



# Robert J. Brown, former Minnesota State Senator, and Professor Emeritus, University of St. Thomas

Legislative candidates and legislators must learn more about public policy

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Legislative Process Interview

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## Present

Steve Anderson, Bob Brown, Janis Clay (executive director), Pat Davies, Randy Johnson, Dan Loritz, Paul Ostrow (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams.

## Summary

Bob Brown, professor emeritus of educational leadership, policy and administration at the University of St. Thomas and former Republican Minnesota state senator, believes people running for the Legislature should understand policy issues before they get elected. He mentors young people interested in public service and tells them that anybody who runs for public office should first have at least three policy areas that they understand well. He worries that neither candidates nor the political parties are looking at policy issues, because their primary concern is just winning elections. He points out that the Republican Party used to have task forces that would meet for one or two years on specific policy issues.

Brown believes legislators must have a sense when they're elected of what are the important things to do once they get to the Legislature. When he was first elected to the State Senate in 1966, he and other legislators were told in a Republican caucus meeting that the only vote the caucus cared about was the vote for leadership organization. Otherwise, they were free to vote as they chose. Now, he says, both parties try to force their own legislators in line. He tells young people interested in running for public office that they should learn from various people and then use their own judgment.

Although Brown supported the switch to party designation when he was in the Legislature, he believes it is now a disaster. At the time he supported the change, he says, both parties were broad-based and overlapped each other, unlike today. He says we must elect people to the Legislature and Congress who can work with each other and who realize they have to make compromises.

Brown also discusses education and is a big believer in "informed choice." He'd like to see community-based people located at neighborhood centers who are trained to help people choose a school for their children.

## Biography

Bob Brown is professor emeritus of educational leadership, policy and administration at the University of St. Thomas, where he taught in the College of Education, Leadership & Counseling for 41 years. He served in the Minnesota Legislature as a Republican senator from Stillwater from 1967 to 1977.

From 1981 to 1986, he served as special assistant to U.S. Secretaries of Education T.H. Bell and William Bennett during the Reagan Administration. He served on the Minnesota State Board of Education and has been on many other boards relating to education, public policy and serving diverse populations.

While at the U.S. Department of Education, Brown established the Department's Partners in Education Program; was on the White House Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives; and worked with members of Congress in creating and operating education policy task forces in the House and the Senate. While he was in Washington, he served as staff director of the Public Policy Committee of the White House Conference on Aging

While in the Minnesota Senate, Brown established a student intern program at the Legislature. He served on a number of legislative committees, including the Senate Education Committee. He was State Chair of the Minnesota Republican Party from 1973 to 1975 and later served as National Committeeman for the party.

He founded and for 25 years operated the St. Thomas National Youth Sports Program, a free academic and sports summer camp that serves hundreds of low-income youth each summer.

With co-author Jeff Cornwall, Brown published *The Entrepreneurial Educator* in 2000, a book to help school leaders function in a competitive marketplace. He serves as editor of the book series *Innovations in Education* for Rowman Education Press. He was executive producer of a series of education-policy television programs that was broadcast on The Learning Channel (now TLC) and PBS stations.

Brown earned a B.S. degree in math and speech from Winona State College and master's and Ph.D. degrees in educational administration, with a minor in educational psychology, from the University of Minnesota.

## Background

Continuing its focus on Minnesota's competitiveness, since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued a report based on that review,  [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). Continuing its focus on Minnesota's public-policy process, in May 2017, the Civic Caucus began a review of Minnesota's legislative process. The Caucus interviewed Bob Brown, former Republican state senator and emeritus professor at the University of St. Thomas, for his perspectives on what works and what needs improvement in the legislative process.

## Discussion

**Bob Brown is an advocate of the Electoral College.** The Electoral College will work out well if we change to the system used by Nebraska and Maine, Brown said. Those two states allocate electoral votes by Congressional district.

"Then everybody has a chance to win," he said. "Right now, candidates only have to campaign in about seven to 10 states, where they see these big blocs of votes. But if each Congressional district has its own electoral vote and there are two at large from each state, you'd eliminate any concern about real corruption going across the country. But you'd actually allow people in states that are small to see presidential candidates once in awhile."

Brown added that the states have complete control over how they allocate electoral votes. "That's something to think about in terms of our state," he said.

**Reapportionment and redistricting are very difficult to do fairly.** But with advances in technology, Brown said, all you have to do is to set the criteria for what you want to do. An example, he said, is that you wouldn't break up a village smaller than a certain population. "You put these things into a process and then turn it over to some techies," he said. "Then you draw lots over which corner of the state you start in on the reapportionment map, with no interference from politics."

**Money in politics is destroying the political parties.** "It's very difficult for someone who doesn't have a lot of visibility or a lot of money to get elected, no matter how good they are," Brown said. That's true, he said, even down to the legislative level. "You see all the money being spent by single-purpose groups," he said. "The people who want to get elected have to put together a group of special interests rather than trying to serve the broad interest. I find that really disheartening."

**We need to train and recruit good people to be public servants.** Brown said during the time the Republicans were in the minority when he was in the Legislature, he formed a nonprofit organization called Within the System to recruit people to be involved in the political process. "We got a lot of great young people as interns who worked on this," he said.

He also had an internship program at the Legislature, both when he was a state senator and when he was chairman of the Minnesota Republican Party, to try to train young people on the legislative process and on the organization and operation of state government. "I'm proud to say many of my interns went onto much more significant positions than I was ever in politically," Brown said. Some became Congressmen, some legislators and some subcabinet members in Washington.

Within the System no longer exists, but currently, Brown has five or six young people he's working with personally. "I'm concerned that people who run for public office, while they might know something about how to win an election, have no idea about how to make public policy," he said. "They don't know about policy issues, because their whole goal is getting elected."

Now, both parties try to force people in their own caucuses in line. Brown said when he was first elected to the Minnesota Senate in 1966, he and other legislators were told in a Republican caucus meeting that the only vote the caucus cared about was the vote for leadership organization. "Otherwise, you're free to do your own thing," Brown said the legislators were told. It's different now, he said, as the parties both try to keep their legislators in line. He tells young people interested in running for public office that they should learn from different people and, after that, they should use their own judgment.

**We have to elect people to both the Legislature and Congress who can work with each other and who realize they have to make some compromises.** Brown pointed out that members of Congress aren't segregated by party. Both Democrats and Republicans have offices on the same floor. "They actually talk to each other in the halls and visit each other in their offices," he said. "It's not much, but it's a step toward getting some dialogue going." In the Minnesota legislative office buildings, in contrast, members of the same party are all on one floor, while members of the other party are on another floor.

**Flexible legislative sessions are a disaster.** "They've turned out to be regular sessions all the time," Brown said. "So you get people in there who only want to be full-time politicians."

**People don't interact with each other today.** Brown said people are only interacting on their computers or their phones. "They don't interact with human beings," he said. It's important to rebuild community organizations, but the question is how.

**It's obvious from the 2016 presidential election that we do a really lousy job of teaching civics in the U.S.** In that election, "it was who were you voting against," Brown said. "It's pretty disheartening. A lot of schools don't teach civics anymore. All the testing in math, science and English has put almost everything else out of the system. There has to be more balance in education."

He said he has spent a lot of time in recent years with Ted Kolderie, whom he described as "the intellectual behind the charter school movement and a lot of other innovations in education." "We need more people like that," Brown said. "I find very few people doing truly innovative things in education."

**Party endorsement for school board candidates is a mistake.** Brown believes that party endorsement encourages some people to run for school board only to launch or enhance their political careers. Before, there were people of stature on the St. Paul School Board who were there for community service, he said.

Brown spoke of his time on the State Board of Education and said he didn't know the political parties of six of the nine members of the board. "They were people who were interested in education," he

said. "It was never a partisan thing." The Legislature abolished the board because of pressure both from conservatives and liberals. He said Minnesota and Wisconsin are the only states without state boards of education.

Minnesota's Board of Education was started early in the 20th century, Brown said. "It was a way to get people who cared about education," he said. "When people started ganging up on it, the State Board didn't have a constituency, because people didn't know about it."

The State Board of Education appointed the State Commissioner of Education, he said, in the same way a school board appoints a superintendent. Now, the governor appoints the commissioner and, as in many states, "it's a very political job."

**Brown has a strong disagreement with University of Minnesota law professor Myron Orfield and his brother Gary Orfield, professor of education, law, political science and urban planning at UCLA.** "They think if you put a group of people who look different from each other in the same classroom, you're going to solve the problems of diversity," Brown said. "But that doesn't help. Some of our best charter schools are not very diverse, such as Spanish-culture or Hmong-culture schools. That gives those students a chance to develop in ways they might not otherwise."

Brown is a big believer in "informed choice." "Affluent people have always had choice, because they could go to expensive private schools," he said. "But poor people don't always have those choices. That's where I think charter schools are a big help."

"One of the problems, though, is that you have to have enough knowledge to make an informed choice," Brown said. School counselors could help, he said, but Minnesota has the second or third worst ratio of counselors to students in the nation.

He developed a program at one time called the Counselor Assistant Program, focused on the Minneapolis and St. Paul School Districts. The program trained counselor assistants from the community. "Counselors are all old white folks," Brown said, "but the constituency is getting more and more diverse." He said St. Paul refused the program and there were only a few schools in Minneapolis that would accept the assistants. "There was resistance to any kind of a change," he said.

"I wanted to see that we would have community-based people to counsel the people in their neighborhoods," Brown said. He wanted there to be people of the community at neighborhood centers who would be trained to help people choose a school for their children.

**We must help people running for the Legislature to understand policy issues before they get there.** "Otherwise," Brown said, "they get there and they're straight-jacketed in various areas by other people. I'm disheartened by what's going on in the Legislature and in Congress."

An interviewer asked how we get better people in the Legislature. Brown responded that he's working right now with some young people to help them understand public policy. "Anybody who runs for public office should have at least three major policy areas that they understand pretty well," he said.

An interviewer commented that neither of the established political parties has leadership-development programs that attempt to bring young people into their system. "As long as we have a party system,

we must get people to understand there must be cross-party communication in order to get anything done," he said. "The parties ought to jointly sponsor political development for people who may have some interest in leadership opportunities."

Brown responded that the parties aren't looking at policy issues. "The primary concern is just getting elected," he said. He pointed out that the Republican Party used to have task forces that would meet for a year or two on specific policy issues.

**What are we going to do about developing community leaders?** Brown said when he was teaching at the University of St. Thomas (UST), he and the head of the Minneapolis campus developed the idea for a series of noncredit seminars for people at a certain level in the education, business, government and religious communities. The series would include speakers, reading of various books and dialogue on different issues. All participants would have to mentor someone else below themselves in their organization. The seminar series idea was turned into a for-credit class in the business department at UST, which Brown said "killed the whole idea."

Brown said many of the home corporations in the Twin Cities that had a sense of commitment and giving back to the community have left or become part of larger businesses. "We have to redevelop that sense of community commitment in our leaders and our businesses," he said.

When an interviewer asked about the role of the Citizens League in the community, Brown responded that when he was in the Legislature, "most of the significant things we did there came from the old Citizens League." When asked if the old Citizens League could be simulated today, "I don't know how to get something that has that breadth of coverage with such a variety of people," he said.

**We truly undervalue public service.** An interviewer made that comment and said that we've denigrated public servants. "People used to see it as noble undertaking," he said. "We have to work on that so we can attract people to public service who bring with them some values."

**The fundamental way new legislators are informed is by the state agencies and by interest groups.** An interviewer made that comment and Brown responded that legislators rarely come up with new ideas. "But you can't buy what the agencies and special interest groups are selling," Brown said. "As the Legislature has staffed up, individual legislators have become less important. They've become captives of the staff."

"Legislators must have a sense when they get elected of what are the important things to do," he said.

**Minnesota's higher education institutions are not doing much to improve the state's public-policy process.** "People are deceived by thinking we have all these higher education institutions doing something, but we don't," Brown said. He said the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs was at its best when Dean John Brandl was running it from 1997 to 2002. Brandl was also director of the U of M's School of Public Affairs (predecessor to the Humphrey Institute, which is now called the Humphrey School of Public Affairs) during the 1970s.

Brown noted that fellows at the Humphrey School have to raise money for their own salaries. "There's no commitment from the institution," he said.

**What would a partnership involving the Civic Caucus to create a program of mentoring and informing future leaders look like?** An interviewer asked that question and Brown responded that you can't form partnerships all at once and that partners must have a common interest. "It's tough; you have to listen to people," he said.

**Party designation in legislative elections and at the Legislature is now a disaster.** Brown made that comment in response to a question on having a nonpartisan Legislature. He said he supported the switch to party designation when he was in the Legislature, but, unlike today, both parties at that time were broad-based and overlapped. He applauded the work of organizations like No Labels, which are trying to lessen the partisan divide. (See [Civic Caucus April 2017 interview with No Labels Minnesota board member John Hayden](#).)