



# Former Congressman Tim Penny

Narrow interests, partisan divide impede broad collective action on public problems

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Civic Process Interview

*October 23, 2015*

## Present

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## Summary

The proliferation of interest groups focused on a narrow set of issues makes it harder for people to come together on a broad range of important public policy issues, according to Tim Penny, former U. S. House member from Minnesota and now president and CEO of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation.

Another development that has helped change the culture of decision-making over the last 40 years, he says, is that now people can get their information the way they want to get it, whether on the liberal or conservative side. The audience is segmented and the media are only interested in talking to their share of the audience. And the fact that people don't all read the same local newspapers anymore has eroded our sense of community and our sense of how to resolve public policy problems.

Penny laments the partisan divide and the failure of most attempts over the past 20 years to overcome it. He believes the two sides often start the debate over an issue too far apart to even find common ground. And insisting that people admit they are wrong before agreeing to talk to them is a nonstarter.

He offers a number of proposals that could change the way people think about being a citizen and could encourage people to work collectively to solve problems: (1) instituting universal service at age 18; (2) encouraging community service tied to academics in high school; (3) helping students register to vote before they graduate from high school; (4) forming a blue-ribbon commission to redesign state government; (5) urging local communities to address their own needs, rather than looking to Washington; (6) setting Congressional term limits; and (7) convincing business leaders that it's essential to cultivate working relationships on both sides of the aisle.

## Biography

Tim Penny has been president and CEO of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF) since April 2007. SMIF serves 20 counties in southern Minnesota. He also serves as an affiliate faculty member at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

Penny's background complements many of SMIF's key interests, including the areas of workforce development, early childhood development and economic development, with a focus on bio-ag and biomedical. Penny sees these areas as having the biggest growth potential for the region and the greatest impact on the future economy of southern Minnesota.

Penny represented Minnesota's First Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1983 to 1995. Previously he was a member of the Minnesota State Senate from 1977 to 1983. He is cofounder of the Economic Club of Minnesota.

Throughout his Congressional career, Penny placed an emphasis on budget issues. He chaired the Democratic Budget Group, as well as the Porkbusters Coalition. His deficit-reduction efforts were recognized by such organizations as the Business Roundtable, Citizens for a Sound Economy, the National Taxpayers Union and Citizens Against Government Waste.

Penny has co-authored three books: *Common Cents: A Retiring Six-Term Congressman Reveals How Congress Really Works - And What We Must Do to Fix It* (1995), *The 15 Biggest Lies in Politics* (1998), and *Payment Due* (1996). Born and raised in southeastern Minnesota, Penny received his B. A. in political science from Winona State University.

## Background

This interview with Tim Penny is part of a new focus for the Civic Caucus: reviewing the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future civic process for developing good public-policy proposals and action to anticipate, define and resolve major problems. The Caucus developed this new focus during three internal discussion sessions, held on [Sept. 11](#), [Sept. 18](#) and [Oct. 2, 2015](#). While it undertakes this review of the civic process, the Caucus will also continue interviews exploring the topic of human capital in Minnesota.

## Discussion

**Society has changed dramatically in the last 40 years, so the culture of decision-making is much different from what it was.** Tim Penny, former U.S. House member from Minnesota and now president and CEO of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF), said somehow the societal structures back then provided a pathway to get things done. "If you look at the civic institutions today that help us address issues, there are some that are still with us. Some of those institutions are no longer the driving force they were in the past.

"Why has that changed?" he asked. "Part of it there has been a proliferation of ways to get involved. It's harder in today's world for people to come together on a broad range of important public policy issues than it is for us to just focus on that narrow set of issues that matter to us most."

Penny noted that interest group proliferation is part of what has bogged down decision-making.

- Interest groups only care about their narrow agendas. "It's not their problem if they get in the way of other agendas," he said.
- Interest groups become more intransigent. "It's hard to bring folks together when they're siloed."

**Today we can get our information the way we want to get it.** Penny said people can go online and get the news as they want it, whether on the liberal or conservative side. "That's a piece of what makes it more difficult to bring folks together."

**A lot of this is tied to generational differences.** Penny said Ben Winchester at the University of Minnesota-Morris has looked at the brain drain in rural areas, caused by young people graduating from high school or college in a rural area and then migrating to the Twin Cities or elsewhere and never coming back. But Winchester's recent research has shown a *brain gain* in rural areas by people from age 30 to 49. And two-thirds of those people have never lived in a rural area before.

Penny said Winchester explained that while there is a brain gain in this age group, when they move to a small town, don't be expecting them to join traditional organizations like the Lions Club or the Rotary Club. "These are broad-based organizations that take on a variety of projects within the community," Penny said. "It might be possible to get these new residents to participate in one project, but not in a broad number of projects. They want to get engaged in things they care about most, not what's best for the community.

"It's a huge cultural shift. This affects how decisions are made in public life. Who shows up at caucuses to nominate candidates? It's not a cross-section any longer of the community or the neighborhood. It's an overrepresentation of narrower groups that want that they want. Over time it's a chicken-and-egg situation. Are they driving others out because it makes the process unappealing to other people who don't have a passion about those narrower issues? There's good evidence that's probably the case."

"Once people are in office," Penny continued, "they've probably already aligned themselves with many of those same interests, which makes it difficult for them to compromise on particular issues. It's very difficult for people on the other side of the aisle to see the pathway to common ground on an issue."

He talked about our inability to come to a solution to the state's transportation funding problem, saying, "We start the debate too far apart to even find common ground."

**In the last 20 years, most of the attempts to overcome this partisan divide haven't gotten a lot of traction.** "In its own way, Penny said, "the Independence Party was trying to find a path up the middle to draw both conservative and liberal people together. But after 20 years, there's no there there."

He spoke of the demise of the Common Sense Coalition and barriers faced by the Bipartisan Policy Coalition, national groups trying to pull together people from both parties. "A lot of it is because all of the sensible centrist groups lack one thing: motivational rage," Penny said.

"It's incompatible in many ways to have a sensible, thoughtful approach to a problem and still have some rage," he continued. "Today, on the left is Bernie Sanders, who taps into some rage. On the right is Donald Trump, who is also tapping into some rage. It's easy to do that and people are yearning for that, but the emotion doesn't lead you to an outcome. You could say that by tapping into rage, there's something to that. But is that agenda realistic or is that further evidence of the divide?" Penny thinks it's further evidence of the divide.

"The challenge for civic groups that are well-intentioned is to somehow tap into this rage that the system is broken in order to capture public attention," he said.

Penny admitted that at this point in his life, he's pulled back from a lot of efforts to try to change things and has focused on things he *can* change. "It's not because I don't care about these bigger issues, it's that I'm worn out," he said. "I'm despondent."

He listed change efforts he's involved in today:

- He's part of FairVote, an effort to move to Instant Runoff Voting. "This could change the dynamics of voting and help eliminate the dominance of the two parties, which increasingly have become too polarized and are not helping us get things done," he said.
- He serves on the Parent Aware for School Readiness board, which, he states, is getting something done in early education.
- He runs the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, which focuses on partnership and collaboration on entrepreneurship, helping the economy grow and early childhood.
- He is a cofounder of the Economic Club of Minnesota, a nonpartisan group that brings in premier speakers on topics relating to the economy.
- He serves on the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, which is also a nonpartisan group.

**We need some expectation on the part of our citizenry that we all do something collectively.** "I was fan of universal service when I was in Congress," Penny remarked. For a year or two out of high school, everyone would be expected to do something, like the military, the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, Civilian Conservation Corps or other things. "We can combine vocational and technical stuff with what people are doing," he said, "but everybody at age 18 does something bigger than themselves."

"I think it will change the national culture and the national dialogue in a variety of ways," he continued. "It'll help us learn more about one another. It could be a way of getting us into a different mindset about what it means to be a citizen."

Penny noted that the Greatest Generation came home from the war and made a huge difference in how we worked together in communities, advanced goals and invested in a whole range of community assets and needs.

**Every war vote should include two things: (1) a reinstitution of the draft to put the country on notice that more people may be called into service and (2) a surtax to pay at least some of the expenses of the war now.** "We should all know that this is what war means," he said.

**Increasingly if people can't get what they want, they'd rather have nothing happen.** An interviewer commented that in years back, the speed at which we gathered information about what was going on was slower. Things had time to soak in people's minds, so there was time for thought before a decision was made. Now information is out before the incident even happens. "Because of that, we've become too much of a democracy," the interviewer said. "We're forgetting that we're a republic. We're supposed to operate giving people the opportunity to make decisions as a group in a representative way. Now every group wants to rule and that's driven by the flow of information."

"People want what they want," Penny responded. "That's part of what's baked into our political process today."

He said he's often told people running for office that if they want to be good legislators, they should buck their party's interest groups once in awhile. "Being constantly in line with them means you're not serving your constituency, which is bigger than that," he said. "Otherwise, you're not challenging the party and the interest groups to realize they can't have it all. That's how the system works."

**We no longer have a Federalist system.** Penny acknowledged that some things do have to go all the way to Washington and primarily be resolved there. But too many things go all the way there. He said about 15 percent of special education money in our local schools comes from Washington, but all the regulations come from Washington. "The other 85 percent of that funding comes from state or local sources," he said, "yet everything has to be done the way Washington wants it done."

**On too many issues, you have to agree you're wrong before we can even talk.** "Telling me I have to agree with you before we can even start to talk is a nonstarter," Penny said. In response to a question about global warming, he said there are global warming activists and global warming deniers. "But we need to get to a resolution," he said. He praised Sen. John McCain's response to the situation. McCain doesn't embrace global warming, Penny said, but he embraces conservation and alternative energy ideas. "You don't have to believe the activists to get to the point where we can agree that conservation and alternative energy make sense," Penny said.

**Local communities must address their own needs, because Washington is broke and broken.** An interviewer pointed out the growth in the number of lobbyists in Washington, as people increasingly look to the Federal government for money and solutions. Penny noted that a Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation report from about 25 years ago observed that the Foundation needed to play a role in helping local communities to address their own needs, because Washington was broke. Now, 25 years later, he pointed out, Washington is still broke, but everyone still thinks we can get Federal money to solve our problems.

"Our problems are our problems," he said. "Washington is not only broke, but it's also broken. They can't even pass a long-term highway bill. So, bring it home."

**Setting Congressional term limits would require a Constitutional change.** In response to a question, Penny said he was inclined toward Congressional term limits, but because imposing such limits would involve a Constitutional change, it would require a lot of rage to get them. "So, I don't think we're going to get there," he said.

He noted that the House has term-limited committee chairs, so there's been some rotation of leadership there, moving talent around. "I think there's a lot of health in that," he said.

"But it would take a lot of rage to get to term limits," he continued. "A hundred years ago, there was a lot of rage at the political system. Teddy Roosevelt and others in the progressive movement brought some fundamental reforms. Former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura captured some rage, rage in the middle. He did it with more of a centrist approach than politicians today. I don't know how we do that today."

**Minnesota's institutions of public policy fall into three categories.** An interviewer said Ted Kolderie has described the categories as follows:

1. Issue-raising organizations.
2. Issue shaping organizations.
3. Issue resolving organizations, which include the many levels of government.

The interviewer noted that there used to be many fewer organizations. Now, he said, Minnesota has close to 4,000 nonprofit organizations.

**Most proliferation among nonprofits is caused by groups narrowing their issue focus.** Penny called the proliferation "amazing." He said there's a lot of overlap among nonprofits, a blurring of service delivery and advocacy.

When asked where foundations fit in the picture, Penny said he doesn't view foundations as institutions of public policy. He believes the bigger foundations in the state are "all trying to find their way." Some foundations want to fund advocacy, some innovative change and some a broad range of organizations and issues.

**We need a blue-ribbon commission to redesign state government.** In response to an interviewer's question about holding the bureaucracy accountable, Penny said the state needs a blue-ribbon commission to recommend ways to redesign state government. Such an effort must empower public employees, whatever their area of work, he said. "The way you empower them is good leadership at the top. That's part of what holds us back. More often than not we have agencies led by appointees who aren't capable of actually leading the agency. They don't have the broad view. They're not empowered by the governors."

Looking at the Ventura years, Penny held that none of the people appointed then were political appointees. "Ventura had some pretty talented people leading the agencies. He created a wholly different sense of purpose and mission. There was freedom in those agencies to actually tackle what they were assigned to tackle. We just don't get enough of that now. Bureaucracies tend to calcify if there's not enough good leadership at the top. When there's a lack of leadership there, everybody keeps doing the same old, same old."

**The media have changed.** Penny said we're not getting a lot of in-depth or investigative reporting from any of the major news organizations any longer. A White House correspondent told Penny the media have been hollowed out and there are limited hours in the day to dig as much as journalists would like to dig. News coverage is more superficial, Penny said. The vast majority of stories are from the wires, as opposed to being developed by local reporters.

An interviewer asked if the fact that people don't all read the same local newspapers has eroded our sense of community and our sense of how to resolve public policy problems. Penny believes it has. "Now we choose to hear the news fed to us the way we want to hear it," he said. "In the glory days, we had only CBS, NBC and ABC. They had to present the news in way that would resonate with every listener. Now we've segmented our listeners. The media are only interested in talking to their share of the audience."

**We should encourage a youth service model in high schools and help students register to vote before they finish high school.** Penny noted that many schools are already doing this. There's a way to incorporate service into the academic requirements. And helping students register to vote could be an opportunity to learn about citizenship.

**In the past, homegrown companies tended to have a sense of civic purpose and obligation to the community.** "We lost it," Penny said. "Many companies are no longer homegrown. But we're getting some of that back. The Itasca Project group of business people is trying to do that. There are several key business leaders in the group trying to get business leaders together on big issues in a nonpartisan way. It's beginning to come back."

Penny noted that some business CEOs are sending some of their younger people to meetings of the Economic Club of Minnesota to get them engaged in topics focused on business and economic concerns.

**Some business organizations have become too partisan in the last couple of decades.** Penny said some business organizations have taken themselves out of the "we're-all-in-this-together role" and placed themselves in a partisan role. He emphasized that business leadership needs to cultivate working relationships on both sides of the aisle.