

How the DFL Got Its GROOVE BACK

The party was wobbly not long ago; now it has sizeable majorities in both the state Senate and House. How did that happen?

By Frank Jossi

DFL Party members in 2002 had figured on a having a good election year and gaining back seats in the state House of Representatives. In off-year elections when both presidents and governors usually lose seats to the minority party, the DFL had reason for optimism, even after suffering the tragic loss of its leader, Sen. Paul Wellstone.

That positive scenario did not come to pass and, in fact, the party endured a thrashing—it lost 10 seats in the House, as the Republican majority grew to 27 seats, and gave up nine seats in the Senate, narrowing its majority to just three. And Tim Pawlenty won the statehouse.

“Democrats were really dispirited and disheartened,” recalls Brian Melendez, the current DFL Party chief and then head of the party’s Minneapolis branch. “We had listening sessions where we normally had 10 or 15 people. We had hundreds of people turning out just to vent. We pretty much had a difficult time across the board in 2002 when we expected it to be a good year.”

Two years later, in 2004, the DFL bounced back in the House to capture a two-seat margin, which has since ballooned to a 40-seat advantage. And in the Senate the DFL’s lead jumped to nine seats in 2004 and is 25 today, a veto-proof majority. Additionally, the party won every constitutional race—for attorney general, state auditor, secretary of state—except the gubernatorial office.

“It’s as if Gov. Pawlenty is charging into battle with his sword drawn without any cavalry behind him,” says Dane Smith, executive director of Growth & Justice and a former *Star Tribune* political reporter. So what happened?

THE NATIONALIZATION OF POLITICS

“All politics have become nationalized,” says Larry Jacobs of the University of Minnesota, pointing to Republican losses in 2006 and 2008, when President George W. Bush’s popularity had plummeted. “It’s bizarre in some ways to think this, but it is the case that the reputation of the national party and the approval of the president are having this remarkable and unusual impact on state and local elections.”

Other Republican analysts, among them former party operative Sarah Janacek, who today serves as director of political coverage at Dolan Group, cite the public’s overwhelming distaste for Bush as the reason behind Democratic triumphs in Minnesota and other states.



Melendez

Former House speaker Matt Entenza doesn’t buy this argument, pointing out that the Democratic resurgence started in 2004 when the party rolled out a strategy of criticizing the governor’s deep budget cuts, in particular in higher education and local government aid. The voters noticed a decline in services and increases in fees and other costs, says Entenza, which allowed for an opening for the DFL. Still, he points out, the Republicans were hardly in disorder, and Bush nearly won the state in 2004, the same year the DFL began its ascent by winning seats in many districts the president carried.

He continues: “Before the 2004 election, the

DFL put together an agenda after talking to a lot of people who told us that the Republicans basically focused on things that divide people—gay marriage, abortion, a lot of wedge issues. We had to focus on where we were going to take the state on education and health care ... and transportation. We said fundamentally we should raise taxes on the highest earners to get revenue and use that revenue to deal with the schools, which are hurting badly, and not be throwing people off health care. That was our argument, and funny enough, that was what Obama was talking about [in 2008] on the campaign trail.”

A SMALLER REPUBLICAN TENT

The Republicans as of late have “rallied around purity,” says Jacobs. Indeed, Republicans were quick to mete out punishment last session against the Override Six who voted against Gov. Pawlenty’s budget. As repercussions for their votes, the Override Six faced primary challengers and a barrage of criticism from GOP leaders and elites. Two resigned, two were defeated in primaries or the general election, and two managed to survive.

A BIGGER DFL TENT

The Democrats have managed to win in districts formerly considered Republican strongholds, such as Lake Minnetonka, Rochester, Woodbury and southern Minnesota, by running mostly moderate candidates who may have lost past elections but had name recognition and a “Main Street vision” of supporting education, transportation and health care. Legislators elected since 2004 in former Republican strongholds include Minnetonka’s John Benson, Lake Elmo’s Julie Bunn, Brooklyn Park’s Melissa Hortman, Faribault’s Patti Fritz and Austin’s Jeanne Poppe.



Janacek

opportunities to put their political capital into helping Republican legislators get elected."

RALLYING THE YOUTH AND DIVERSITY VOTE

The 2008 DFL election party in downtown St. Paul featured a United Nations of ethnicities and races, from

Somali women in veils to Latinos to gays to former 1960s radicals to suburban dads and moms. The Republican Party, in contrast, was as white as snow. Democrats have done well in former Republican strongholds such as Rochester, Faribault, Owatonna and Willmar because of an influx of immigrants. "Rural communities are increasingly diverse, and that's been changing the results of elections," says Entenza.

Andy Brehm, a Republican adviser, suggests Minnesota's youth vote has gone the way of national trends, with Democrats holding a lead. "I think we have fallen a bit behind; this past year there were a lot of young people

really fired up about Obama—being a young Republican, there wasn't a lot of excitement there for us," he says. "And what Democrats have done for a long time is make their candidates accessible to young voters by having them visit universities."

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Democrats have often been accused, and rightly so, of having a muddled message and trying too hard to be everything to everybody. The Republican message of less government and low taxes was pretty simple to understand regardless of whether they pushed those beliefs legislatively.

By design the Democrats have, since 2002, focused on a handful of nondivisive issues, namely education, transportation and health care, says Entenza, who concedes the party "needed a clearer message of where we would take the state." While the Republicans have kept using wedge issues like the Defense of Marriage Act and abortion to rally the troops—or suggesting that a "racino" would answer the state's revenue problems—the Democrats were busy linking higher property taxes and more crowded schools with the Republican agenda, says Entenza.

Anyone expecting change in the GOP in

2009 should take a nap: Party officials introduced yet another abortion bill to deal with a so-far phantom problem of human cloning and sexual selection.

END GAME

The Democrats should not get cocky, says Jacobs, because the flaws of the party are seen in its inability to win the governor's office and to nail down more federal seats, though he mentions that Michele Bachmann's 6th District continues to trend blue. He sees the GOP's impregnable opposition to any taxes as one of the party's largest challenges, even if new revenue makes sense, as it has in Florida, California and other states with Republican governors who broke ranks with party orthodoxy. "It's tough to be a Republican now," he says. "Part of it is the environment, part of it is your team. This is a very unforgiving group." L&P



Entenza

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HOW THE DFL GOT ITS GROOVE BACK



Jacobs

figure out how to make your life work when you have to door-knock for a job that pays \$31,000 a

CANDIDATE TRAINING

Good candidate attraction has generally favored Democrats since they have more candidates, often from the public sector, willing to pay the price of being a legislator. "If you run your own business, it is hard to

year that will consume half your year—the fundamentals just don't work," says Janacek.

Looking at the numbers, the legislature had 23 business members in 2001; today it has 14. The single largest profession is education. The legislature has gained over the past decade several Democratic high school and college educators—Woodbury's Marsha Swails, Burnsville's Will Morgan, Dilworth's Paul Marquart, Northfield's David Bly, St. Peter's Terry Morrow—who came to their campaigns often well-known in their communities through teaching legions of schoolchildren and, in many cases, coaching them.

CAMPAGNING

Wellstone Action and Education Minnesota

have candidate-training programs that have favored Democrats, adds Melendez, and the party's own efforts have been vastly improved. The DFL "party has done a great job" by out-hustling and out-training the Republicans, concedes Janacek.

POLITICAL COATTAILS

"Gov. Pawlenty has no coattails," says Smith, a point seemingly lost on national political reporters who invariably fail to mention his inability to help fellow legislators get elected. He follows in a long line of Republican governors since 1980 that "have not seen it as a high priority to elect other Republicans," says Janacek. "Both Arne Carlson and Tim Pawlenty have missed

THE RIGHT IS RIGHT

Why positive GOP solutions will win the day over DFL pessimism BY MARTY SEIFERT

In 2010, the GOP has a great opportunity to regain the majority in the legislature. Let's contrast what the DFL has done and look to our solutions.

Looking back on the three legislative sessions since Democrats took control of the Minnesota House, one observation eclipses all the rest: They cannot lead. In 2007, after Republicans handed them a \$2.2 billion budget surplus, they somehow spent it without providing tax relief or adequate funding for schools and nursing homes. One year later, with the economy approaching its freefall, they took a knee on solving a relatively small deficit by relying mostly on budget reserves to push the problem past the next election.

Republicans advocated fiscal discipline. We wanted to focus on a job-creating strategy, right-sizing government service delivery top to bottom and the opportunity to reform. Unfortunately, we were ignored in all three sessions.

The remarkable failure of this past session was the wasted opportunities. It was a "do-nothing legislature" in every sense of the term. They wasted away three months out of fear of discussing the tax increases they desperately desired, couldn't balance the budget and spent the waning days of the session in breathless shock after Gov. Pawlenty decided to be the adult in the room and do their job for them.

Should the GOP gain control, we will not mark up billion-dollar tax increases in the dark of night, without public testimony and with little idea of how our constituents would fare under the plan. However, that is exactly what DFLers did on the last night of session.

As the governor cleans up the Democrats' fiscal mess, expect to see them revert to what they know best: blaming Pawlenty. Democrats (locally and nationally) have mastered the art of being "not the other guy" and used it to their electoral advantage. Once in control of the legislature, DFLers found themselves in over their heads without the slightest knowledge of how to prepare our state for the future and navigate through difficult times.



Seifert

Perhaps the reason Democrats haven't been able to effectively address Minnesota's challenges is that those challenges required solutions that don't come naturally to the liberal mindset. Fiscal responsibility, private-sector growth and government reform are not exactly the forte of politicians schooled in the way of tax-and-spend liberalism. Lacking the skills to lead, they let our state down.

Therein is the opportunity for Republicans: The conservative principles of a limited and efficient government offer a much more effective vision for emerging from the recession as a stronger state. The liberal orthodoxy is simply at odds with what ails our state and nation. We don't suffer from too little government; too much of it is weighing us down. We aren't plagued by low taxes; high taxes are pricing us out of economic expansion. We aren't drowning in a sea of reform; we are starving for it.

We will push for reform, pure and simple: we stand for the tradition of counties, but know full well that service delivery can be performed across those lines and in full cooperation with partner cities. Clinics deliver health care much cheaper than emergency rooms. Let's reform government to realize that fact. We also know that in most cases, private-sector choices can render out waste a give better options for our citizens in health care.

There is no page in the playbook of liberalism for the problems before us. Democrats can point their fingers at Tim Pawlenty to their heart's content (and they will), but eventually their inability to provide positive results will show through. When it does, Minnesotans will have a choice between politicians who tap dance around challenges and leaders willing to tackle them head on. I am confident that Minnesotans will choose the emerging leaders and positive ideas of the Minnesota House Republican Caucus over the do-nothing Democrat legislators who chose to squander five months of precious time to just raise taxes and reformat reform. Next year, choices will be clear.

—Rep. Marty Seifert, R-Marshall, is the former House minority leader who is currently running for governor.