



Summary of Meeting with Elaine Voss

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, October 20, 2006

Present: Lee Canning, Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

Guest speaker: Elaine Voss, former deputy Minnesota Secretary of State

Context of the meeting: The Civic Caucus is conducting a review of ways to reduce polarization and paralysis in the Minnesota Legislature. In three previous meetings and in today's meeting the Caucus is looking the elections process as a possible contributor to polarization and paralysis. Elaine Voss was invited because of her long experience as an elections official, including service with the Secretary of State when a report on election changes was prepared.

A. Introduction of Voss—Paul introduced Voss, who served as deputy Secretary of State from February 1983 to January 1999. Previously she had served as supervisor of elections for Anoka County and before that was an instructor in nursing. In 2001 she served as a member of the Governor's Citizen Advisory Council on Redistricting. She currently is serving as an advisory member to the staff of Citizens for Election Integrity, which is verifying the election of 2006. She is a recipient of the Women of Distinction award from the Association of Business and Professional Women.

B. Growe Commission—Voss began her remarks by mentioning the Growe commission report:

1. Recommendations of the Growe Commission on Electoral Reform—Voss highlighted recommendations from the Growe Commission, January 1995, headed by then-Secretary of State Joan Anderson Growe. The 17 members included Democrats and Republicans. The recommendations:

a. Change precinct caucus dates—Conduct precinct caucuses on the first weekend in April, during daytime hours.

b. Move state primary election earlier—Conduct the state primary election during the first two weeks in August, on a Saturday or a Tuesday.

c. Conduct presidential primary by mail—Conduct a presidential primary by mail on the same day as the precinct caucuses in presidential election years.

d. Raise support threshold for major party candidates— To gain a spot on the state primary ballot, major party candidates for state and federal offices would need to obtain either (a) at least 20 percent of the vote on any ballot at the party endorsing convention for that office or (b) a petition by eligible voters equal to 10 percent of persons voting for nomination for that office at the last state primary election.

e. Identify endorsed candidates on the state primary election ballot.

f. Rename the state primary the "party nominating election".

g. Permit corporations to make tax-deductible contributions to the Secretary of State to promote voter participation in precinct caucuses and elections on a non-partisan basis.

h. Increase voter education— Require and provide funding for the Secretary of State to make voter information available to the public via a toll-free telephone line, to produce and make available to the public a video explaining how to participate in the precinct caucuses, and to prepare and distribute to each household in the state a voter's guide prior to the precinct caucuses, the state primary election, and the state general election.

2. Findings of the commission- -The commission found that the current system for nominating candidates is characterized by declining participation in caucuses, divisive and negative campaigning in party primaries, and avoidance of or lack of time to discuss substantive issues in the general election.

3. Anticipated results— The commission expected that its recommendations would (a) encourage candidates to include the concerns of the wider party electorate in their campaign messages, (b) allow more time for voters to examine candidates' messages before the general election, and (c) discourage sound-bite, negative campaign sloganeering and encourage a more thoughtful approach to dealing with public issues.

4. Recommendations not adopted— The Growe commission recommendations have not been adopted by the Legislature.

C. Discussion with the Civic Caucus— During Voss' comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. A public function or a party function?- -A member commented that it appears the commission's recommendations were designed to make the primary election a party function, not a public function. If so, the member wondered if the parties should pay for the primary.

2. Make the primary less a party function?- -A member commented that some persons have suggested that the primary should be less of a party function. In fact, one idea has been to hold the primary election before the party endorsement conventions. Thus the choice of the party's nominee would be made by a much larger group of people. A candidate would file for office as a member of a political party and indicate support for the party's platform. A party could choose to endorse the

nominated candidate after the primary election.

3. Problems with campaign finance— A member and Voss agreed that the party endorsement seems to be taking a back seat to certain national advertising on behalf of, but supposedly unconnected to, the campaign of a given candidate. No one knows where the money is coming from for such advertising. Voss said she favors full disclosure, immediately, of the financing sources for such advertising.

4. Problems with precinct caucuses— Voss said attendance at precinct caucuses varies dramatically. In fact, she and her husband were the only persons attending their caucus a few years ago. She agreed that sometimes precinct caucuses elect delegates based on selected single issues. Under rules of the DFL Party, of which she is a member, sub-caucuses that are formed around single issues are allowed to name convention delegates. Despite their problems, precinct caucuses provide grass roots input to issues and candidate selection and should be retained, she said.

5. Influence of the legislative caucuses— The discussion moved on to the question of legislative caucuses (the permanent organizations of Republicans and Democrats in the State Legislature), as distinct from precinct caucuses (one time gatherings of citizens every two years).

Voss disputed comments made in previous summaries that the legislative caucuses are the major players in finding candidates for office. She said that the political parties are continuing in that role. She agreed that the legislative caucuses have become major players in providing campaign financing for legislative candidates.

6. Attacking the problem of polarization and paralysis— A member said that the Civic Caucus is seeking ways to reduce the sharp divisions on both sides of the aisle in the Legislature. Thus, the member said, we're concerned that the role of the legislative caucuses in campaigns could be accentuating the sharp divisions. Voss agreed that Minnesota has problems, but other states such as Texas have even greater problems in this regard.

7. Changing the redistricting process?— It was noted that in recent years legislative bodies around the nation have gerrymandered their districts and, thereby, added to the problems of polarization. Voss said the Legislature should continue to establish the boundaries of legislative and congressional districts. She said she supports writing guidelines into law that legislators should follow, such as contiguity, community, compactness, and competitiveness.

She acknowledged many suggestions have been made to hand the decisions off to special commissions. Someone has to appoint the commission members, she said, and they can be as partisan as the Legislature. In the discussion a member said such commissions wouldn't necessarily need to have the last say. For example, a commission's recommendations could be final, unless rejected by the Legislature. Or a commission's recommendations could be advisory only to the Legislature.

8. More at-large seats in a district?— If changing the redistricting process isn't a real answer to polarization and paralysis, a member said that one suggestion is to have larger districts with, say,

three at-large offices being elected in each district. Under this concept, no party would be allowed more than two nominees in the district, thereby guaranteeing that a minority party would have some representation in the district. Voss said she is opposed to such an arrangement.

9. Single transferable vote?— The discussion moved to a newer voting concept that is on the ballot in Minneapolis this fall, known as single transferable vote (STV), or instant runoff voting, a way to assure every winning candidate receives a majority, even in elections with more than two candidates. Under STV, the voter ranks candidates in order of preference. If first preferences don't provide a majority for any candidate, lower preferences come into play.

Voss said she believes very strongly in the two-party system. She thinks that STV is designed to help third-party candidates. Moreover, she thinks that voters would have a hard time with this system. When she enters a voting booth, she said she never has in mind what her second and third choices would be. Voss also commented that she couldn't make the connection on how STV would impact the polarization and paralysis issue in the system.

10. Removing barriers to voting— On a national basis Voss said barriers to voting should be lowered, not raised. She is opposed to proposals for mandatory ID cards. She cited a new report, issued October 12, 2006, by the Century foundation, Common Cause, and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. The report states that since 2004 some states have made it harder to register to vote.

Voss said that another problem is assuring accuracy in counting votes. Fortunately, she said, Minnesota has a system that guarantees a paper trail for validation.. Ballots are counted electronically in this state, but it is possible retain the actual ballot for each voter. Some states don't have that ability with their electronic systems.

11. Combating polarization and paralysis— Voss made brief comments about additional factors contributing to polarization and paralysis:

- Lack of real commitment of party (caucus) leaders to address public policy issues vs. maneuvers to shut out the opposition and maneuvers to increase their caucus numbers;
- The role of media: looking for entertainment value rather substance;
- Political use of religion and wedge issue on a sharp increase.

12. Thanks— On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Paul thanked Voss for today's meeting.

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.