



Summary of Meeting with Joe Mansky

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, October 6, 2006

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

Guest speaker: Joseph Mansky, Ramsey County elections manager

A. Context of the meeting -The Civic Caucus is beginning an inquiry into whether changes in election laws would help reduce polarization and paralysis in the Minnesota Legislature. Today the Caucus is meeting with Joseph Mansky, Ramsey County elections manager since 2001. Prior to coming to Ramsey County, he was the manager of Governor Jesse Ventura's redistricting commission. He also served 15 years on the elections staff of the Minnesota secretary of state's office, the last 11 years as state election director.

Note to readers: In this and other summaries the words "caucus" and "caucuses" may apply to different groups. The "Civic Caucus" is an independent, non-partisan, tax exempt educational group. Precinct caucuses" are provided by state law and represent the first step in the political party endorsement process. "Legislative caucuses" or "House Republican (or DFL) caucus" or "Senate Republican or (DFL) caucus" are the political organizational groups within the Legislature.

B. Introduction of the topic : Verne said we are looking preliminarily at several issues, including the role of the precinct caucuses, party endorsement, dates of primaries, party designation, campaign finance, redistricting, at-large races, instant runoff voting, the presidential primary, and election fraud. The Civic Caucus will have to narrow the list for detailed review.

C. Comments by Mansky : During Mansky's comments and in give-and-take with the Civic Caucus, the following points were made:

1. Moving to an earlier primary -Mansky recalled the recommendations from a bipartisan commission put together in 1994 by then Secretary of State Joan Growe. Among commission participants were Ron Abrams and Sheila Kiscaden, Republicans, and Carol Flynn and Bernie Lieder, Democrats. The Growe commission recommended that Minnesota's September primary be moved to the first Tuesday in August, although some persons from both major parties were suggesting dates in June.

Mansky said that strictly from an administrative standpoint it is extremely difficult for election officials to get all the preparatory for the general election when the primary occurs in September. Thus, any amount of pushing the primary date back will satisfy him.

Political parities prefer a later primary because it helps the endorsed candidates, he said. If the primary is too early, an endorsed candidate with primary challenges might end up exhausting campaign funds before the primary election. It's comparatively easy for someone to get on the ballot. All it takes to file for State Legislature on a major party is a \$100 filing fee and an affidavit. For Congress the fee is \$300.

A Civic Caucus member commented that polarization in the Legislature seems to have produced more endorsed candidates on the left and right and fewer toward the middle. The member wondered whether such candidates should receive preferential treatment via a later primary. Mansky said that it's increasingly difficult for moderate candidates to be supported or welcomed in their own party.

2. Growing polarization is aided by trends in Washington, D. C. -Polarization in the State Legislature seems to have accelerated since the early 1990s, when persons who had worked with Congress began showing up on the staff of the State Legislature and bringing with them highly partisan organizational practices, Mansky said.

3. Problems of precinct caucuses -Precinct caucuses, provided by state law, occur in early March. Precinct caucuses are the beginning of the process that produces party endorsement. While anyone can participate, Mansky said, the precinct caucuses seem to attract the political activists with more extreme positions. A Civic Caucus member said it is almost impossible to get widespread participation in precinct caucuses. The member suggested greater use of new technology to increase involvement.

4. Rising role of the legislative caucuses and diminishing role of the political parties -Political parties in Minnesota are weak when it comes to the Legislature, Mansky said. The Republican and DFL caucuses in the House and Senate (four different groups) each is responsible for recruitment of candidates, fundraising, and political campaign strategy for the legislative races. The political parties are not involved. Thus the top caucus leadership, Speaker of the House, House minority leader, Senate majority leader and Senate minority leader are the most significant persons when it comes to the election process for legislators.

In response to a question, Mansky clarified that such an arrangement means that the same persons whose leadership is key in passage of legislation are also the persons whose leadership is key in the entire campaign process. The caucus leadership handpicks the persons to run for office.

The political party platform means very little in legislative races, he said. Each legislative caucus leadership has its own set of top issues that constitute the platform, which is not publicly circulated as a political party platform.

5. Comparison with other states -Verne turned to Jim Olson, who resides in Illinois, to comment on differences with Minnesota. Olson said that in Illinois political conventions and endorsements occur after the primary.

6. A way to improving voting -Mansky suggested that rather than being open only one day the polls might open from Friday to Tuesday and that polling places would be located where people normally congregate, such as major shopping centers or large office complexes. A person need not vote in his or her precinct of residence, Mansky said. We have enough technology available today that someone

could go into any polling place which, after verification of the individual's identity and residence, could immediately prepare the appropriate ballot for that person.

7. Campaign finance changes -Mansky said meaningful changes in campaign finance must first occur at the federal level. But instead of making major efforts to shut off the flow of money, Mansky would provide free access to qualified candidates for U. S. Postal Service mailings (as is now granted to members of Congress) plus free access to TV and radio. Such a step would not eliminate the problem of some candidates raising much more money than others, but every qualified candidate would have an opportunity for the public to learn about the candidate's position on issues. Another reason Mansky is not anxious to reduce the flow of funds is that large amounts of money are needed to campaign in large districts, such as a statewide race in Minnesota or the presidential race nationally.

8. Change the nature of TV advertising? -Mansky agreed that TV political ads are negative and might inaccurately represent views of candidates. But he said he is a libertarian on this issue. He tends to trust that voters themselves will discern the value and accuracy of TV ads. You must understand, he said, that negative TV ads are designed to discourage people in the middle from voting and to fire up the people on either end.

9. Both parties able to get out the vote -Mansky said that the 2004 election in Minnesota had the highest voter turnout since the 1960s. Both parties are very capable at mobilizing their voters, he said. Neither has an advantage over the other in Minnesota.

10. Reduce the size of legislative districts? -One good way to make the Legislature more diverse is to reduce the size of legislative districts, Mansky suggested. Currently a House district in Minnesota covers about 36,000 people. If you reduced the size to about 20,000 people, then people of lesser means could find it possible to run. With 20,000 people in a district, someone could easily door-knock the entire district, and wouldn't require a vast campaign treasury..

11. Provide for three at-large offices in each legislative district? -Mansky noted that it is almost impossible today for a DFL candidate to win in strong Republican areas, such as on the northwest fringe of the metro area or for a Republican candidate to win in a strong DFL area, such as in Minneapolis. Mansky suggested that three representatives could be elected from each district. Each party would be limited to not more than two nominees in the district, thereby assuring that a strong DFL district would have one GOP representative and two DFL representatives and a strong GOP district would have one DFL representative and two GOP representatives.

Mansky said that prior to 1970 Illinois had a system of multi-candidate districts, with each party guaranteed at least one seat in each district. Jim Olson, a Civic Caucus member who resides in Illinois, commented that the Daley machine controlled the Republican nominees as well as the Democratic nominees.

12. A unicameral Legislature- Mansky spent some time in Nebraska and is a supporter of the unicameral. The single body could have multi-member districts, with cumulative voting allowed in each district.

13. Desirability of instant runoff voting (IRV)- Mansky was asked to comment on the potential of IRV. He said he questions whether the fear of a wasted vote is an appropriate reason to be supporting IRV. He disputes that any vote is wasted. He said he voted for Jesse Ventura in 1998 because he wanted to support the Ventura position. Even if Ventura had not been elected, Mansky said his vote would not have been wasted. Another person said that the rationale behind IRV is more related to stimulating candidates to adopt more moderate positions, knowing that they need to attract second and third choice votes, not just top choice votes. Mansky said IRV would work in competitive districts but not in those that are lop-sided toward one party or another. A question of constitutionality of IRV is present, Mansky said, based on a 1915 Minnesota Supreme Court decision. Mansky also said that he senses a strong bias in Minnesota in favor of a two-party system; thus he doesn't see the usefulness of IRV.

14. Making it easier to serve in the Legislature and hold another job -Mansky said he doesn't advocate restrictions on when the Legislature may meet during a calendar year. However, he thinks that it might be possible-for metro area legislators at least-to hold down an outside job if more legislative business took place during the late afternoon or evening.

15. Changes in presidential primaries? -Mansky favors a regional primary, say for the states of Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

16. Declaring party preference in the primary? -With 40 percent of Minnesota voters not listing a party preference, he doesn't think it advisable to require that a primary election voter declare party affiliation in order to vote in the primary.

17. Fixing gerrymandering -Mansky advocates that the Legislature be the final decision-maker on redistricting. But he would favor establishing an independent redistricting commission whose recommendations the Legislature could vote up or down but not modify. If the Legislature failed to adopt a commission-recommended plan, the judiciary would step in. Mansky would place definitions in state law for such terms as "compactness", "contiguity", "competitiveness" and "community of interest". He'd require that the political makeup of proposed districts be clearly identified in whatever proposal emerges from a redistricting commission.

18. Thanks -Members of the Civic Caucus expressed their thanks to Mansky for his challenging, candid, well-considered, and far-reaching comments.

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.