



David Durenberger

Learn from past Minnesota Republican progressive policies; progress-motivated leaders must step forward today

A Minnesota Public Policy Process Interview

October 19, 2018

Former Republican U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger speaks about *When Republicans Were Progressive*, the September 2018 book he co-authored with Lori Sturdevant. The book is a history and analysis of the Minnesota Republican party of the mid-twentieth century. He discusses the dominant role the Republican party played in Minnesota politics for much of the State's history. He says the historical progressive policies of the party, beginning with the election of Governor Harold Stassen in 1938, are very different from the policies of the Republican party of today, which have shifted to the right.

Present

Steve Anderson, Audrey Clay, Janis Clay (executive director), Sheldon Clay, Jack Davies, Pat Davies, Dave Durenberger, Paul Gilje, John Hayden, Paul Ostrow (chair), Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams. By phone: John Cairns (vice chair).

Summary

Dave Durenberger, former Republican U.S. Senator from Minnesota, discusses *When Republicans Were Progressive*, the book he recently coauthored with then-*Star Tribune* columnist and editorial writer Lori Sturdevant. The book is a history and analysis of the Minnesota Republican party of the mid-twentieth century, in which Durenberger grew up and which he helped build.

Many people today do not know the dominant role the Republican Party played in Minnesota politics for much of the state's history, Durenberger says. In 1938, the election of Governor Harold Stassen began an era of progressive policies very different from the Republican party of today, he says. Minnesota's progressive Republicans earned voters' trust and delivered on their promises. He notes that their policy ideas were grown from a number of people, many in leadership positions in communities, into a party platform built from precinct caucuses through conventions to election campaigns, where voters decided their future.

Durenberger says as an increasingly anti-government, anti-tax national party shifted Minnesota Republican thinking to the right, however, progressive ideas fell out of favor. In today's era of polarized politics, he says, both the Republican and the Democratic parties, their candidates for office and those elected have lost the public trust required to deal with the difficult problems we face.

He calls for better informed, progress-motivated leaders to step forward, both as candidates for public office and as persons whose influence and support is essential to bipartisan policymaking.

Durenberger said he hopes his book is a useful history of what worked so well over those years and also a valuable resource for the future.

Biography

Dave Durenberger, former Republican U.S. Senator from Minnesota, recently retired as Senior Health Policy Fellow at the University of St. Thomas and as chair of the National Institute of Health Policy, which he founded there in 1998.

Durenberger served in the Senate from November 1978 to January 1995. He was first elected in a special election in November 1978 to complete the unexpired term of the late Sen. Hubert Humphrey, whose position had temporarily been filled by Humphrey's wife, Muriel Humphrey. Durenberger was re-elected in 1982 and 1988.

Prior to his election to the Senate, he served in the U.S. Army Reserve as an officer in Military Intelligence and as a reserve Civil Affairs and Military Government officer. He practiced law in South St. Paul with Harold LeVander and served as his chief of staff when LeVander was governor from 1967 to 1971.

From 1971 to 1978, Durenberger was counsel for Legal and Community Affairs at the H.B. Fuller Company in St. Paul. While there, he also served as chair of the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission and the Hennepin County Park Reserve District and as executive director of the Minnesota Commission on the Future of the Arts, the Minnesota

Supreme Court Code of Judicial Conduct Advisory Committee and the Minnesota Constitutional Study Commission.

After his election to the Senate, Durenberger became a member of the Senate Finance Committee whose then-chairman, Russell Long of Louisiana, taught him why the founders established the Senate: "So that when every state is heard from, we get good national policy. Because it's good for my state and for yours."

Having campaigned on "changing the role of government," Durenberger also secured a seat on the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee of the Government Affairs Committee, later becoming its chair. He became a member of the Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations in 1981. Working with the National Governors Association, he drafted President Ronald Reagan's "New Federalism" proposal in 1982.

He also served as chairman of the following Senate committees and subcommittees: the Select Committee on Intelligence, the Health Subcommittee of the Senate Finance Committee, the Oversight Subcommittee of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, and the Rights of Individuals Subcommittee of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

He is the coauthor, with Lori Sturdevant, of *When Republicans were Progressive*. His other books include *Prescription for Change* and *Neither Madmen Nor Messiahs*. He teaches and speaks nationally on the future of health-care delivery and policy. He has a B.A. in political science, history and English from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., and a J.D. from the University of Minnesota School of Law.

Background

As part of its ongoing review of the policy process in Minnesota, the Civic Caucus interviewed former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger about his September 2018 book, *When Republicans Were Progressive*, which he co-authored with Lori Sturdevant.

The Civic Caucus has interviewed Durenberger four times previously: Oct. 9, 2015, [Restore value that an effective civic infrastructure once offered Minnesota](#); Aug. 22, 2014, [Policymakers would benefit from more reports with recommendations](#); Aug. 10, 2009, [Interview of Durenberger and Dick Pettingill](#) (former president and CEO of Allina Hospitals and Clinics) about civic leadership; and Nov. 4, 2005, [Interview of Durenberger](#) about a variety of topics, including democracy, the two-party system and campaign finance.

Discussion

The story of the progressive Republican Party in Minnesota is a story that needed to be told. Former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger's decision to write *When Republicans Were Progressive* traces to the spring of 2017, when he awoke in a hospital looking into the face of a cardiologist who told him after a two-hour surgery, "Dave, you are lucky to be alive." This incident prompted him to reflect on his life, career, and roots and reminded him of a conversation he had years ago with esteemed Minnesota historian Russell Fridley, who led the Minnesota Historical Society to growth and success over three decades. Fridley had suggested that Durenberger write a book on the progressive Republican Party in Minnesota and its heyday in the middle of the twentieth century. This is a story that needed to be told, Fridley had said.

Unknown to many these days, the Republican Party dominated Minnesota's politics for much of the state's history. Durenberger explained that the progressive Republican Party of the mid-twentieth century, in which he grew up and helped build, was very different from the Republicans of today. In 1938, he said, the election of Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen spearheaded a transformation of the previously isolationist conservative party toward a progressive cooperative approach to state government. He believes that the principles and practices of that progressive political movement can be credited with much of modern Minnesota's success story.

Durenberger said he has continually encountered people with purpose in their lives. He commented that during his years in the United States Senate, 1978 to 1994, he worked with incredible leaders, whose backgrounds ranged from astronauts to leaders of large corporations. A common thread, he said, was the purpose all found in their lives, primarily because of where, how and by whom they were raised.

Durenberger pointed to a copy of Colin Woodard's book, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. This book, he said, goes a long way toward explaining why we do what we do in Minnesota. We are deeply influenced by our Yankee and Scandinavian roots, valuing education, sacrifice for the common good, local political control and the importance of citizen involvement. There is a moral component to this, and when we abandon it, we are in big trouble, he said.

Minnesota's progressive Republicans were leaders who earned voters' trust and delivered on promises. Durenberger made that statement and named a litany of influential Minnesota Republican Party leaders-Chuck Slocum, Bob Brown, Ed Viehman, Bob Forsythe and George Thiss. He explained that they placed great importance on issues such as environmental protection, economic opportunity for low-wage workers and the middle class, and assistance for the disadvantaged.

Working across the aisle was important. Durenberger made that statement and said that during his time in the Senate there were 17 Republican senators from states similar to Minnesota. They were interested in identifying problems and finding solutions brought from their home states to prove they worked. He said they did this often at some political risk. But this provided leadership that curbed extreme impulses and allowed Ronald Reagan to be a great president and his vice president, George H. W. Bush, to be equally productive-even with a Democratic Senate and House.

Where are the leaders of today in politics and business? Durenberger asked that question. He pointed to John Cairns as "one of my favorite leaders" and complimented the leadership Cairns provided for the Minnesota Business Partnership from 1979 to 1984.

Durenberger noted that as an increasingly anti-government, anti-tax national party has shifted Minnesota Republican thinking to the right, progressive ideas have fallen out of favor. Both the Republican and the Democratic parties have lost public trust, he said.

What is the future of political parties? An interviewer asked that question and Durenberger responded that this has to start at the precinct caucus level, with leadership and efforts to take back the grass roots. He recommended joining **No Labels**-type organizations and overcoming the distorting impact on policy of special-interest wealth, an effort he had led in the Senate and handed over to Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) when he left. (See **April 28, 2017, Civic Caucus interview with No Labels Minnesota board member John Hayden.**)

An interviewer said he grew up in Chicago and attended his first precinct caucus in Minnesota many years ago. He found it interactive, fascinating and raucous, and it allowed the opportunity to express ideas. He is concerned over how participation is falling. Durenberger agreed about the precinct caucus and added that the caucus system provides a chance to return to ideas that have not yet been adopted. Durenberger gave as an example Ted Kolderie's continued push to professionalize teaching. It is important to build on what is working.

How can someone deal with the challenges of stepping out as a leader? An interviewer asked that question and Durenberger gave the example of Noah McCourt from Chaska, a mental-health advocate who served on Governor Mark Dayton's Council on Developmental Disabilities. McCourt's sheer willingness to step forward with intensity and hard work exemplifies leadership and has made a difference.

Another example, Durenberger said, is former Obama Acting Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Andy Slavitt from Edina. Slavitt recently launched a nonpartisan nonprofit called the United States of Care, headquartered in Minnesota and Washington, D.C.

Durenberger said the organization focuses on policy and grass-roots work, seeking to break through partisan politics and promote health care solutions Americans can agree on. What is done at the state level will influence the federal, Durenberger noted.

What about climate concerns? An interviewer brought up that topic and Durenberger said that when he left the Senate in 1994, only one senator fell into the category of "climate denier." These days, that label covers the bulk of the Republican party, he said.

Durenberger described working with Democrat George Mitchell of Maine in 1990 on the acid rain amendment to the Clean Air Act. Bipartisan leadership and support allowed Mitchell to defeat amendments that would have weakened the bill, Durenberger said. He also mentioned his friend of 54 years, Arctic adventurer and spokesperson Will Steger, whom he introduced to people such as Vice President Al Gore and both Presidents Bush, as a valuable environmental resource.

It's important to value the civic sector. Durenberger was asked for his thoughts on the health of the "civic sector," and another interviewer said we have been "de-Brandlized" (referring to John Brandl, educator, legislator, legendary civic leader and former Dean of the Humphrey School). Durenberger responded that the important thing is to value the civic sector. Durenberger mentioned a [Civic Caucus piece he had just read on the Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative](#), an initiative to reclaim democracy as the work of citizens, organized by Trygve Throntveit and other faculty from the University of Minnesota and Augsburg College. The health of the civic sector gets back to the critical factor of leadership, Durenberger said.

The Minnesota of 1973 was a state that worked and governed itself well, noted one interviewer, but so much has changed. Durenberger stated that the important thing is how one anticipates and then deals with change.

What is the definition of "progressive"? An interviewer asked that question of Durenberger and also asked what it means to be a Republican. Durenberger responded that progressives are "center left and right," noting that the media has decided to characterize the liberal left as progressive. He said the Democratic Party's version of progressive, however, is different from the Stassen line of Republican progressive politics.

Durenberger said the Democratic left sees the government as a monopoly definer of government's role and responsibility. He said progressive Republicans, on the other hand, would seek to use the government as a framework for those who would act in the public interest. He said that to him a real Republican is someone who cares and is accountable to the disadvantaged American.

Durenberger mentioned Bill Doherty of **Better Angels**, a citizen movement to bring liberals and conservatives together to make their voices heard, understand each other's perspectives and bridge the political divide. Durenberger said leaders of nations have to accept that nations have conditional relationships. Leaders of nations, on the other hand, need some level of unconditional relationships with each other in our global interdependence. It comes down to relationships, Durenberger continued, and to being morally motivated.

How should we deal with the notion that government is the enemy rather than a tool?

An interviewer asked that question and Durenberger responded that he thinks that is somewhat of an excuse.

What is the draw to hold onto office rather than losing on terms true to oneself? An interviewer who had been to Washington, D.C., to talk to Congressional members about the No Labels organization asked that question. Durenberger gave the example of Representative Erik Paulsen, whose district has changed greatly over the years, and who at the time of the interview was engaged in what Durenberger called a campaign sinking ever lower.

People lack relationships outside their "clan," and their ideas are consistently reinforced by the media they consume. An interviewer made that point and Durenberger said we must enhance the role of and our responsibility as members of a larger community than cultural. Reinforcing this community is an important niche for all private foundations- and even the United Way- in connecting people to solve problems.

Is the lack of competitiveness in many congressional districts contributing to polarization? An interviewer asked that question and Durenberger responded that fairer representation in government suggests that well-intentioned people form a citizens commission to redesign districts after the Census, similar to something being tried in California and Arizona.

Does an increasing preoccupation with the national and international end up leaving the state and local unaddressed? The same interviewer asked that question and Durenberger responded that now is an important time to focus on how best metro Minnesota people can be represented. He said that Minneapolis and St. Paul have changed in important ways in terms of civic and fiscal capacity. And he remarked that St. Paul hardly has a newspaper anymore.

Another interviewer added that he had recently attended a conference at the Humphrey School on the 50th anniversary of the civil rights-era Kerner Commission report. He noted

that the *Star Tribune* covered the conference from an almost exclusively national perspective. "Can't we localize that?" the interviewer asked. Durenberger responded by saying, "Absolutely. That's my point here."

Durenberger also said we must do a better job of educating young people.

We appreciate Senator Durenberger's mention of the Civic Caucus in his book's final chapter, "Reviving the Middle."