



# Summary of Meeting with Wy Spano

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Friday, October 28, 2005*

**Attendance:** Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay (by phone); Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone); Clarence Shallbetter, Paul Gilje (by phone), and Wyman Spano, guest

**A. Introduction of Wyman Spano** -Verne introduced Spano, director of the new Center for Advocacy and Political Leadership at the University of Minnesota Duluth. The Center offers weekend classes toward a Master's degree in Advocacy and Political Leadership. It began operating in Fall 2004 and now has 50 students in three cohorts with another 15 or so expected this Spring. Spano is the former founder and co-editor of the publication *Politics in Minnesota*. He has served for many years as a lobbyist in the Minnesota Legislature and is a member of the DFL Party. Spano was invited to comment on the Caucus position paper concerning threats to America's democracy.

**B. Comments by Spano and discussion with the Caucus** -During his comments and the discussion the following points were made:

**1. Purpose of the Center for Advocacy and Political Leadership** -Spano said that Center encourages its students to set their own goals and then helps them accomplish them. The Center is non-partisan, although the term "advocacy" tends to draw more liberals than conservatives. The Center stresses honesty and integrity in public dialogue. One of the star students in the program is a committed conservative and active Republican, who loves to argue with the liberals, Spano said.

**2. Agreement with our position paper** -Spano agrees with the overall position taken by our draft, that there are several threats to our democracy today. He said that the sense of unhappiness, bordering even on desperation about where the nation has been going is reflected in the draft. It is perfectly adequate, he said.

**3. Problem of income distribution** -Spano said that he has some other concerns not addressed in our paper. He's disturbed by the changing characteristics of income distribution in the USA, moving our nation toward "banana republic" status, that is, with financial resources concentrated in a small portion of the population, with hardly any middle class, and with the rest of the population left poor.

He cited statistics that he said are from Larry Bartels, founding director of the Center for Study of Democratic Policies at Princeton University. Bartels was at the Humphrey Institute the other day. The Bartels data, he said, illustrate that from 1954 to 2004 the average income for the upper one-third of the population increased \$50,000 in inflation adjusted terms. Income increased \$9,000 for the middle third, and \$650 for the bottom-third. He finds that astounding.

Spano said that he became aware of substantial changes in political ideology in Minnesota when, in the mid-1990's, he wandered into a meeting in Minnesota of five Republican legislators who were discussing whether or not the state should be providing free public education. He said such discussions never would have occurred a generation ago.

**4. A result of how our democracy is structured or how the people vote** -Spano and caucus members discussed whether the problems Spano is citing come about because of structural defects in our democratic system. Spano replied that one major problem is the way our congressional and legislative districts are created.

Spano agreed that structural problems are important, but also cited the significant ideological shift as contributing to the condition.

**5. Party influence impacting legislative consensus** -the Republican and Democratic caucuses in the Minnesota House are much more dominant now than before. Currently, a caucus occurs before every committee meeting, where decisions are made on how members will vote in committee. He advised the Democrats not to follow the pattern of Republicans, but he said they felt they had no choice but to follow the same procedures. Decisions used to be made much more on the political interest of individual legislators as opposed to the political interest of the caucus.

Caucuses now have a much greater role in campaign finance. He cited the federal district court decision by Judge Ann Montgomery in the late 1990's which overturned Minnesota law which limited to \$5,000 what a caucus could contribute to a legislative campaign. Now no limits exist, and caucuses are playing a much larger role in individual members' elections. Minnesota legislative elections used to be very limited in spending, with nearly all candidates sticking to the limits of \$20,000 or so in House seats. After the Montgomery decision, the first election where caucuses spent whatever they could get their hands on was in northwestern Minnesota. Now Rep. Paul Marquardt defeated then Republican incumbent Bob Westfall. Instead of an election which spent about \$40,000, nearly half a million was spent, most of the money coming from the caucuses. This simple change in Minnesota law changed the way caucuses dominate elections. Now, in heavily contested seats, caucuses are the dominant voice in the election. They're not allowed to coordinate what they do with the candidates.

**6. Potential to deal with the problem of campaign finance** -Spano repeated his view that the No. 1 improvement he would like seen is removing legislators from their role in reapportionment. He doesn't see that the problem of campaign finance is solvable. The Supreme Court has essentially taken the issue off the table. Asked to comment on suggestions in our previous meetings that only individuals, not groups or organizations, be allowed to make campaign contributions, Spano thinks such an idea is vulnerable to being thrown out as an infringement of free speech, even though he likes the idea and doesn't think it's an infringement himself.

**7. Extent of polarization** -Spano believes that the political spectrum has moved considerably to the right, so that today's left wing Democrats are about where conservative Democrats were 30 years ago. He personally would favor abolishing party designation.

**8. Two top vote getters should advance to general election** -He would provide that the two top vote getters in a primary advance to the general election, regardless of their party. Thus, you could

have two Democrats or two Republicans face off in the general election. Such an approach would present an opportunity for moderates, but party people hate the idea because it takes away their power. He thinks that instant runoff voting, as suggested by Tim Penny last week, is a lot tougher to sell but would be a very good solution if you could sell it. His solution, allowing the two top vote getters from the primary in the general election, would be less desirable, but more possible.

**9. The Capitol is no longer a "grey" area** -In the 1970s and 1980s one could see legislators on different sides of an issue coming together in compromise. Now it's a black-and-white arrangement. You are either for me or against me. Civic Caucus members said it is difficult to understand the polarization on some issues. For example, broad public and business support seemed to exist in the 2005 Legislature for a gasoline tax increase. But the tax couldn't be enacted. Spano said at a time in the past it was patriotic to pay taxes. Now, taxes have become black and white, just like other issues. All taxes have been defined as bad which makes compromise on spending difficult.

**10. Fixing reapportionment** -Discussion occurred over criteria for reapportionment. Whoever is given the reapportionment responsibility, one view is that the criteria for maximizing competitive districts needs to be clear. Spano said he thinks that preserving a sense of community in districts is also very important. He thinks the Civic Caucus might want to consider as a major initiative a series of constitutional amendments in Minnesota and around the country which decree that congressional and legislative districts in that state can only be done every 10 years, that they're done by independent bodies, and that the criteria be focused on compactness, contiguity and community instead of on the political affiliation of the voters, which is really a way of focusing on the political affiliation of the person elected from that district.

**11. Value of third parties** -Spano isn't sure of their value. If Peter Hutchinson runs in 2006 and receives 5 percent of the vote as an Independent, that could have the effect of electing Pawlenty over Hatch, he said. Nevertheless, he also said that third parties make it possible to bring disaffected people into the system.

**12. Other potential resource persons** -Spano suggested State Senator Sheila Kiscaden and Mike Ciresi.

**C. Thanks to Spano** -Caucus members thanked Spano for meeting with us.

***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.**

**[Click Here](#) to see a biographical statement of each.**