



**Business and Public Policy Round Table
June 7, 2011
University Club of St. Paul**

“Redistricting and Gerrymandering: What Can be Done?”

Introductory presenters: Peter Bell, former Chairman, Metropolitan Council; Roger Moe, former Majority Leader, State Senate

Chair, facilitator and rapporteur: Steve Young, Global Executive Director, Caux Round Table

Participants: Ron Baukol; Roger Conant; Bob MacGregor; Deborah Montgomery; Doris Rubenstein; Al Zdrazil

Key Comments:

Politics in America have changed. Good governance is harder and harder to come by. Our politics are more and more about what’s good for me and less and less about the common good. The two major parties have more and more become havens for partisans of rival ideologies.

A fractured political system has brought widespread cynicism where those disenfranchised do not accept government decisions. The credibility of government has suffered and the stature of politicians and elected officials, and the respect they can hope for, are in decline.

Active Democrats seem to be more intense than ever in their confidence that government is very necessary. To the contrary, active Republicans seem to be more intense than ever in their confidence that government is unnecessary. The philosophical divide between the parties is deep and growing deeper.

Is this growing polarization the cause of political dysfunction, or rather, a symptom of a system that rewards extremes over moderates?

Re-districting – gerrymandering – is both a cause of polarization and a symptom of this divided culture. Better districting – without today’s gerrymandering – might lead to a more constructive political culture, but it is only a sub-set of political dynamics responding to larger social forces.

Change will not come from party leaders. A demand for change must come from outside of politics, from a coalition of business and citizens.

New rules on districting should be put in place before the next census. To enact big changes now runs against the self-interest of all incumbents. Change can be made when it is not clear who will be effected and by how much.

A proposal by former Vice President Walter Mondale, former Governor Al Quie, former Majority Leader Roger Moe and former Speaker of the House Steve Sviggum that re-districting should be assigned to a special panel of five retired judges has merit as one step in dethroning ideology in politics. It will not be a magic bullet and has been tried in Arizona and Iowa. It will, however, enhance credibility of our political system.

Conducted as “gerrymandering,” districting creates safe seats for both parties. Districting has divided America into cultural zones of red and blue voters. In biennial elections for the U.S. House, only some 64 districts nationwide are competitive. The rest – the vast majority – are safe for either Democrats or Republicans.

Safe seats shape party politics. Whoever is the candidate for the majority party in the safe seat will win. Meaningful politics then shrinks down to the intra-party process for becoming a candidate. More and more, that process has been one dominated by ideological partisans within that party. Moderates and independents are ignored by the process and have no authoritative say in governance. Loyalty is to party and then to state and country.

Safe districts spawn candidates who have little incentive to be civil as long as they remain emotionally in tune with their base that controls re-nomination.

The insular quality of party decision-making carries over to statewide elections for U.S. Senate and the Governorship. Thanks to so many safe districts, partisan factions have taken over control of the party nominating machinery and bring to candidate selection for statewide races the same ideological litmus tests that predominate in selecting candidates for districted elections.

Those elected from competitive districts bring a different, more constructive, more pragmatic attitude and style to government. They are easier to work with, listen better and more easily form coalitions. Representatives from such districts tend to stay at the top of the “bell curve.”

If each party in the Minnesota House had only 6 more members from swing districts, that would be enough to change the outcome of legislative deliberations.

Therefore, a new principle is needed to determine the boundaries of electoral districts:
Competitiveness.

Every district should be as competitive as possible. No incumbent should be favored. This principle to be used in drawing the boundaries of electoral districts should take first place among other principles, such as convenience and contiguity, respect for township and city boundaries, compactness and no dilution of minority voting power.

Politics is a social process. Whatever breaks down the process of getting to know one another, whatever leads to rigid separations, undermines constructive democratic politics. If you don't or can't know and like the other players, the play of politics turns nasty and loses its constructive quality. Ideology and polarization keep people from getting to know and like one another and break down our ability to govern. If we don't know each other's stories, we don't really know each other and mistrust is, accordingly, hard to overcome.

Rules, such as open meetings laws and ethical laws restricting entertainment of politicians, de-personalize politics to our detriment. They limit opportunities for intimate dialogue over differences and in seeking agreements and compromises.

Finally, in seeking to solve a big puzzle, the first thing to do is not group the pieces by colors, or separate out those with straight edges, but to look at the picture on the cover of the box. We need to have a big picture of ourselves as a people, then we get to work to give it reality.