

Summary of Meeting with Blois Olson

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437
Thursday, September 6, 2007

Guest speaker: Blois Olson, DFL media consultant and commentator

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, and Jim Olson (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting --The Civic Caucus is narrowing its list of election-related topics that the Civic Caucus will address in a possible report to the 2008 Legislature. The Civic Caucus is inviting representatives of political parties to comment on high-priority topics.

B. Welcome and introduction --Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced Blois Olson, founder and president of New School Communications, a public relations and public affairs firms. He is former co-publisher of PoliticsinMinnesota.com.

C. Comment and discussion --During Blois Olson's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Precinct caucuses not serving "normal" people --Blois Olson recalled his first precinct caucus, as a 14-year-old ninth grader. He remembered speaking out against a resolution on mainstreaming handicapped students because of the possibility of draining resources for other students. He felt very good about having a voice in politics. Later, in 1992 he worked on the Clinton campaign for president and later worked for Congressman Bruce Vento.

Blois has that precinct caucuses are failing to attract "normal" people. Fewer than four percent of the electorate participate in precinct caucuses, he said. The "normal" people come from all across the political spectrum, although many are from the broad "moderate" middle. They are civically engaged and vote, but they aren't inclined to make time available to attend precinct caucuses followed by a host of political conventions. He cited 30-to-40-year old suburban women with children living in the outer suburbs. Precinct caucuses don't fit that group, he said. In response to a question Blois agreed that the present system favors candidates with more extreme positions.

Blois senses a greater sense of potential political involvement in the Generation Y group (approximately ages 18-30), rather than the older Generation X group.

2. An alternative to precinct caucuses --Precinct caucuses still could meet for the purposes of issue identification and party platforms, and selection of officers. Blois favors moving the date of the primary election from September to June. The parties could provide for multiple endorsements (say, all candidates receiving a certain percentage of support at a convention). Parties could also decide to forego endorsement or wait until after the primary, he said. Some 37 states don't have precinct caucuses, he said.

3. Increasing voter turnout --Blois suggested making election day a state holiday, holding the election on weekends, providing multiple days for voting, or allowing mail-in voting or secure on-line voting as ways to encourage more people to vote.

4. Pressure not to file against endorsed candidates --Blois agreed with a comment that in the present endorsement process--with its limited participation--those candidates who don't get endorsed by their parties are strongly discouraged from filing for office. Very few non-endorsed candidates ever win in primaries, Blois said.

5. Opposition to Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) --Blois doesn't favor IRV. He thinks the person who receives the most first place votes should be declared the winner. He doesn't like the idea that someone who wasn't in first place might eventually be declared the winner by picking up more second-and-third choice votes. A member commented that some people believe that the existence of IRV would prompt candidates to moderate their views to appeal to a broader range of voters.

IRV also is opposed, Blois said, because it would require more campaign spending. It would stimulate political parties to divert more campaign money to benefit incumbent legislators in so-called "safe" districts, where voters are predominantly of one party or the other. Safe-seat incumbents would be more vulnerable to getting defeated in a primary if IRV were in use, he said. Thus more campaign spending would be needed to support safe-seat incumbents.

Late in the meeting the group returned briefly to a discussion of IRV in connection with a presidential preference primary. Blois said he could imagine how IRV might be utilized in a presidential preference primary where you have such a large number of candidates.

6. Pressure to conform to legislative leadership grows during the legislative session --Blois cited the case of a conservative Republican legislator who, early in the session, was prepared to vote for a gas tax increase and support an override of the Governor's veto, if necessary. However, the longer the session lasted the more that pressure developed to conform to what the leadership wanted, to the extent that the legislator late in the session no longer could support a gas tax increase or overriding a veto.

7. High priority on protecting incumbents --Legislative caucuses usually attach first priority to protecting their own incumbents, irrespective of political party endorsement, Blois said. He cited cases where the legislative caucuses successfully provided financial backing to non-endorsed incumbents.

8. Influence of legislative caucuses --Blois agreed that legislative caucuses play a major role in financing campaigns in contested districts. He believes that such a situation will continue so long as we have part-time legislators. He favors reducing the size of the Legislature and moving to full-time legislators who, he contends, would be stronger in their own right, thereby diminishing the need to rely on the legislative caucuses.

9. Support for change in redistricting --Blois favors assigning the responsibility for redistricting to a commission, via constitutional amendment. He likes the work being done by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the

Humphrey Institute and by the Citizens League. He'd be more optimistic about prospects for change if a grass-roots effort were present, with heavy involvement from "normal" people. Despite his antipathy to IRV, he's impressed with its grass-roots support.

10. Support for non-partisan judiciary --Blois is pleased that elections for judges in Minnesota have not yet become politicized, even though the US Supreme Court has lifted restrictions on how campaigns for judges may be conducted. That's a good indication that Minnesotans still strongly support keeping partisan politics out of the elections process. While changing the system for selecting judges is not at the top of his agenda, Blois agrees that it is good to fix the system now by providing for merit-based appointment.

11. Support for presidential preference primary --Blois favors a presidential preference primary in Minnesota. He believes such a move would engage a broader segment of the population early on. He agreed that new voters are much more likely to begin their participation in the political process via a national election than a state or local election.

A proposed set of regional primaries doesn't feel right to Blois. Such an approach artificially divides the nation, he said, which is contrary to the spirit of the USA. While regional primaries might make it easier for candidates to campaign, he doesn't think changes should be made just for the convenience of candidates.

Touching briefly on the presidential campaign, Blois said he senses some move toward more "authentic" candidates, that is, candidates whose platforms are based on personal,, strongly held, principles.

12. Lack of a legislative willingness to take "tough" votes --Blois was asked about his feelings about the Legislature calling for constitutional amendments on controversial revenue-raising and revenue-spending issues, such as a proposed amendment on dedicating sales tax revenues to the outdoors, water quality, and the arts.

The last "tough vote" the Legislature took was in 1993 in supporting non-discrimination of homosexuals, he said. Today, because of their support for unity within a legislative caucus and because of political aspirations for higher office, legislators aren't taking tough votes. Thus, he said, the tendency of the Legislature to pass matters on to the voters via constitutional amendments is a result of a desire to avoid tough votes.

13. Opposition to term limits --Blois said he opposes term limits.

14. Different views on full-time versus part-time Legislature--In response to a question Blois re-iterated his view that increasing legislative pay, cutting the size of the Legislature, and having annual sessions would help attract better legislators. He disagreed with the idea of moving back to biennial sessions. Under such an approach fewer quality candidates would run.

15. Thanks --On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Blois for meeting with us today.