



Lori Sturdevant, Minneapolis Star Tribune Editorial Writer

Big money drives Minnesota public policy today

A Civic Caucus [Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process](#) Interview
December 09, 2016

Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Dave Broden, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (executive director), Rob Jacobs, Randy Johnson, Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Lori Sturdevant, Clarence Shallbetter, Tom Triplett, T. Williams, Fred Zimmerman.

Summary

What's driving Minnesota public policy today is who is paying for our politics and what those people insist on, asserts *Star Tribune* editorial writer and columnist Lori Sturdevant. She says the quality of ideas is not what's driving public policy now. She denounces the million-dollar legislative races that have recently appeared in Minnesota and says candidates have lost control of their own campaigns. She calls the nationalization of Minnesota's politics "an amazing change" in just the last dozen years. She contends that elected officials feel bound to their political patrons and that legislators are paying more attention to money than to their constituents.

Sturdevant agrees with the Civic Caucus that the community sector must come up with better, more thoughtful, innovative public-policy ideas that look to the future. But she is concerned about the recommendation in the recent Civic Caucus report that foundations should play a large role in helping improve the quality of these proposals. She points out that foundations are not really accountable to the public, although she praises Minnesota's foundation community. But she says other communities have quite different foundations that have been created by well-to-do people to advance their particular interests and agendas. She asks what would happen if Minnesota's foundation community were to change significantly over the next 25 years.

Sturdevant addresses the caliber of candidates for public office in Minnesota, the need for nonpartisan public-policy guidance in the area of transportation, the need for political and legislative reform, the benefits of cooperation among existing nonprofit public-policy organizations and the importance of convening people face-to-face to talk about issues. She's optimistic that Minnesota can still make public policy work.

Biography

Lori Sturdevant is an editorial writer and columnist at the *Star Tribune*. She writes about topics she has covered for more than 35 years: state government and politics. She joined the *Minneapolis Tribune* as a summer replacement reporter in 1975, returned as a reporter in 1976, and was lead Capitol reporter and a newsroom assignment editor before joining the editorial staff in 1992.

A native of South Dakota, Sturdevant is a graduate of Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and is a member of that institution's Board of Trustees. She has been the author, ghostwriter or editor of 10 books, including *A Man's Reach: The Autobiography of Elmer L. Andersen*, *Her Honor: Rosalie Wahl and the Minnesota Women's Movement*, and *The Pillsburys of Minnesota*. Her latest book is *Creating a Real School: the Lake Country School Story* by Larry and Pat Schaefer, released in 2016.

She is a three-time winner of the Minnesota Book Award and recipient of the David Graven Award at the 2010 Frank Premack Public Affairs Journalism Awards Program.

Background

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 its report based on that review, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). The Civic Caucus interviewed Lori Sturdevant of the *Star Tribune* to get (1) her reaction to its report; (2) her perspective on whether the Legislature and other policy bodies are getting the kinds of quality proposals they need for resolving community problems; and (3) her suggestions for people the Caucus might interview in the coming months to follow up on its report.

Discussion

It's encouraging that the Civic Caucus is concerned with advancing the creative, innovative solutions we all associate with Minnesota public policy. Sturdevant followed up on that remark by saying she has great respect for the Civic Caucus and its latest effort to improve the state's public-policy process.

What's driving public policy today is who pays for our politics. Sturdevant said having an idea advanced by an organization like the Citizens League or the Civic Caucus and then accepted affirmatively by the Legislature "is not a slam dunk anymore. It never was, but it's gotten much more difficult. The quality of ideas is not what is driving public policy now. What's driving public policy is who pays for our politics and what those people insist on."

Sturdevant asked the interview group to what extent the Civic Caucus's proposal—that is, to ask the Minnesota foundation community to take the lead in attempting to improve the quality of public-policy proposals offered by organizations and individuals—overcomes the problem that the political process won't embrace ideas opposed by the financial patrons of our politicians.

The foundation community is not, in any usual sense, accountable to the public. Through the tax system, Sturdevant said, foundations have some accountability to the public. "But they're not accountable in the way we usually think of things being accountable," she asserted. "It's an advantage in some ways, because it also means they're independent, but a lot of foundations are very susceptible to doing the bidding of their donors."

She said that's made clear in the book [Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right](#) by Jane Mayer. Some foundations have been created by well-to-do people with agendas. "Foundations have been used to advance those kinds of agendas," Sturdevant said. "If you are funded by foundations, how do you build a reputation for your work as something bigger than just the foundation community's agenda?" she asked. "How do you avoid being controlled by these foundations that have a particular self-interest and agenda?"

She praised Minnesota's foundation community, but she said other communities have foundations that are quite different. An example would be foundations that work to maintain the status quo in a number of ways.

How do you set an independent, middle ground agenda? With results of the recent election, Sturdevant argued, elitism is out of favor politically. "All of us who are considered elites are out of vogue right now," she said. "How do you involve the old Citizens League types? How do you involve more than Citizens League types in this work, so as to enhance your credibility? I think that becomes important to the work you will accomplish. How do you set an agenda that is seen as springing from average citizens, rather than from partisans or special interests or just Citizens League types at a time when there is such intense polarization of the electorate? How do you set an agenda that is seen as truly independent and occupies the middle ground?"

Should there be a public policy shop within state government? "To what extent did you consider a role for a public policy shop within state government, such as reviving the State Planning Agency or expanding the good shop at House Research?" Sturdevant asked. "There are advantages and disadvantages to being within government. But the accountability problem that your proposal has would be alleviated if somehow the agendas were set in a system that is accountable directly to the public."

An interviewer commented that the Civic Caucus is not going to be the organization that does the work. "We're just trying to find a way that it might be done," he said.

What about political process reform? "Will you work on political process reform?" Sturdevant asked the group. "We now have million-dollar legislative races. The scale of this has just gone crazy." She said following Watergate, Minnesota passed a public campaign finance system that held pretty well. For a long time, most legislators were able to control their own campaigns and were adhering to spending limits.

"But in this new independent-expenditure world, candidates have lost control of their own campaigns," she remarked. "What their own campaigns can control is a miniscule portion of what's being spent in their districts. The nationalization of our Minnesota politics is an amazing change in just the last dozen years."

There has been a reduction in emphasis on social sciences in schools, including civics education. Sturdevant made that remark in response to an interviewer's comment that higher education is not preparing kids to be citizens. Sturdevant noted that Rep. Dean Urdahl (R-Grove City) is trying to improve K-12 civics education by requiring high school students to pass the U.S. citizenship test in order to graduate.

What are the institutions that can be helpful in how people participate in learning about issues today? An interviewer asked that question after commenting that today people pick and choose how they get their information based on what they already believe. He went on to say that meetings like that of the Citizens League in the past, where people served on study committees that lasted six months or more, aren't possible today. People are willing to sit at their computers or use their phones, but many are unlikely to come to meetings. "We haven't adapted our process to match the communication methods of today," he said.

Legislators are paying more attention to money than to their citizens.

Sturdevant remarked that the Civic Caucus wants to put together a product that has impact and that is seen as valid and viable. "The audience you're speaking to is primarily the Legislature and other public bodies," she said. "Those people feel bound to their political patrons. Legislators are paying more attention to money than to their citizens."

For example, she asked, why was Sen. David Hann (R-Eden Prairie) so hostile to light rail even though polls in his district showed substantial citizen support for it? Sturdevant believes that ultimately cost him his seat in the recent election. "The political patrons of the state Republican caucus are anti-transit," she said. "We have to connect the dots back to the source of that money."

An interviewer commented that legislators appear to act based on the information they're given. "And the Koch brothers are giving them lots of information," he said. "They're hiring colleges to do studies that legislators can use. The Koch brothers are doing a great job of getting information to legislators to get the decisions they want."

"There is an opportunity still for individuals to make a difference apart from spending billions of dollars," Sturdevant responded. "But billions of dollars back the messages that come from the entrenched groups. There's more money being spent on the right and it tends to be dark money. The money being spent on the left is more visible."

She said all this money takes certain things off the agenda or makes it difficult for them to stay on the agenda in a meaningful way. The issue of big money has a hard time staying on any agenda, because there are big-money forces arrayed against it.

Did the additional money affect the presidential election? An interviewer asked whether all the additional money actually influenced the presidential election. Sturdevant responded that Hillary Clinton's campaign spent more than Donald Trump's. The dark money that was spent, according to Jane Mayer, was \$750 million, all concentrated on eight states and on down-ballot races and turnout. The down-ballot races altered the turnout, Sturdevant said, which made the difference in the presidential election. Only 80,000 votes made the difference between Clinton losing and Trump winning.

Sturdevant said Clinton was talking about things that would have made a difference for the economies in various states: reducing the debt associated with higher education, a higher minimum wage, paid family leave. "Those sorts of things would have made a difference in lots of places," Sturdevant said. "A positive immigration policy would have made a difference for the Minnesota workforce. That whole message seemed to get muted somehow."

Instead, she said, people were convinced that negative trade deals were responsible for loss of their jobs and that immigration is a threat, not a plus.

The community sector must come up with better, more thoughtful ideas that are innovative and look to the future. An interviewer asked for Sturdevant's assessment of the effectiveness of the community sector in taking seriously the need for analysis of issues and the need to be thoughtful in coming up with proposals that are innovative, looking to the future, specific and actionable. He asked how urgent it is for that process to be improved.

Sturdevant replied, "There is a need. No question about it. And there is a need to engage a younger generation that operates primarily on social media."

The print media are not dead yet. An interviewer commented that some print media have an impact on some of the people who think about things. He asked where the print media are having influence, irrespective of the big money. The Cowles family (former publishers of the *Star Tribune*), he said, had an idea about the world and had impact.

Sturdevant interjected that the Cowles family had an idea of Minnesota's place in the world that was ambitious and very impactful.

The interviewer asked how print media people today think of their impact. How are they edging into the new way of people learning about what's going on in an intelligent way?

Sturdevant responded that the *Star Tribune* is not talking as much about print anymore as about being a news service. It's bigger than print alone, she said. Someone in the paper's circulation department told her, "We don't talk about circulation; we talk about readership."

In a given week, Sturdevant said, 1.3 million adults in the metro area read the *Star Tribune* in print or online. "That doesn't mean they're reading the whole newspaper," she said. Many people reading the paper are reading one article referred to them by a friend on Facebook, which is one of the primary entrees to the *Star Tribune*.

She said today the *Star Tribune* has 47,000 digital-only subscribers and the number is growing. That's among the highest of any major metropolitan news organization. In terms of the print edition, the *Star Tribune* has the

fifth largest Sunday newspaper circulation in the country. Only the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* are larger.

"We're not dead yet," Sturdevant said.

The impact of the editorial page is probably less today than it was 25 or 30 years ago. As an example of that, Sturdevant noted that every major newspaper of note endorsed Hillary Clinton, but that didn't seem to matter. "That tells you a lot," she said.

The *Star Tribune* has always had ebbs and flows in its reach outstate. Sturdevant said that seems to be caused by whatever the latest fad is in the publisher's office. She commented that the paper has readers all over the world. "We're not as geographically bound," she asserted. "That said, we have a very strong commitment to being Minnesota-specific. That I don't see eroding. We are Minnesota-specific, not Twin Cities-specific. "

How does the Civic Caucus respond to the dark money era? An interviewer reported that when [the Civic Caucus interviewed former television news anchor Don Shelby in May 2016](#), Shelby said that even when he was a young child, his father made him read the newspaper, telling him it was his patriotic duty.

The interviewer asserted that dark money can only thrive in an era where people are choosing not to be informed and choosing not to listen to other points of view. "Part of what the Civic Caucus is about is to break through this," he said. "Because we're not beholden to people because of money, party or anything else, we can expose the fact that there are innovative solutions that cross party boundaries. But it also has to be a sea change. It has to be a call to a new kind of patriotism. If you believe in democracy, part of your patriotic duty is, as Don Shelby said, to be informed."

"I think that's what we seek to do," the interviewer said. "We're not going to tackle dark money, but we want to expose the innovative solutions."

"I want to encourage you to do exactly that: to shine a spotlight on the issues that are being neglected by the system," Sturdevant responded. "That's a wonderful role. It's really important that you preserve your independence and credibility as you do that." She said that's the reason she's asking about the independence and accountability of the foundation community, if that's to be a financial source for this work.

We're not getting the caliber of candidates for public office that we'd like to see. An interviewer asked how we can change the kind of people who enter public service, particularly those in elected office. "A lot of things depend on what a person brings to the table and how susceptible that person is to being manipulated by so many external forces," he said.

Sturdevant responded that she has worried in recent years about the difficulty in attracting good people into government, whether in elected, appointed or civil- service positions. She asserted that Minnesota voters just did something to counter that trend by passing the Constitutional amendment that requires an independent commission to set legislators' salaries. "That was an important change," she said. "It should lead rather soon to an increase in legislative salaries, which is not the end-all and be-all, but it will help." As it is now, she maintains that we're not getting the caliber of candidates we'd like to see. "Some of these folks are not up to the job."

"Having a job that doesn't require quite so much financial sacrifice will help," Sturdevant argued. "Having a job that isn't so thankless and isn't going to subject you to a constant barrage of all kinds of criticism would certainly help, too. That maybe speaks to your call for a new kind of patriotism."

She asked what that would really look like and said it would require us to stop demonizing government. "There are people with large pockets and large impact who believe that government is pretty much all illegitimate," she commented.

Why do people vote against their own interests? Two interviewers asked Sturdevant that question. She referenced the 2004 book [*What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*](#) by Thomas Frank.

"People will vote for some sort of a sense of patriotism or goodness or morality," she said. "There is that sense of wanting to be on the side of goodness that is motivating some votes. But folks maybe aren't quite discerning where 'good' is."

"And," Sturdevant continued, "we're in an environment where, since Ronald Reagan's campaign in 1976 and his victory in 1980, we've had a pretty strong drumbeat of 'government is the problem, not the solution.'" In Minnesota, we've squeezed government hard, she asserted. She noted that Minnesota Senate Minority Leader Tom Bakk (DFL-Cook) has said that government can't do anything well if it's squeezed too much. "Then government continues to be seen as illegitimate in the eyes of some people," she said.

Involving multiple foundations is beneficial. An interviewer echoed some of Sturdevant's concerns about the Civic Caucus report recommending that Minnesota's foundation community should take on a role in attempting to improve proposals for solving community problems. But he thinks the fact that the report talks about multiple foundations being involved is a strength, because certain donors can have a disproportionate impact on individual foundations. The interviewer noted that when more foundations are involved, it's less likely that particular donors will have influence.

Foundations today are now very sensitive to demographic, racial and income-equality issues, the interviewer continued. Working with foundations might help address the concern of having a greater diversity of people involved in trying to resolve public policy issues.

Which Minnesota institutions have the greatest policy impact? The same interviewer, a former director of Minnesota's State Planning Agency, doesn't believe that dismantled agency will be revived. He said Legislative Auditor Jim Nobles has a huge positive impact on public policy. Maybe some sort of quasi-public entity, perhaps affiliated with a higher education institution, could take on some of the former functions of the State Planning Agency.

The interviewer continued by saying the *Star Tribune* has the foremost public-policy impact in the state of Minnesota. The newspaper's recent multi-issue, high-profile, front-page series on topics like endangered waters and treatment of disabled people working in sheltered employment have a huge impact, he said. "If there's some way we could build a link between what the Civic Caucus report talks about and the visibility and impact the *Star Tribune* has, that's the way to get positive public-policy influence," the interviewer said.

Sturdevant responded that the *Star Tribune* has a long history of working closely with the Citizens League, the Civic Caucus and other organizations. "We're looking for the kind of work you're describing" in the Civic Caucus report.

"Minnesota is so blessed by the quality of its foundation community and business community," she said. "But public mindedness is not guaranteed to us from the foundations. If you turn to the foundations, what if foundations 25 years from now look a lot different than they do today?"

An interviewer asked how it is decided inside the *Star Tribune* which big questions should get high-profile attention. Sturdevant responded that there is a really strong firewall between the editorial department and the

news department. She is one of five writers in the editorial section and those writers don't know how the decisions are made about which issues to tackle in high-profile news series.

She noted that she did an editorial-page series last year on Minnesota's growing rural/urban divide. She was motivated by her belief that "one of the great assets of Minnesota has been its ability to aggregate resources statewide and then distribute them in a way that brings up the quality of education and other public services in lots of places," she said.

The transportation issue needs public-policy attention to help us navigate great technological changes. An interviewer asked what the issues are that the public-policy process recommended in the Civic Caucus report should be used to try to resolve. "Now there's a tendency to bring all the contending parties into a room and come up with a grand compromise that will resolve the issue," the interviewer commented. "Transportation finance seems a perfect issue for that. What issues are ripe for the analytical process and coming up with actionable proposals?"

Sturdevant responded that we've been stuck on the transportation issue since DFL Gov. Rudy Perpich left office in 1991. She said the state has been in a "bad place" since Independent-Republican Gov. Arne Carlson (1991-1999) came out against any increase in the gas tax. Sturdevant said with the latest election, the gas tax is "off the table."

She asserted that great technological changes are coming very quickly in transportation, such as driverless cars and attempts to lower carbon emissions from cars. "The transportation issue is changing quickly," she said. "Some public-policy guidance apart from partisans would be really useful right now to help us navigate through that change."

Today there tends to be a focus on national issues, rather than Minnesota issues. An interviewer made that point and said solving Minnesota's problems was the priority from the time of Republican Gov. Harold Stassen (1939-1943) until about 10 years ago, when the focus shifted to national issues. "We need to talk about both local and national issues," the interviewer said. "But let's fix Minnesota first,"

"Minnesota is our thing here," Sturdevant responded, referring to the newspaper. The change in our politics, she said, is that "national money is flowing into Minnesota politics big time. If you think that was bad in 2016, wait till 2020, when redistricting is upon us."

Should the Civic Caucus and other organizations be looking at political and legislative reform? "To what extent should political reform be on your list?" Sturdevant asked. "To what extent should we say there's a Minnesota way of doing things that had to do with limited campaign spending and elevation of debates and forums and not so much with these hit pieces that come in people's mailboxes?"

She said legislative calendar reform is another issue that could be on the Civic Caucus's list of topics. "It's the pay issue, but it's also how much time does this require?" she said. "At some point, we must use the time more wisely than we do now."

Another interviewer suggested the issue of reformation of the current legislative process. She said 80 bills passed in the last session versus 1,200 in an average session. Sturdevant said she likes what former State Senator and Appeals Court Judge Jack Davies is saying about bringing back single-subject bills to replace the recent reliance on omnibus bills. She thinks it will take a court case to bring back single-issue bills. The single-subject rule for legislative bills is being violated all the time, she said.

Do we need cooperation among existing organizations? An interviewer noted several nonprofit organizations in Minnesota that deal with public-policy issues: the Center of the American Experiment, the

Citizens League, Growth & Justice, the League of Women Voters and the African American Leadership Forum. He asked whether we need an entirely new citizen-based organization in Minnesota or, instead, to improve an existing one.

Sturdevant replied by asking, "Or do we need some sort of cooperation among those organizations? A lot of institutions from the 20th century are now in a new realm with social media being such a driver. They're asking, 'Can we come together? Can we join forces?' The Citizens League is still a good brand in this city and it still has something that this effort needs: instant recognition."

Incoming Civic Caucus Chair Paul Ostrow commented that he and incoming Civic Caucus Executive Director Janis Clay are having that conversation with the Citizens League. They met recently with Citizens League Executive Director Sean Kershaw and talked about meeting quarterly.

Should we try to bypass the legislative process? Ostrow asked whether Minnesota could be the exception to the nationalization of our politics. "Is there a role for the Civic Caucus, the foundation community and the *Star Tribune* to bring people of good faith together and bypass the legislative process?" he asked. "People are afraid that it'll be exposed that there's not as big a divide as people think."

Sturdevant responded that a lot of government is run through the state Legislature in this state, so trying to bypass the Legislature is not a good strategy. "It's better to empower the people in the Legislature to put Minnesota first," she said.

"The power to convene is an important power," Sturdevant continued. "Social media drives so much, but there's still a hunger to get people together for face-to-face conversations." Ten years ago the *Star Tribune* had a program called the Citizens Forum to bring people together to talk about issues. "We should be doing more of that," she said. Some of the organizations we've talked about already do some of that and the Civic Caucus could partner with them.

An interviewer asked if the newspaper could focus on good legislators and publish their ideas. He said he knows a number of CEOs. "I don't know any of them who are actively interested in the dark money. They're not that partisan. They would like to see government work well."

The Civic Caucus should interview Rip Rapson about its new report. Sturdevant recommended that the Civic Caucus interview Rip Rapson, president and CEO for the last 10 years of the Kresge Foundation in Detroit. "I think there is a model there, maybe," she said. (Rapson has strong Minnesota ties, having served as president of the McKnight Foundation for six years, as deputy mayor of Minneapolis, as legislative assistant to U.S. Rep. Don Fraser and as a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Design Center for American Urban Studies.)

Voting patterns are very different inside and outside of the metro-area beltway. Sturdevant asserted that if you draw a ring around the I-694 and I-494 beltway, voting patterns are very different inside and outside of that ring. "We need to find ways to talk to each other," she said. "I want to believe there's more of a middle ground than we see in our voting patterns."

Minnesota can still make public policy work. Sturdevant noted that because Minnesota is a bit remote due to its weather and geography, we've been able to be a little different here. "I think that's been more of a plus than a minus," she said. "We still get along with each other here. We still have CEOs with enlightened views. We can still make this work."