



Summary of Meeting with Janet Donavan

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN

Friday, November 17, 2006

Guest speaker: Janet Donavan, assistant professor, political science, University of Minnesota-Duluth

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Lee Canning (by phone), Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, and Jim Olson (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting— The Civic Caucus, as part of its work on improving democracy, is conducting a review of the elections process in Minnesota. The Caucus is meeting from week-to-week with respected authorities in the academic world. They are being asked to evaluate the November elections and to comment on several proposed changes in elections.

B. Introduction of Janet Donavan— Verne introduced Donavan, assistant professor, political science, University of Minnesota-Duluth. Donavan joined the UMD political science department in Fall 2006. Before coming to Duluth, she taught at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, WA, while working to complete her dissertation in political science at the University of Wisconsin- Madison. Donavan's work on the role of the mass media in political participation and the political process includes research on the local news in Duluth. She teaches courses in American politics.

C. Comments by Donavan— In Donavan's opening comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus, the following points were raised:

1. Analysis of the national election— Exit polls revealed that the election was clearly a referendum on the President and Iraq; it was not a vote for the ideas of Democrats, Donavan said. Democrats will need to be very careful how they proceed. Newly elected conservative Democrats may not vote along party lines.

Donavan said the election The election was the first full cycle under the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA), also known as McCain-Feingold, where all the money raised and spent in the campaign was conducted under the new rules (to distinguish from 2004 election where the rules went into effect in 2003 and so that cycle was partly governed by the new rules). With such a large amount of money being spent by independent campaign groups, the election demonstrated the shortcomings

of BCRA.

2. Analysis of Minnesota election— It's difficult to explain Pawlenty's election, Donavan said, because people voted DFL for offices above and below that of the Governor in the order in which the offices appeared on the ballot. Among reasons were that the Governor gets credit for a strong economy, the mistakes of the Hatch campaign in the last week, the vote for the Independence Party (6 percent), and the fact that Minnesotans apparently like divided government.

Pawlenty has moved to the center, she said, as indicated by his support since the election for health care for all children. Thus we might see some movement away from paralysis. The Hatch loss, she said, represents an indictment of the precinct caucus system. Many DFLers were distressed over the Hatch nomination.

A member noted that David Schultz in our meeting last week asserted that Pawlenty was elected by the large turnout for conservative Michele Bachmann in the 6th District. Even if that's the case, Donavan replied, she doesn't think that Pawlenty owes anything to that conservative base.

3. Precinct caucuses evaluated— The precinct caucus system makes Minnesota largely unique in the nation, but it is not serving to draw young or new people into the process. The precinct caucus system in Minnesota gives political parties more control over who gets nominated. The date for the primary election in Minnesota should be earlier, she said.

4. Potential for instant runoff voting— It is interesting, Donavan said, that instant runoff voting passed in Minneapolis. The results of the Governor's race make a great case for extending instant runoff voting to state races. It was noted that the StarTribune has endorsed instant runoff voting for Minnesota. With instant runoff voting, also known as single transferable vote, the voter ranks candidates in the order of preference. Second- and third- choices are used as needed to produce a majority for the winning candidate.

5. Role of the legislative caucus leadership— The discussion next focused on the growing role that legislative caucuses play in financing elections. Legislative caucuses are the majority and minority organizations in the House and Senate. These groups now raise a great deal of money to influence legislative races. Donavan said such an arrangement tends to increase polarization because legislative leaders—using the power of the purse—are more able to get their caucus members to vote in lockstep. This practice at the state level is modeled after the same type of practice in Congress.

6. Comment on Schultz analysis— Donavan said she has read the summary of David Schultz' meeting with the Civic Caucus. She said she has no problem with his conclusions other than she said we might see some larger shifts in policy at the national level. Bush hasn't accomplished much and he might move like Clinton did and work with the other party.

7. Importance of the female vote— Donavan agreed that women are voting more Democratic now. They are less supportive of the war and domestic issues rank high in their concerns, she said.

8. Needed election changes— Asked to evaluate various proposals for change that might reduce

polarization and paralysis, Donavan offered these suggestions:

—Reduce the role of legislative caucuses in financing campaigns. Reducing the role of money is the best of the solutions, she said.

—Enact instant runoff voting. She's not very hopeful that instant runoff voting will pass because it increases the power of third party candidates.

9. Change redistricting?— Donavan isn't as excited as some people are about removing the Legislature from setting legislative district boundaries. She doesn't see the boundaries issue as much of a problem in Minnesota.

10. Opposition to using the state constitution for legislative policy decisions— Donavan said she shares the conclusion of the Civic Caucus that the Governor and Legislature shouldn't pass controversial issues on to the voters in the form of constitutional amendments, as they did on transportation in this election. She said she understands, however, why the amendment received so much support. People voted to make something happen in transportation.

11. Era of good feeling?— A member noted that since the election that more talk of working together has been heard both in Washington, D. C., and in St. Paul. The member wondered whether such discussion will diminish the cry for making changes in the election system.

12. Performance of the media in the recent campaign— Donavan is encouraged by what she saw. The StarTribune, for example, did a good job of independently comparing the facts with the claims of the candidates. At the national level, coverage was not as good, with most of the coverage dealing with the campaign as a horse race.

Donavan shares others' concerns about the future of the media, particularly newspapers. Newspapers set the agenda and provide the facts for the electronic media coverage. If readership and advertising revenue continue to decline, we have a serious problem, she said. Increasingly, information is coming to people in a fragmented manner. Absence of a common source of information makes it difficult to understand the other side. It was noted that for years the StarTribune provided a common source of information for the Upper Midwest. In the mid-1950s, for example, the StarTribune was shipping 5,000 copies of its Sunday paper as far as Billings, MT. A member also noted that fragmentation today isn't dissimilar to 100 years ago when there were many more competing newspapers in the same market.

Further tempering the discussion of the influence of newspapers, a member noted that even in the heydays of newspaper readership, barely 6 percent to 8 percent of readers read the editorial pages.

Discussion continued about new sources of information today, particularly the Internet. Reference was made to the new effort of the StarTribune to reach younger readers with a free publication known as Vita.mn, with heavy emphasis on entertainment news.

The discussion moved briefly to reasons why people follow the news. Often, members said, it is because they want to have something to talk about over breakfast or lunch with friends.

13. Go back to non-partisan state elections— Donavan sees real advantages in party designation and wouldn't repeal that provision. Non-partisan elections aren't fair to voters, she said, because they don't learn enough about the candidates. The party label conveys at least some information about the candidates' positions. Furthermore, Donavan said, in states with non-partisan ballots, more campaign money is spent.

14. Partisan elections for judges— A member inquired whether judges should run on a partisan ballot. Donavan said it's not a good idea to polarize the bench or have judges be elected on the basis of how they might vote on pending cases. Nevertheless, she said, too often voters have no idea who the judgeship candidates are. Political designation helps somewhat.

15. Thanks to Donavan— On behalf of the Civic Caucus, the chair thanked Donavan for meeting with us today. Asked how the conference call process worked, Donavan said she sometimes has a problem with that but today the conversation seemed to go quite well.

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.

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