Ken Martin, Minnesota DFL Party Chair

Can political parties focus on policy issues when their main function is to win elections?

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Present

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Summary

There was a time when the role of citizens in their democracy was much more than voting, according to Minnesota DFL Party Chair Ken Martin. In the past, people were more engaged in issues and in policy discussions. People brought policy issues to a number of institutions, including the political parties, for discussion. But, he says, the days of political parties and elected officials engaging in serious debate about major reform and major public policy are gone. He compares today's discussions with the type of meaty debate that took place when the "Minnesota Miracle" passed in 1971. There was a different culture back then, a different sense of what the objective was and a different sense of what success meant.

He says now when elected officials discuss issues like education, they're just talking about the "small potatoes" of an increase here or there, rather than looking at larger, systemic change. He admits that parties have not helped create a more civil discourse on issues. Nor, he says, have the media.

Martin says political parties have one main function: to elect people who share their values. But he believes parties cannot force their elected officials to toe the party line and can't be in the business of just trying to make the other side look bad. If each party takes tools for compromise off the table when trying to solve serious problems like transportation funding, there's no room for solutions and the conversation is set up for failure. Then legislators admit at the end of the legislative session that they didn't get anything done, but they made sure the people on the other side didn't, either.

Martin believes Minnesota should have a presidential primary, but should keep the caucus system for statewide and local offices. But the political parties need to reform the precinct caucuses to improve

participation. Otherwise, he says, the "diehards" representing the extremes within a party are often the only ones who show up and they endorse candidates with extreme beliefs like their own.

Biography

Ken Martin has been chair of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) party since 2011. Before his election as chair, Martin spent two decades working for several elected officials and managing a variety of issue and election campaigns. In 2010, he worked to elect a DFL governor as the executive director of WIN Minnesota and then as the director for Mark Dayton's recount efforts in that gubernatorial election.

In 2008, Martin ran the Vote Yes campaign to pass the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment. He played leadership roles on the following campaigns: Hatch for governor in 2006, Kerry for president in 2004, Humphrey for secretary of state in 2002, Gore/Lieberman Minnesota in 2000 and various other races at the national, state and local levels. He served as political director for the Minnesota DFL in the 1998 election cycle and as field director for the Kansas Democratic Party in the 1996 election cycle. He has served the DFL Party as a member of the State Executive and Budget Committees and in other party offices since 1997.

Martin holds a B.A. in political science and history from the University of Kansas.

Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems. The Caucus interviewed Minnesota DFL Party Chair Ken Martin to learn more about the role of the political parties in that public-policy process.

Note: Minnesota Republican Party Chair Keith Downey was invited to this meeting, but was unable to attend.

Discussion

There was a time when the role of citizens in their democracy was much more than voting. Minnesota DFL Party Chair Ken Nelson said in the past, people were more engaged in issues and in policy discussions. "People brought those ideas to a number of institutions, including the political parties, for discussion," he said.

Political parties have become part of the problem. Martin said political parties have one main function: to elect people who share their values. "The piece that is missing these days is finding the candidates who share those values or the candidates who will represent the broader party," he said. Parties have not helped create a more civil discourse on issues.

There are fewer participants now in civic institutions like political parties and other organizations. "All that's left is the diehards," Martin said. "When so few people show up, those people represent a smaller viewpoint in the larger party," Martin said. The people at the extremes show up and dominate the discussion. The candidates who are endorsed represent those extreme viewpoints or positions.

There are elected officials in Washington and St. Paul who have put their oath to their political party or to special interest groups ahead of their oath to their constituents. "That leads to a corrosive debate when it comes to public policy," Martin said. He was critical of efforts last year by Republican party leaders to convince the Legislature that the surplus should be given back as tax cuts. "I don't think it's appropriate for political bosses to be at the Legislature dictating to legislators what they should be doing," Martin said. "It's not the place for a political leader."

"There is a role for parties to hold elected officials accountable to their platforms and their values," he said. "But it's another thing to create this false dynamic and choice for legislators: 'Do I respond to the wishes of party leaders or do I do the right thing and find common ground and compromise and work with the other side to get something done?'" This dynamic creates the toxicity we've seen in Congress, in legislative bodies across the country and in local governments.

"We do have a responsibility, but we have to temper that responsibility with the idea that compromise shouldn't be a dirty word," Martin said. "It's become a game about making sure the other side doesn't win. It's no longer a sign of success to say, 'We got something done for the people we serve.' Now the sign of success is to say, 'We didn't get anything done, but we made sure the people on the other side didn't get what they wanted, either.'"

Forty years ago, the campaign ended the day after the election. "The swords were put away," Martin said. "People decided the campaign was over, the rhetoric needed to get toned down and we needed to find common ground. We needed to do something for our constituents."

"That scenario doesn't exist anymore," he continued. "Now the campaign isn't over after the election. It's one perpetual campaign of people pointing figures, placing blame and calling names to score political points.

Parties do have a role in public policy. "But for parties really to be engaged in public-policy discussion, they cannot exact ideological purity and they cannot force their elected officials to toe the party line," Martin said. "They cannot be in the business of just trying to make the other side look bad."

Everyone's responsible for broadening the conversation about public policy. An interviewer asked what the roles of the party leaders, the elected officials and the citizens are in tackling serious problems in serious ways. Martin responded that it's everyone's responsibility. "If we approach policy issues through a narrow prism, we will create a situation where we're set up for failures," he said.

He cited the issue of transportation funding in the state. The Republicans have said they won't support any proposal that needs new tax revenue. And the Democrats have said they won't support taking money from the general fund. "If you want to see the transportation crisis fixed, you don't start the conversation by taking tools off the table," he said. "That leaves no room for solutions. It creates a situation where the conversation is already set up for failure."

Political parties should not expect purity on issues from elected officials. Martin asserted that the role of political parties is not to tell their elected officials they have to do a certain thing or the party will run candidates against them in the primary. "We're a 'big tent' party," Martin said. "We shouldn't exact purity on some of these issues. We should approach issues very deliberately and intentionally by putting everything on the table. You have to have all options on the table in situations like that. There are no sacred cows."

He noted that in 2011, party leaders warned Republicans that if they compromised with the governor, the party would run candidates against them in the primary. "What kind of message does that send?" Martin asked. "We all have a responsibility to allow elected officials the opportunity to govern."

"If we box our elected officials into a corner and expect purity," he continued, "it makes it tough for them to find common ground with the other side. Policy is not black and white." He said the public also has a responsibility to show up and participate.

Leaders in the state don't want to dodge major issues. Martin said the governor and other leaders realize that our transportation needs are crippling our economy and are a looming crisis for the state. They don't want to dodge the issue. "But there are some legislators who understand they can create political advantage by making the other side look bad," he said. "They take options off the table, nothing gets done and they can blame the other side. But I do have faith that a number of our leaders want to see these issues resolved."

The days of serious debate about major reform and major public policy are gone. An interviewer asked whether the real topics get discussed, as opposed to peripheral issues. "Are we talking about the right topics?" he asked.

"It seems that the days of very meaty debate about major government reform and major public policy are gone," Martin responded. When the Minnesota Miracle passed in 1971(a major reform of the state's tax system and in how the state funds school districts and local governments), he said both Republicans and Democrats engaged in a "very meaty debate." The legislation "changed the very fabric and culture of the state."

He said now when we talk about education, we're not having that level of conversation. "We're just talking about the small potatoes of an increase here or an increase there," he said. "We're not talking about the larger systemic issues around education." He noted that pertains to every issue, whether it be tax reform, transportation or health care.

There have been some transformative policy debates, Martin said, but they've been few and far between. "It's important to understand that there was a different culture back then, a different sense of what your objective was and a different sense of what success meant. Now so many issues we talk about at the Legislature are boiled down to very small, incremental changes versus large, systemic change."

Another interviewer said perhaps the best example of a legislative decision to implement systemic change also happened in 1971, with passage of the Fiscal Disparities program. The program shares business property-tax base among the seven counties in the metro area. It was "an enormous decision, unequaled anywhere around the country," he said.

Sometimes, advocacy groups might have to support candidates with whom they don't always agree. An interviewer noted that in the past, when candidates were running for office, advocacy groups would meet with them and ask a few screening questions. Now, he said, advocacy groups give candidates 50-question, written questionnaires, expect them to get a perfect score and won't support the candidates if they don't.

"It's really changed from advocacy groups feeling that if candidates will always listen, even if they don't always agree, that's enough," the interviewer said. "Now that's not enough anymore."

"We have to win elections," Martin said. "If we expect candidates in certain parts of the state to take positions on issues that will cause them not to win elections, we're not going to build a majority. We need to win, sometimes at the expense of issues our advocacy groups want."

He believes that candidates should not take vows put forward by interest groups who will support the candidates if they do. "No one in either party should take such a vow," he said. He pointed to the Tax Party pledge to raise no new revenue that some candidates have agreed to in past years. "How, then, are we going to solve some of these issues? Sometimes, advocacy groups might have to support candidates with whom they don't always agree."

The media have contributed to the erosion of the type of substantive debate that used to go on over public-policy issues. An interviewer asked about the role of the media in educating the public about complex issues. Martin responded that today people require almost instant news and aren't as interested in following the debate over policy issues. "The media have a huge influence on what our candidates will talk about," he said. "People are looking for sound bites."

A number of good groups are bringing good public-policy proposals forward. "You can be an agitator on the outside until you get people elected who also care about public policy," Martin said. "Getting stuff done is not possible until you get people elected who share your values."

He noted that people working in academia and in the field of public policy can't divorce policy issues from the political process and getting people elected. He said millennials are not apathetic and tend to be more interested in the substantive type of debate we're talking about.

Minnesota should have a presidential primary, but should keep the caucus system for statewide and local offices. Martin noted that 206,000 people showed up for the party precinct caucuses in Minnesota this year. He called the Minnesota DFL party one of the strongest political parties in the country and he believes the caucus system is a big part of that. Caucuses are an opportunity for people to have their voices heard and to have a huge influence in the selection of candidates and the development of the platform.

"Where else in our society can you come together with your neighbors and be engaged in politics and issues?" Martin asked. "The caucus system enables that." He admitted, though, that when people aren't engaged in it, the caucus system is not reflective of the larger party itself.

He asserted that someone like Paul Wellstone had the opportunity to get elected through the caucus system. A primary would favor candidates with more money and more name recognition.

We need to think about how to reform the precinct caucuses to improve participation. An interviewer commented that usually only two to four percent of people attend party caucuses. The public perception is that the precinct caucus is extremely narrow and beyond the average citizen.

Martin responded that the parties must reform precinct caucuses to increase participation. "There are lots of ways to include more voices in the platform," he said. "There are structural things that prevent more people from participating, but mainly, people think it's not worth it."

The platform and resolutions used to be a much more central part of the process at party caucuses. An interviewer commented that the caucus system is broken. He said he has gone to every caucus since 1960, but they aren't the same today as they used to be. Nor is the training of people running the caucus as good as it used to be. Today, the purpose of the caucus isn't clear. People come to the caucus to vote for candidates in national or state races. "Any discussion of issues is at the bottom of the list," he said. Many people leave after voting for the candidates and never get to the resolutions on issues.

Martin replied that in the past, the party platform played a much more central role in caucuses. He agreed that the platform often has become secondary and irrelevant in the caucus process. "But the party exists so people can build power," he said. "People in our party can have amazing influence and can help reverse the growing cynicism. The way to change things is to get involved." Many decisions are still made at the local level. "The party has the opportunity to bring in a new generation of perspectives. It's incumbent on party leaders to create new opportunities for people to get involved."

According to Martin, both parties are focused on legislative and higher-office elections. He believes the Tea Party, in order to build its movement, is focusing on local government offices, such as school board members or county commissioners. He ponders whether the DFL party should also focus on the local level and wonders whether the party would then lose its impact on state policy.

Candidates for office should listen to everyone and filter what they hear through the people in their districts. An interviewer asked whether candidates should pay attention to the media, to advocacy groups, to nonpartisan do-gooders, to the governor's office or to the DFL platform. He asked where candidates should get ideas for their campaigns.

Martin said his advice is to listen to everyone and filter what you hear through the people in your district. "None of us is as smart as all of us," he said. "Maybe some people expect that as party chair I should be a dictator. But I won't beat you over the head if you don't support a certain issue. What constituents are thinking does not always jibe with the party's ideas. Power comes from the people who vote."

Martin said good-government think tanks should also be at the table giving information to candidates and elected officials. Those candidates and officials can then decide what's best for their districts and what's good politically.

Trust in government institutions is at an all-time low. Polls show that Congress has only an 11 percent approval rating, Martin said. And 80 percent of parents don't want their kids to go into public service or politics. "We have to reverse that, so people understand that public service is good," he said.

"People run because they want to make a difference," he noted. In the past, elected officials started with a level of respect for the people across the aisle. Now they look at them as evil.

Republicans are attacking government to raise cynicism. Martin said Republicans are making a very concerted effort to make government look bad. They're telling people that government's broken and that we should shrink government. That increases cynicism. When people become cynical, they say they're not going to participate. "The level of toxicity rises," he said.

He pointed out that there are more Democrats than Republicans in Minnesota and in the country as a whole. "Republicans win because people don't turn out to vote," he said. "The only way they can win is by suppressing voters and raising cynicism." He admitted that some Democrats are also complicit in that.

Twenty to thirty years ago, the parties agreed on a goal, but had different ways of achieving it. Now, Martin said, the parties can't even agree on a goal. "How can we find common ground when we can't agree on our goal or objective?" With that level of toxicity, lower voter participation is not a surprise.

But he pointed out that Minnesota still has higher voter participation than most other states. "Voters here expect discussion on the issues."

The DFL has governed with the idea that we're governing for all of Minnesota. "We're not trying to pit one part of the state against each another," Martin said. An interviewer suggested that the Republicans are the party of Greater Minnesota and the DFL is the party of the metro area and the larger outstate cities. Martin responded that the Democratic Party nationwide has become the party of the urban core. But in Minnesota, he said, there are big pockets of Democratic votes outside of the urban core.

Martin said that polling for the last 10 years has shown that the Democrats are losing white working-class people and union members, the New Deal Democrats who were once the base of the party. "A lot of that is because of cultural issues like abortion and guns," he said, "and a lot is because of people's inability to get ahead in the current economy. That's real and we must be more reflective of that."

Elected officials can't always listen to their constituents, but they shouldn't be dismissive of the people who elected them. An interviewer asked whether elected officials should sometimes vote with their consciences, which may not be what their constituents want. "There are so few opportunities to make a big impact on people's lives," Martin replied. "Sometimes officials just have to say, 'I'm going to vote for this.'" In those situations, they must decide whether to vote for the greater good by voting against their constituents. And the DFL will not punish its elected officials for voting against the party.

He said Alexander Hamilton talked about balancing out the will of the people with the responsibility to future generations. "Elected officials can't always listen to their constituents, but they shouldn't be dismissive of the people who elected them," Martin said. There are too many "finger-in-the-wind" politicians, such as former presidential candidates Tim Pawlenty and Mitt Romney.

Politicians like Senator Paul Wellstone and Governor Jesse Ventura led with conviction and didn't just worry about getting reelected, Martin said. "Now many politicians are just thinking about how they'll get reelected. It's a very narrow self-interest."