



Summary of Meeting with Mark Ritchie

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, March 30, 2007

Guest speaker: Mark Ritchie, Minnesota Secretary of State

Present: Chuck Clay, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, and Jim Olson (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting —The Civic Caucus has been reviewing various aspects of elections and election law as part of an inquiry into the question of polarization and paralysis in state government. Today we're meeting with the state's chief elections officer, Mark Ritchie, Minnesota Secretary of State.

B. Welcome and introduction —Paul welcomed Ritchie and introduced him to the Civic Caucus. Ritchie, a DFLer, was elected Minnesota Secretary of State in November 2006. Immediately preceding his running for office, Ritchie had been leading National Voice, a coalition of more than 1,000 organizations across the nation working to increase participation in elections. Previously he had served, from 1986 to 2005, as president of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy that fosters long-term sustainability for Minnesota's rural communities. He has been a resident of Minneapolis for more than 25 years.

C. Comments and discussion —In Ritchie's remarks and discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Importance of relationships —Taking note of the Civic Caucus concern for polarization and paralysis, Ritchie cited the book *Team of Rivals*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin. Goodwin profiles five of the key players in her book, four of whom contended for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination and all of whom later worked together in Lincoln's cabinet. The importance of maintaining respect and personal relationships is a key aspect of gaining consensus among political adversaries, he said.

2. "Multi-partisan", not "bi-partisan" —Ritchie said he is distressed because so little attention is given to smaller parties, like the Green Party, the Libertarian Party, and the Constitution Party, by the media, civic organizations and others in Minnesota. He believes the term "bi-partisan" is biased in favor of the two major parties, the Democrats and Republicans.

The Secretary of State is administratively responsible for handling filings for some offices. Ritchie said the filing process is biased against smaller parties and independent candidates not affiliated with any official party. State law provides a very narrow window for candidates from smaller parties and independents to get signatures to get on the ballot.

The negative treatment of minority parties extends to the media, in terms of who gets coverage, and to civic organizations, in terms of who gets invited to campaign meetings, he said. It is hard enough to run for office, Ritchie said, considering the time and financial investment required. The Secretary of State will try to make access to the ballot equitable for all parties.

3. Why elect the Secretary of State? —In response to a question Ritchie said that in some states the chief elections officer is appointed by the Governor, which creates many opportunities to politicize the office.

4. Secretary of State is not a "lower ticket" office —The media, civic organizations, and the political parties themselves view the offices of Secretary of State and State Auditor as "lower ticket", and not worth the attention of other statewide offices, Ritchie said. In 1858, when Minnesota became a state, the office of Secretary of State was the second most important office, behind that of Governor.

5. Service by 10,000 people who run elections in Minnesota —Ritchie said the elections officers of the 87 counties, plus the city clerks, township officials, and volunteers who service polling places have done a good job of producing fair elections in Minnesota.

6. Legislative program of the Minnesota Secretary of State —Ritchie said his office has submitted a multi-part program to the 2007 Legislature, including:

a. Help for overseas voting —Ritchie is supporting moving the date of the state primary up from September to make it possible for ballots to get in the hands of Minnesota residents who are overseas and to return those ballots by election day in November. Ritchie said this problem is serious for Minnesotans in the armed services. Later in the meeting he agreed that the problem also is present for an even larger number of Minnesotans who are in various types of civilian positions overseas, too.

Ritchie acknowledged that many elected officeholders in the state are opposed to moving the date of the state primary as early as June. It would only be necessary to advance the date to August to provide enough time to get ballots in the hands of overseas voters, he said.

One of the proposed changes would allow ballots to be sent by email to people overseas. Regular mail would be necessary for return of the ballots. Also he is working for what is known as the "submarine" ballot, giving people who are going to be out of the country on Election Day to write the name of their favored candidate even before primary results are certified. This is currently used in federal elections and would be used for state elections as well under this proposed law.

b. Changes in voter registration —Nearly 600,000 persons now swamp election officials by registering on presidential election days, Ritchie said. He is supporting changes recommended by county election officers to facilitate registration in other ways. For example, under current law a registered voter must re-register upon changing an address. A proposed law change would automatically update a person's voter registration when a change of address is submitted to the United States Postal Service (USPS).

A second proposed change involves allowing persons to be automatically registered to vote when they receive drivers' licenses or state IDs, unless someone specifically asks not to be registered to vote.

Ritchie also is proposing a study of using the internet for voter registration.

c. Allowing all citizens to serve as election judges —Currently, election judges must declare their affiliation to one of the three major parties. Under the proposal, persons would not need to be affiliated with political parties to be eligible to serve.

7. Avoiding fraud —In response to a question about avoiding fraud in using USPS address changes, Ritchie said the USPS has its own enforcers; the Minnesota Secretary of State would send a non-forwardable post card to verify an address; all subsequent communication would be with that new address and anyone who committed fraud would be subject to felony prosecution.

Jim Olson, a resident of Illinois, suggested that people who register on Election Day have a purple mark placed on a finger to keep them from voting in more than one precinct.

Asked how names of the deceased are removed from election rolls, Ritchie said counties maintain the lists and keep track of deaths with data provided by the State Department of Health. Also a person failing to vote in two election cycles is automatically removed. Moreover, he said, family members take the initiative to remove names of loved ones who have died, because they are hurt by receiving mail addressed to the deceased.

8. Encouraging young people to vote —Ritchie acknowledged that an ongoing problem—even in Minnesota and despite its high vote turnout—is that young people vote in very low numbers. For some reason many young people believe the system is rigged against them. We need to eliminate barriers to voting and we need to address the matter of civics education. Civics education is abysmal in Minnesota, he said. Often it isn't offered in some high schools until after many of the kids have dropped out. Ritchie is conducting a roundtable discussion on civics education from 4 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Monday, April 2, at the office of the Minnesota State Retirement Systems, 60 Empire Drive, St. Paul. The meeting is free and open to the public.

9. Potential of vote-by-mail —In July 2006 a special election for a county commissioner race using vote-by-mail took place in Blue Earth County, MN. Turnout was 53 percent, twice the turnout of a regular special election, according to the *Mankato Free Press*.

Current state law allows cities that have precincts with less than 50 registered voters to use mail-in ballots. Townships and some small cities are allowed to mail ballots to areas with 400 or fewer registered voters.

Ritchie cited another example, Kittson County, in far northwestern Minnesota, where voter turnout had been falling in recent years, partly because of an aging population, coupled with long distances to the polling places. An experiment in mail-in voting brought the percentage up towards 100 percent again.

Interestingly, Ritchie said, not everyone is excited about getting large turnouts, particularly at special elections for school referendums, because of a possibility that an increase in voters will turn out people who will vote against the referendums.

Jim Olson pointed out that that it is increasingly difficult to recruit people to serve as election judges. Voting by mail reduces the need for election judges, he said. Ritchie noted an extensive use of voting by mail in Oregon, (<http://www.sos.state.or.us/executive/policy-initiatives/vbm/execvbm.htm>), and

California and Colorado, with ability to vote "absentee" without needing to be absent from the city on Election Day.

10. Potential of a presidential election by popular vote —Jim Hetland highlighted an article in *National Civic Review*, Spring 2007, "Reforming the Electoral College with Interstate Compacts," by Robert Richie (No relation. Name spelled differently). Richie points out the concentration of the presidential campaign in a handful of battleground states, and notes the substantially lower voter turnout among youth in the non-battleground states. Richie points out that "voting behavior of most citizens is established for life during their first three or four elections...", and that "a sharp difference in turnout according to where one lives could all too easily continue for the rest of this generation's lives..."

The article points out that states already have exclusive power over how to choose their electors. Today most states allocate voters to the statewide vote winner, but, according to the article, "they could just as easily allocate them to the national vote winner."

A national effort is under way, according to the article, to encourage state legislatures to enter into binding interstate compacts to allocate their electoral votes to the national winner, with such compacts becoming effective when states representing a majority of Americans and a majority of the Electoral College did so. "With a national popular vote, ...every part of every state would be equal," according to the article.

For detailed information on the status of the National Popular Vote plan, click on <http://www.nationalpopularvote.com/index.php>.

Ritchie said he has just read the article himself. He is studying the issue. He is personally very concerned with the large number of negative campaign advertising.

11. A presidential primary for Minnesota? —Ritchie said he favors a plan offered by the national organization of secretaries of state for having regional primaries across the nation, with the dates for each primary varying every four years.

12. "Voting centers" versus precinct polling places —Jim Hetland asked about the potential of allowing people to have a choice of voting at one of several voting centers, not just at the polling place for the precinct in which they live. Ritchie mentioned experiments in Colorado. Larimer County, Colorado conducted successful elections using vote centers in 2003 and 2004, reducing the number of polling places from 143 precinct polling places to 22 vote centers, each linked with a computerized voter registration list to prevent voters from being able to cast votes at multiple vote centers on **election day**. An experiment in Denver in 2006 apparently was less successful.

13. Issues of voter "registration" —Ritchie said that historically voter registration was created to be a barrier to keep some classes of people from voting. He noted that North Dakota still doesn't require any voter registration. Minnesota, of course, allows eligible citizens to register to vote on Election Day at the precinct.

14. Redistricting commission? —Asked about changing the method of drawing congressional and legislative districts, Ritchie said that as Secretary of State he leaves that up to the Legislature.

15. Selection of judges —Referring to the meeting the Civic Caucus had last week with former Gov. Al Quie, Ritchie declined to comment on the specific proposal, but he believes that selection of judges should not become subject to partisan politics. He is very concerned with national developments that are placing the judiciary under assault.

16. Instant runoff voting —Ritchie said he is working to help IRV get implemented in his home town of Minneapolis and will be convening a task force this year to develop some guidelines and suggestions for other communities considering this for their own elections, like St. Paul.

17. Precinct caucuses -He did not offer any suggestions for change.

18. Thank you. —Members of the Civic Caucus thanked Ritchie for meeting with us this morning.

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.