



Summary of Meeting with Don Ostrom

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, November 14, 2008

Guest speaker: Don Ostrom, retired professor of political science, Gustavus Adolphus College, and former four-term member of the Minnesota House of Representatives, St. Peter, MN

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

A. Context of the meeting —Over several months the Civic Caucus is holding many meetings with persons with broad exposure to and knowledge about the state's election system. Today's speaker has a long record of involvement as an elected official at different levels of government in addition to teaching about principles of representative democracy.

B. Welcome and introduction —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Don Ostrom**, currently visiting professor, department of political science, St. Olaf College. From 1972 to 2004 he was on the political science faculty of Gustavus Adolphus College. Earlier he held teaching positions at the American University, Washington, D. C., the University of Minnesota, and The University of Nigeria. From 1989 to 1996 he was a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives, and served two years as assistant majority leader. He was a member of the St. Peter School Board from 1983 to 1988. He was legislative assistant for Congressman Don Fraser from 1966 to 1968. He has a B.A. degree from St. Olaf College, and a master's and Ph.D from Washington University, St. Louis, MO.

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

1. Support for precinct caucuses —Ostrom said he is more supportive of precinct caucuses (once-a-biennium neighborhood meetings conducted by political parties) than are many others. The precinct caucus system makes it possible for people of modest means to run and serve in elective office. If we didn't have precinct caucuses with subsequent party endorsement, he said, candidates would just run in the primary, with name recognition and money becoming the key factors. He cited examples of previous DFL office-holders, Humphrey, McCarthy, Freeman, and Wellstone, who achieved high office but were not wealthy. Precinct caucuses also allow great scrutiny of candidates, he said.

2. Advantages of competitive legislative districts —It is likely that candidates who don't hold strong ideological views on the left or the right on the political spectrum are more likely to come from

competitive districts, because they can attract voters with a broader range of positions on litmus-test issues. But in the case where one party strongly dominates a legislative district, it is more likely that office-holders will be identified with more extreme views.

Ostrom said that keeping moderates active in the party seems more of a problem for Republicans than Democrats. Politics is for people who show up. There's nothing better than to encourage people to attend their precinct caucuses. If one interest group seems to dominate a given caucus, it's the job of citizens to get others to the caucus to balance off the strength of the interest group.

3. Change redistricting —Legislators ought to be removed from redistricting, Ostrom said. Better legislators often come from the most competitive districts, he said. It is more likely that a bi-partisan commission of non-legislators will select a plan with more competitive districts, because such a commission would not be as motivated to protect incumbents as are legislators themselves. The main problem, he said, is in selection of the members of the commission that would handle redistricting. In discussion it was noted that California voters in September approved a constitutional amendment that wholly removes its Legislature from drawing legislative boundaries. See: http://www.lao.ca.gov/ballot/2008/11_11_2008.aspx.

4. Precinct caucuses need improvement —Given the experience with precinct caucuses this year—when many caucuses were overwhelmed by people who showed up just to vote their preference for President—Ostrom favors some way of splitting off the presidential preference vote from the precinct caucus itself. One possibility, he suggested, is that a presidential preference primary could take place at regular voting locations during the day, followed by separate precinct caucus meetings at night. Then the precinct caucuses could carry out their functions of acting on proposed resolutions and endorsing candidates for state offices. There's no substitute for face-to-face discussion of issues and candidates, he said.

If you did away with precinct caucuses and relied only on primary elections for selection of party nominees, the elections will be more dominated by candidates who can raise lots of money or candidates with quickly-recognized Minnesota names.

Ostrom acknowledged that precinct caucuses could be more welcoming. Citizens participation waxes and wanes but it's not downhill. He favors steps designed to encourage better precinct caucus attendance, such as the possibility of holding precinct caucus meetings on a Saturday.

5. Opposition to multiple endorsements —Ostrom prefers that political parties endorse only one candidate for each office. He noted a proposal is made frequently that all candidates achieving a certain threshold of support at a nominating convention, say 20 to 30 percent of the votes, would be regarded as endorsed candidates and would fight it out in the primary on an equal basis. Ostrom said he sees real value in the party convention selecting a preferred candidate, rather than leaving that decision to a primary, where non-party members would have a voice.

In general Ostrom favors strengthening the political party organization as the best way to strengthen democracy.

6. Advance the date of the state primary —Ostrom supports moving the date of the state primary from September to June. A party needs more than the present seven weeks between the primary and general elections to resolve party differences and make the case to the citizenry, he said.

7. Difficulty in getting the message out about the importance of precinct caucuses —A Civic Caucus member observed that the decline in news-gathering by the traditional mainstream media doesn't make it any easier to educate the public about the function of precinct caucuses.

8. Influence of the precinct caucuses versus the legislative caucuses in selecting and electing candidates for the Legislature —The group moved on to a discussion of whether the legislative caucuses (permanent majority and minority organizations of legislators) are more significant in the process of selecting candidates than are the precinct caucuses. Leaders of the legislative caucuses actively seek candidates. The caucuses provide large sums of campaign money in competitive districts—often eclipsing amounts raised by individual candidates' campaign committees.

Ostrom said that an active role by legislative caucus leadership has the effect of increasing the quality of candidates, and that legislative caucus leaders check with the party leadership in the local districts.

A Civic Caucus member observed that the role played by the precinct caucus in selecting candidates seems quite minor along side the active role of the legislative caucus.

9. Creation of professional legislators or citizen legislators? —Ostrom was asked whether Minnesota's Legislature has become dominated by members whose full-time job is that of a legislator, as a result of changes in the early 1970s that produced annual sessions and party designation. Ostrom said he agrees with a Civic Caucus member who said that well-respected community leaders might not be as prevalent among candidates for the Legislature today as they were before annual sessions. But Ostrom said that legislators now appear to be much more reflective of the community at-large than simply being picked from a more narrow group of people who already had been recognized leaders before being elected to the Legislature. Ostrom also said that the scheduling of many legislative committee meetings between sessions offers very good opportunity for ongoing education on issues.

10. Should a political party's fund-raising function be handled together with its candidate-selection function?— A Civic Caucus member commented that political parties in Minnesota today seem to organize their fund-raising functions and their candidate-selection functions in the same leadership unit within their party structure. The member recalled that years ago the two functions were not as closely connected. Moreover, chairs of the parties in past years seemed to play a much larger role as spokespersons on major issues, the member said, citing George Farr, Warren Spannus, Robert Forsythe and George Thiss. Ostrom replied that expenses for campaigns today are very large, particularly with television ads, so it shouldn't be a surprise that a party would give major emphasis to fund-raising. In response, a Civic Caucus member wondered whether TV ads do anything to promote an understanding of candidates' positions on issues.

11. Support for ranked choice voting, Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)— The group moved on to discuss whether it's important that a winning candidate receive at least a majority of votes cast. Ostrom said he supports IRV, in which a voter ranks candidates in order of preference. But he sees

little chance of its being enacted statewide, because of opposition from Republican leaders. Also, he believes a constitutional amendment would be necessary, which would be extremely difficult to gain approval from voters.

He doesn't see all that much strength in the Independence Party in Minnesota and that maybe leaders of that party would recognize greater strength in merging with the DFL, because their positions aren't that far apart.

12. Difficulty in identifying changes to improve leadership in the state —A Civic Caucus member noted that it's hard to find much support for significant change in the structure of elections, even though the state urgently needs more leadership. Ostrom replied that he'd go for a parliamentary system. In parliamentary systems, the chief executive is not chosen by the people but by the Legislature. The fusion of the legislative and executive branches in the parliamentary system tends to lead to more discipline among political party members. Party members in parliaments almost always vote strictly along party lines.

13. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Ostrom for meeting with us today.