



# Summary of meeting with Craig Swaggert

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Friday, August 29, 2008*

**Guest speaker: Craig Swaggert**, chair, Independence Party of Minnesota

**Present:** Verne C. Johnson, chair; David Broden, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

**A. Context of the meeting** —Today's meeting is one of several the Civic Caucus has been conducting on the subject of the current structure of elections in Minnesota.

**B. Welcome and introduction** —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Craig Swaggert**.

Swaggert is the chair of the Independence Party of Minnesota. Occupationally, he's been involved in real estate and construction. He became active in the Independence Party when Tim Penny and later Peter Hutchinson ran for Governor as members of the Independence Party. He then was asked to run for chair of the party in Minnesota. He was reluctant because he's not been heavily involved in politics. He has a passion for changing the system and making the system more appealing to the moderate majority.

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

**1. A voice for the moderate middle** —Swaggert contends that the Republican and Democratic parties have been hijacked by activists on the left and right. The Independence Party tries to be a voice for the moderate middle. In the last two elections for Governor in Minnesota the presence of a third, Independence Party, candidate made the Independence Party a spoiler, but the system itself is spoiled, he said.

**2. Reluctance to cast a "wasted" vote** —A Civic Caucus member asked why the third party candidate seems to do better in public opinion polls than in the actual election. Swaggert said much of the reason lies with the voters knowing that the third party candidate won't win, and, anxious not to waste their votes, decide to vote for one of the others. Responding to a question, Swaggert said that Tim Penny, Independence Party candidate, received 17 percent of the vote in the 2002 election for Governor and Peter Hutchinson received 6.4 percent in 2006. This year's Independence Party candidate for U. S. Senator, Dean Barkley, now is around 10 percent in the polls, Swaggert said.

**3. Ranked choice voting would help** —Ranked choice voting, also known as Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), would help Independence Party candidates, Swaggert said, because persons could vote for their hopes not their fears. Such a change would have great influence on quality of candidates, he said. A questioner wondered whether IRV is readily understood by voters. Swaggert contended the concept is very straightforward. One ranks candidates in order of preference, meaning that a voter could choose a third-party candidate as the voter's top choice, without feeling that the vote would be wasted.

**4. Reducing the need for a third party with more open primaries** —Swaggert said he has no problem with being out of a job if primary elections for Republicans and Democrats were more open. Currently, the two major parties aren't receptive to others filing against candidates endorsed by the parties. If the primaries were more open, he said, that would reduce the need for the third party.

**5. Future of precinct caucuses** —Precinct caucuses play a significant, official, role in the process of selection of party candidates in Minnesota, a Civic Caucus member said. But the precinct caucuses seem to attract mainly the activists on the right and left. While agreeing that moderate voters don't participate that much, Swaggert said he doesn't have a proposal for changing the precinct caucuses.

**6. Importance of candidate selection** —The best way to enhance the prospect of more moderate voter influence is through the recruitment of more candidates, Swaggert said. He noted that Independence Party candidates are running in about 10 to 12 legislative races. This year, with a presidential contest, is a very difficult time for third-party candidates in state races to gain support, he said. This year, he said, the Independence Party has endorsed a few major-party candidates whose agendas seem closer to those of the independent voter.

**7. Substantial influence from the major party legislative caucuses** —A Civic Caucus member noted that in the last several years the majority and minority legislative caucuses in the Minnesota House and Senate have become very major players in the selection, endorsement, and nomination of legislative candidates and in the financing of their campaigns. Such a role, when combined with the influence that the legislative caucuses can exert over candidates, tends to produce candidates whose philosophical orientation is very close to that of the leadership of the legislative caucuses, the member said. Swaggert said he doesn't have a proposal for reducing the influence of legislative caucuses. (Point of clarification: Legislative caucuses are permanent, on-going organizations of the majority and minority parties in the state House and Senate. By contrast, precinct caucuses are once-a-biennium grass-roots small-area gatherings used by the parties as the first step in the endorsement process.)

**8. Possible changes in primary elections?** —Swaggert said he supports moving the date for the state primary election to a time earlier than September. Moving the date forward, he said, would give voters a chance to know the candidates better. On the matter of a presidential preference primary for Minnesota, Swaggert said he's not spent a lot of time thinking about such a change. A Civic Caucus member noted that some advocates for IRV see greater potential for IRV in primary elections, where the list of candidates is narrowed, than in general elections, where the final choice is made.

**9. Looking to future elections** —The Independence Party today is looking mainly to elections in 2010 and beyond, Swaggert said. In the meantime, the party will concentrate on strengthening its voter base and in finding quality candidates.

**10. Too little coverage by the media of serious public affairs** —Responding to a question, Swaggert said he is largely discouraged by media coverage of issues and candidates. Too much attention is devoted to the sensational, he said.

**11. Focus of Independence Party platform** —The Independence Party platform concentrates on four issues: health care, education, environment and transportation, he said. The Independence Party doesn't deal in more divisive issues that often highlight differences between Republican and Democratic candidates. Detailed discussion of the Independence Party platform can be found at <http://www.independenceminnesota.org/about-the-ip/positions> . The platform lays out broad principles, within which candidates are free to develop specific proposals, he said. To work effectively on issues, the Independence Party needs to get people elected.

**12. Protecting Independence Party candidates from special interest influence** —Independence Party candidates to not accept political contributions from Political Action Committees (PACs) or from lobbyists, he said. A Civic Caucus member commented that such a step would seem to give opponents of Independence Party candidates substantially greater access to campaign fund-raising.

Swaggert said he doesn't see any changes in campaign finance laws on the horizon.

**13. Retain party designation of state candidates?** —Not knowing what the situation was like before 1973 when the Legislature enacted party-designation, Swaggert said he doesn't have a position on whether the non-partisan Legislature should be reinstated.

**14. Attracting moderates requires good candidates** —Asked how the Independence Party can build its base of moderate voters, Swaggert said the key is the enlistment of high quality candidates. One needs good candidates to attract voters, he said. Swaggert acknowledged difficulties the party encounters because it relies entirely on volunteers, of which Swaggert himself is one.

**15. Where responsibility for legislative redistricting should lie** —Swaggert said he has no position on the question of whether the Legislature should hand over legislative redistricting to an outside body.

**16. Opposition to constitutional amendment** —Swaggert said he personally is opposed to the constitutional amendment on outdoors, water and the arts being voted on this November. It represents a failure of the Legislature and Governor to settle such issues themselves, he said. That's why they were elected in the first place.

**17. Support for changing judicial selection** —The Independence Party supports a proposal from a commission headed by former Governor Al Quie to move to merit appointment of judges, with retention elections, he said.

**18. Importance of solving health care problem** —Asked for any point of emphasis he'd like to make, Swaggert replied by highlighting the importance of action on assuring affordable health care for all Minnesotans. An essential component, he said, must be to get the rising costs of health care under control.

**19. Attracting young voters** —The best way to attract young voters to the Independence Party is through finding candidates that will appeal to young voters, he said.

**20. Thanks—** On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Swaggert for meeting with us today.