



Minnesota State Senator Jeremy Miller

Legislature's Purple Caucus aims to ease partisan gridlock

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

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Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Dave Broden (vice chair), Paul Gilje (executive director), Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams. By phone: State Senator Jeremy Miller.

Summary

The Purple Caucus is a bipartisan collaboration of Minnesota State Senators aimed at ending partisan gridlock at the Legislature, according to State Senator Jeremy Miller (R-Winona). The goal of the Caucus, which was founded in March 2013, is to bring together legislators from both political parties to work on positive solutions for Minnesota, Miller says. He calls the Caucus a "much-needed platform to get things done in today's political environment." Miller and State Senator Roger Reinert (DFL-Duluth) are co-founders and co-chairs of the Purple Caucus. All state senators are invited to join in the Caucus's work.

The Caucus set priorities for the 2015 and 2016 legislative sessions and had several successes during those sessions, Miller notes. He lists those successes as moving forward on child-protection policies, impacting the education funding conversation, passing a bipartisan tax bill (vetoed by Gov. Mark Dayton) and working on the Senate side on a bipartisan bonding bill. Miller believes legislators are noticing those successes and feel the Purple Caucus is starting to build momentum.

Miller asserts that the number one thing the Purple Caucus can do is to make good-government changes in the legislative process. He decries the last-minute nature of voting at the very end of the legislative session on Omnibus bills that neither legislators, the administration nor the general public have had time to review.

To put an end to, or at least minimize, that last-minute voting on bills and to increase transparency, the Purple Caucus put forth a proposal last spring that would require all conference-committee reports

to be finalized at least one week before the end of the session. While the proposal could potentially be adopted by both the House and the Senate as a joint rule, Miller says it's more likely the proposal will need legislative action.

Miller also discusses what he calls the shortsightedness of the Legislature and the important role of lobbyists in the legislative process.

Biography

Minnesota State Senator Jeremy Miller (R-Winona) is in his second term in the Minnesota Senate, representing parts of Fillmore, Houston and Winona Counties. His principal interests as a state senator are supporting and enhancing the economic and cultural life in southeastern Minnesota, including stimulating job growth, improving educational outcomes, and preserving and protecting the unique natural environment of southeastern Minnesota.

He serves on the Senate Committees on Capital Investment, Finance, and Higher Education and Workforce Development (ranking minority member). He is ranking minority member on the Finance Committee's Higher Education and Workforce Development Budget Division and also serves on the Finance Subcommittee on Legacy. He is the co-chair, with State Senator Roger Reinert (R-Duluth), of the bipartisan Purple Caucus.

Miller is the chief financial officer and quality, environmental, health and safety management representative for Wm. Miller Scrap Iron & Metal Co., a family-owned-and-operated Winona scrap and recycling business that dates back to 1910. He serves on the President's Advisory Council at Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical, is vice president of the Morrie Miller Athletic Foundation, serves as a director of the Winona State University Warrior Club and Saint Mary's University Athletic Advisory Board, and is a member of the Winona Area Chamber of Commerce.

Miller is a 2001 graduate of Winona Senior High School and earned an associate degree in accounting from Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical, located in Red Wing and Winona.

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 State Senator Jeremy Miller to get his assessment of the kinds of proposals for solving public-policy problems the Legislature needs and the role a bipartisan legislative group like the Purple Caucus can play in implementing those proposals.

About the Purple Caucus. In March 2013, State Sen. Jeremy Miller (R-Winona) and State Sen. Roger Reinert (DFL-Duluth) launched the bipartisan Purple Caucus, a collaboration of Minnesota legislators. (Red and blue make purple; thus, the name Purple Caucus.) At that time, Miller described the goal of the Purple Caucus as bringing together members of the Legislature from both political parties to work on positive solutions for Minnesota. Legislators and constituents are tired of partisan gridlock, he said.

Miller said then that the Caucus would come together in a bipartisan fashion to prove that the parties can work together, develop some relationships and do some good things for the state of Minnesota. The Caucus wants to focus on issues that bring legislators and Minnesotans together, Miller said, rather than those that divide people. All state senators would be invited to join in the Caucus's work.

Discussion

There has been extreme partisanship in the Legislature. "It seems to be more about party politics and the next election cycle," said State Senator Jeremy Miller (R-Winona). "It should be more about what's best for the people and for the state of Minnesota. When you do what's right for the state, you'll have a good result."

Miller and State Senator Roger Reinert (DFL-Duluth) launched the Purple Caucus in 2013. Miller said he and Reinert, who serve as co-chairs of the Caucus, wanted to create a platform where people could talk to each other from different sides of the aisle. There's an open invitation on the Senate floor for any member to participate, Miller said. "Our schedule in the Senate is so incredibly busy," he said, "that it's hard to develop personal relationships. We must do that to earn trust."

Seating legislators by party affiliation makes it difficult for them to develop relationships with members of the other party. An interviewer commented that now legislators are seated by party affiliation, but at one time it wasn't that way. In the past, two people of different parties could be seated together and they could develop a personal relationship. The interviewer said he'd like to see some consideration of doing that again, perhaps by seniority.

Miller responded that legislators are seated by caucus, with the majority party in the back portion of the Senate chamber and the minority party in the front portion. It's more relaxed during committee meetings, he said, where legislators of different parties often are comingled. In the past, legislative colleagues would go out for dinner and get business done with more candid conversation, but laws have been passed preventing lobbyists from doing that with legislators anymore. One bad effect of that legislation, he said, is that legislators can't get out of the Capitol, which becomes an "isolated bubble."

In the beginning, there was pushback against the Purple Caucus from hard-core conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. "I'm a conservative person and a Republican," Miller remarked, "but at the end of the day, I'm a public servant and a statesman and I try to do what's best for the state of Minnesota." He said now the Purple Caucus gets positive feedback from legislators. "People know if they want to get things done, they have to work together. They're frustrated with finger pointing and partisanship. I'm doing it because I want to make a difference."

The number of legislators participating in the Purple Caucus is growing. Miller said there were six legislators at the first Caucus meeting in 2013, which grew to 10 or 12 the following two years and averaged 18 to 20 in 2016. The participants are evenly split between Democrats and Republicans. The Caucus has no staff.

The Purple Caucus has moved into setting priorities for each legislative session. Miller said that in 2013 and 2014, the Caucus's focus was on members getting to know each other individually and developing relationships. Then in 2015, the Caucus developed three priorities for the legislative session: (1) education funding; (2) working on child-protection policies; and (3) developing a long-term, comprehensive transportation plan. "We were successful on two of the three," he said. "We impacted the education funding conversation and moved forward on child-protection policies."

The Caucus's three priorities for the 2016 session were (1) transportation; (2) a bipartisan bonding bill and (3) a tax bill. The Legislature passed a tax bill with strong bipartisan support, but unfortunately, it was vetoed by the Governor, Miller noted. The Caucus worked on the Senate side to put forth a bipartisan bonding bill. Ultimately, that effort failed because of an impasse over light-rail transit (LRT) funding.

He believes legislators are seeing some success with the Purple Caucus and feel it's starting to build momentum. "It's tough with the party caucus system," Miller said. "It's difficult to vote against your own caucus. That's a challenge for the Purple Caucus. If legislators put the people ahead of politics, the Purple Caucus will build momentum."

Legislative staff plays an important role. An interviewer asked whether the large role of legislative staff "allows legislators to be legislators." Miller responded that the legislative staff's role is an important one. "They have a lot of institutional knowledge," he said. "There's less turnover in higher level staff positions than among legislators." But the legislative leadership gives direction to staff, he noted.

There is no Purple Caucus in the House. Miller believes that because House members are up for election every two years, it's more difficult for them to take ownership of something like the Purple Caucus.

If you vote against your district, chances are you won't be re-elected. "You must have a good feel for your district and your constituency," Miller asserted. "I always vote with the district, even if that is sometimes against my personal views." If legislators vote their districts, there's a very good chance they'll be back at the Legislature again, he said.

It's very difficult to change the legislative process. An interviewer commented that there is a lot of frustration with the legislative process both inside and outside the Legislature. "Omnibus bills seem to be out of control," the interviewer said. "Committee chairs have the power to cut off debate and preclude issues from getting a hearing." And the Legislature seems unable to resolve the transportation issue. He asked whether within the Purple Caucus there is the potential for making changes in the legislative process that might decrease partisanship and improve people's confidence in the Legislature.

Miller said it's very difficult to change the legislative process. But he agreed with the interviewer about Omnibus bills. "Omnibus bills include everything but the kitchen sink," he said. "It's totally ridiculous. In order to get something passed, legislators put it in the Omnibus bill. I don't like it at all."

Members of the Purple Caucus have been talking about how to make government more responsive, efficient and transparent, Miller noted. Late in the 2016 legislative session, the Caucus developed a proposal to bring more transparency to the Legislature and to try to put an end to, or at least minimize, the passing of bills in the last few minutes of the legislative session.

Miller said the Purple Caucus proposed that conference-committee reports must be finalized one week before the end of the session. That way, legislators, the administration and the general public would have the opportunity to read and understand what's in the bills being voted on, he said. "Otherwise, we sometimes have only 10 minutes to review and pass bills before the deadline," he said.

"That is one of the good-government policies the Caucus is working on," Miller said. "We think it would make a significant difference in the approach to the deadline of the overall session. And citizen involvement is critically important, especially in the legislative process. We'll try to do our best to make it a more transparent process."

The same interviewer asked how to build support outside the Legislature to assure that the Purple Caucus proposal gets a hearing. Miller replied that the Caucus's proposal could potentially be a joint rule adopted by both the House and the Senate. "But," he noted, "it's unlikely that would happen, so we'd have to take a legislative approach. We need to make sure people know about it. More support for the Purple Caucus from outside groups can build a coalition for good-government policies."

The Legislature is very shortsighted. An interviewer commented that some people believe that because of partisanship, the Legislature hasn't looked at the long term. Miller responded that the Legislature is very shortsighted because it works within a two-year budget cycle and can't do anything to bind a future Legislature.

With a part-time Legislature, legislative sessions are really dense. And in a budget year, most of the time is spent putting together the two-year budget, making it difficult to spend time on other issues.

The number one thing the Purple Caucus can do is to make some good-government changes. Miller said his focus is to bring bipartisanship to the legislative process. "The Purple Caucus is a much-needed platform to get things done in today's political environment," he said. "Proposals come from the left and the right. But to get something passed, it needs to have bipartisan support."

He said the Caucus has not sought out proposals from groups outside the Legislature. But it would be helpful, he said, for the Purple Caucus to have the support of outside groups when good-government proposals are brought forward.

It's more important to have strong bipartisan support for good-government ideas than to have the ideas come from special-interest groups, Miller said. "Leadership is in a tough position," he stated. "They can't give too much to the other party. That's where the Purple Caucus can be helpful. There's nothing wrong with going in front of the podium and saying this is a bipartisan proposal."

Lobbyists play an important role at the Legislature. An interviewer asked what outside disinterested group is most influential today at the Legislature. Miller named Education Minnesota as an influential outside group with a very powerful presence on education issues.

"Lobbyists do play an important role here at the Capitol," he said. "They're hired by different groups to bring together the shared views of hundreds or thousands of people by presenting their ideas in a specific proposal. Lobbyists play a critical role in connecting legislators to ideas generated by large groups who have in-depth knowledge of the issues and widespread support across the state."

Legislators do develop relationships with lobbyists over time, Miller said. "Many legislators rely on lobbyists to bring them detailed information and perspectives on important issues. Good lobbyists know the views of the group they represent inside and out and can help legislators understand a viewpoint they might not have considered otherwise. We learn who to trust and who not to trust. Really good lobbyists will tell you both sides of an issue. There's a lot of money spent on lobbyists, but the amount of money spent does not necessarily correlate to their effectiveness. It really comes down to the merit of the ideas they are bringing to the table and their skill at presenting them."