



Mark Jenkins, Chair, Minnesota Independence Party

Interview with The Civic Caucus

8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

February 17, 2012

Notes of the Discussion

Present: Verne Johnson (chair), David Broden, Janis Clay (phone), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Sallie Kemper, Tim McDonald.

Summary of discussion: The chair of Minnesota's Independence Party discusses the limitations of the political caucus process in a polarized political environment and opportunities to improve the capacity of caucuses to serve as effective bodies of discussion and debate for a broader spectrum of citizens.

A. Introduction of speaker - Mark Jenkins was born and brought up in western Wisconsin. He graduated with a degree in Speech Communications from the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. Employed in technology sales and consulting since 1987, Jenkins worked for T-Mobile in Minnesota from 1997 to 2002. He now runs his own training and consulting firm specializing in wireless telecom solutions. In 2004, Jenkins became an active member of the Independence Party of Minnesota (IP). He has served on several state committees and as an officer at the legislative, congressional and state levels. He was the 2010 IP candidate for Minnesota State Senate and since February of 2011 has been the state IP chair.

B. Discussion -

THE PROBLEM: A public perception that precinct caucuses are not open to general participation .

According to the Minnesota Secretary of State, "precinct caucuses are meetings organized by Minnesota's political parties to begin the process of selecting candidates ... and policy positions to shape the party platform. Caucuses are held in locations across Minnesota, are open to the public, and participation is encouraged."

Caucuses have had a recent history of extreme ideology, Jenkins stated, and of sometimes administering a "purity test at the door." He believes there has been a tendency in the past 15 years toward filtering people at the door of caucus meetings, either literally or figuratively, to assure that attendees have a uniform set of political beliefs that are not at odds with those of most party leaders.

About 66,000 persons, or two percent of the state's registered voters, participated in Minnesota precinct caucuses on Feb. 7, 2012. Parties conducted precinct caucuses to begin the process of selecting candidates for the 2012 state election, to select delegates for party conventions, to consider positions for party platforms, and to conduct non-binding straw polls for the 2012 Presidential election.

THE GOAL: Have a more open, inviting precinct caucus process.

Jenkins thinks that a precinct caucus should be a gathering where an array of ideas are expressed, welcomed and debated, and agendas reflective of the diversity of opinions are ultimately agreed upon.

THE STRATEGY: Increase participation and debate of issues through new approaches to the caucus process.

There is no legal requirement for political parties to hold caucuses, Jenkins pointed out. Rather, the holding of a caucus is a prerogative of the parties. State law has guidelines as to when caucuses meet, but parties use the caucus for their own purposes, to decide which candidates to support and which public policy decisions to include in the party's platform. A significant role of the caucus is to elect local delegates to the conventions. How that election of delegates is done is left up to the party constitutions and bylaws.

Parties can try new strategies for increasing participation.

As a smaller political party the Independence Party thinks it can operate "below the radar" and try new things without much publicity, negative or positive, Jenkins said. However, he prefers to take a different tact, trying new things directly in the public eye. Such was the case in the party's use of technology this year to allow caucus participants to participate in a caucus meeting through webcam. Jenkins said it appears they are the first party to do a live, online caucus anywhere in the country.

As all political parties, the Independence Party does have certain identifiable general policy positions Jenkins said. Most IP members tend to be "fiscally responsible and socially tolerant." While state has people that support the left and people that support the right, "you almost never see a left fielder backing a right fielder," he said. "Saint Paul needs a center fielder." And he believes the IP takes on that "center fielder" position in state politics.

He described his party's role in non-election years as building public support and seeking out volunteers who do not feel a strong allegiance to another party. He describes the IP's election year task as "helping citizens to vote for the best candidate." He went on to stress that "each person's vote doesn't belong to a party, but to themselves." His challenge as party leader is to get the best candidate on the Independence Party ticket. Only then will party support follow.

Make the precinct caucus a place of open debate.

In the past there were times when the parties would debate issues in great depth. Recently, caucus proceedings have had less open debate and more an appearance of controlled, perfunctory agendas.

If done well, however, the caucus can serve as a party-building tool, attracting people and ideas. The IP platform doesn't start out covering all of the issues that people are interested in; instead the party sponsors forums with guest panels including public and private officials and invites people to participate in the discussion. If someone believes strongly about an issue the individual can submit a resolution. Eventually, after much debate and discussion that issue may be included in the party platform.

"Where a lot of our growth comes is with the people who are put off when given a form at the door of the other party caucuses that says 'I plan to vote for this party'."

By contrast he said there is no sign-up to attend the Independence Party caucus. In order to become a delegate and represent the party later in the convention process, a participant must agree to support 75% of the party platform.

One problem with the caucus process may be that it has come to be viewed more as a straw poll than a discussion of issues, Jenkins said.

Increase involvement in the precinct caucus process.

Jenkins described a need to get more people involved in the caucus process in order to moderate the tenor of the proceedings and yet still contribute to a vigorous debate. Part of this involves overcoming the perception that the caucus process is closed to new ideas.

To overcome the perception Jenkins proposed three initiatives:

1. **Improve marketing** so people see the caucuses as an opportunity to participate. That's not the message the public gets presently, he said.
2. **Encourage outside organizations to advocate** for greater caucus attendance. Nonpartisan organizations could and should advocate for more widespread caucus participation, he noted; they can promote caucuses as an important entry point into the democratic political system.
3. **Use technology** both to get more people involved in the caucus and, as an outreach mechanism, to build party identification. The physical locations of the IP caucuses do not begin to cover the entire geography of the state. In addition, some people are simply not comfortable in a public space or may not be able to be physically present at the prescribed location. Technology allows people to participate when their participation would be impossible otherwise or when a crowded public setting is simply too overwhelming. It allows people to contribute without having to either drive long distances or be shoulder-to-shoulder with large numbers of people.

C. Conclusion - People are told time and time again that their vote is their voice in public policy,

Jenkins said in closing. He believes that's just not true. "Your vote is a *choice*, not your voice. However, the caucus *can* be an opportunity to make your voice heard in the public policy debate." He wants people to have more than simply a choice among candidates; he wants them to be able to voice their opinions about what public policy positions those candidates and their parties should stand for. The caucuses, he believes, can change to accomplish more of that direct participation.

The chair thanked Mr. Jenkins for the informative visit.