



# Summary of Meeting with Jim Ramstad

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Thursday, November 29, 2007*

**Present:** Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay (by phone), Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, John Mooty (by phone) and guests Justin McCoy and Lance Olson, aides to Congressman Jim Ramstad

**Guest speaker:** Congressman Jim Ramstad

**A. Welcome and introduction** —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced Rep. Jim Ramstad, Minnesota 3rd congressional district. Ramstad was first elected to Congress in 1990. He is a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, Health Subcommittee and Oversight Subcommittee. In 2005, Ramstad was named "Leading Light for Seniors" by the American Health Care Association, and in 2006 he received the "Disabilities Rights Award" from the American Association of People with Disabilities. He is a former Criminal Justice attorney. Prior to his election to Congress, Ramstad served three terms in the Minnesota Senate, where he was Assistant Minority Leader.

**B. Comments and discussion** — During Ramstad's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus, the following points were raised:

**1. Problems in the Congress** —Congress is characterized today by a lack of comity, a lack of collaboration, and increased polarization that is leading to paralysis, Ramstad said. By September 30 of each year, Congress should have completed work on its 11 appropriations bills. As of today, only one of those bills has been signed into law. No action has occurred on such importation legislation as transportation funding and children's health insurance.

In years past, he said, many members of Congress from opposite parties worked with one another in a bipartisan fashion. He mentioned how Bill Frenzel, his predecessor from the 3rd District, was probably the hardest worker on trade legislation. Frenzel, a Republican, worked successfully with Democrats.

The situation has changed rapidly over the last two decades, he said. Some new political people came to Washington with the objective of appealing narrowly to one's base of support, rather than seeking a broader consensus. Every possible action was analyzed as to how the action would play to the "base". They made no attempt to reach consensus, but simply to gain politically by playing to their base.

The far right and the far left have controlled decisions. There's a moderate group of Republicans known as the Tuesday group, and a moderate group of Democrats known as the Blue Dogs. While

these groups hold the balance of power, the far left and far right are under a lot of pressure not to work with the moderates. Thus, the result is more polarization.

**2. Pork barrel politics seems healthy** —Ramstad agreed with a member's comment that members of Congress are able to get their favorite projects inserted into legislation. Ramstad said it took him awhile to learn the game. "Earmarks", the specific projects for a member's congressional district, get thrown into a 600-page bill in the dark of night. Members vote on the bill the next morning and then two weeks later they learn from the press that something like "a bridge to nowhere" has been inserted. Members all know that if they don't agree to vote for an appropriations bill that their own perks will be deleted. In effect, if a member has a project in the bill, the member is required to vote yes.

**3. Do away with precinct caucuses** —Ramstad recommended that open primaries in the state should replace precinct caucuses. When you add together attendance at all precinct caucuses in the state, for all parties, the total attendance is less than the number attending a Vikings game at the Metrodome on any Sunday, about 62,500. Open primaries would encourage politics to be more inclusive.

Political parties in some states endorse more than one candidate for a given office, with voters then making the choice in open primaries, he said.

**4. Advance the date of the primary** —Ramstad supports moving the primary forward from September to June. He never could understand why only five or six weeks separates the primary from the general election.

**5. A drop in support for political parties** —Ramstad said he wish he could have a dollar for every time a constituent of his has made a campaign contribution with a disclaimer to the effect that "Here's my dollar. But I'll not do anything for the party."

**6. Improve redistricting** —The group discussed the fact that the states draw the boundaries for U.S. House of Representative districts as well as for their state legislatures. Ramstad said he thinks it would be better if the courts, not the Legislature, were responsible for redistricting. A member replied that he'd prefer some kind of non-partisan, not bi-partisan, commission. The member cited the fact that some judges have been every bit as partisan on redistricting as the Legislature. Ramstad said he agrees with the member that a non-partisan commission would be preferred.

**7. Better disclosure of campaign contributions** —Ramstad said he supports immediate, complete disclosure of campaign contributions. The House has agreed to make available electronically the quarterly reports to the Federal Elections Commission on campaign contributions, but the Senate has not agreed. Ramstad is opposed to public financing of campaigns. To help show they are worthy for public office, candidates need to generate their own support, he said. A member said public financing would provide more benefits to incumbents than challengers.

**8. Combating negative advertising** — More involvement of the electorate, better education of the people, and holding candidates accountable are ways to reduce negative campaign advertising, he

said. You can't legislate against something that has first amendment protection. He expressed great distaste for certain negative ads, including one that questioned the patriotism of Max Cleland, a close friend of Ramstad's.

**9. Potential of ranking candidates by preference** —Ramstad was asked whether candidates might be discouraged from attacking opponents so strongly if they had incentive to appeal to opponents' base of support, too. He was asked about whether the concept of instant runoff voting (IRV) would have some potential. With IRV the voter ranks candidates in order of preference. To attract some support from voters who back other candidates, even as a second or third choice, a candidate might ease away from negative campaigning, a member said. Ramstad said this is the first he's heard about the potential of IRV to reduce negative campaigning.

A member suggested that with IRV political parties would be stimulated to find additional candidates to enter races, to attract second and third choices.

Later in the meeting the group briefly discussed the possibility of whether political polls might start asking respondents to identify their second and third choices, not just their first choice. Ramstad said some pollsters already do that. The question arose whether public pollsters are as inclined to asking such questions as are the private pollsters.

**10. Why Ramstad isn't running** —Asked why he has announced he won't seek re-election in 2008, Ramstad said he is tired of 18 years of commuting to Washington. He said he should have followed the advice of his predecessor, Bill Frenzel, and moved to Washington. He said he is not discouraged with being in Congress. He's exploring the possibility of teaching at a university.

**11. Change in the media** —The decline in newspapers and the rise of the Internet is revolutionizing American politics, Ramstad said. The young don't read newspapers. Even the newspapers themselves are reporting what blogs on the web have to say. The group briefly took note of a new non-profit on-line newspaper started by Joel Kramer, former publisher of the *Star Tribune*.

**12. Growing role of legislative caucuses in financing and running campaigns** —A member pointed out to Ramstad that since he left the Minnesota Legislature some 18 years ago that the majority and minority caucuses of the House and Senate have dramatically increased their role in financing and running campaigns.

**13. Selection of judges** —Asked about the need for changing the system by which district judges in Minnesota are selected, Ramstad said he likes the present system, which he characterized as a hybrid of appointment and election. The Governor usually makes the initial appointment, because judges usually resign before their terms have expired. Then judges run for election when the unexpired terms end. He said he intends to read the report issued by the Quie commission that recommended a merit-based appointment system.

**14. Support for a presidential primary** — Ramstad said he favors a presidential primary in Minnesota. He believes it would energize people to become more involved in politics.

**15. Compensation for federal judges** —In response to a question about the compensation for federal judges, Ramstad said that a proposed pay increase for judges is part of the same bill that

would give members of Congress a raise. He believes it is likely that the pay increase for judges will be placed in a separate bill and be passed, but that the pay increase for Congress is not likely to be approved. Federal judges are calling him monthly to inquire about the status of their pay increases, he said.

**16. Thanks** —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Ramstad for visiting with us today.

***The Civic Caucus* is a non-partisan, tax-exempt educational organization. Core participants include persons of varying political persuasions, reflecting years of leadership in politics and business.**

**A working group meets face-to-face to provide leadership. They are Verne C. Johnson, chair; Lee Canning, Charles Clay, Bill Frenzel, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, John Mooty, Jim Olson, Wayne Popham and John Rollwagen.**