.

**15. Changes in redistricting?--**

Dorman doesn't think serious problems of gerrymandering exist in Minnesota. Moreover, he has difficulty imagining how a redistricting commission could be established that would guarantee its nonpartisanship. In terms of making districts more competitive, he doesn't know how that would be possible in certain areas that already are predominantly in one-party control. Dorman said he hasn't thought about, but is somewhat intrigued by, the possibility of making districts larger and having, say, three legislative seats at-large within the district, but not allowing any one party to nominate candidates for more than two seats in such a district.

**16. Best possibility for reducing polarization and paralysis--**

Asked which of several elections changes he sees as offering the best prospect for reducing polarization and paralysis in the Legislature, Dorman said to get more people involved at the local level, so that influence over legislative campaigns can be lessened at the state level.

**17. Using the state constitution for legislative purposes--**

Dorman was asked his opinion on proposals now active in the Legislature to provide a constitutional guarantee of revenue for arts and clean water, similar to the guarantee provided to transportation in a referendum last November. Such proposals ought to be a red flag to everyone that the system is broken, Dorman said. Legislators are simply passing controversial issues back to the voters who elected them, rather than taking a stand themselves. He agreed that it would be interesting if someone would author a bill for a constitutional amendment guaranteeing a certain revenue stream for every state services, as a way of illustrating the problem of granting favored treatment to some services and not others. A member facetiously commented that if such a constitutional amendment were adopted, there'd be no need for the Legislature to meet.

**18. Role of the Civic Caucus summaries--**

Dorman said he hadn't considered the advantages of forwarding summaries of Civic Caucus meetings to people on his own email list, but he thinks that is a way to spread the information from the Civic Caucus more widely.

**19. Thanks--**

Members thanked Dorman for meeting with us today.