

DFL's Early Ward Conventions Deter Challengers, Stifle Debate

This guest editorial was published as Viewpoint in the February 13, 2019 edition of The Villager

Anyone who has been around St. Paul politics for long recognizes that for all intents and purposes it is a one-party town dominated by the DFL. This year all seven City Council seats and four School Board seats will be on the ballot. However, St. Paul's DFL leadership has manipulated the endorsement schedule to limit public input and pick favorites. This is unhealthy for democracy.

The DFL has chosen Sunday, March 10, as the date for all precinct caucuses across the city. The purpose of the precinct caucuses is to conduct party business, consider resolutions to be included in the party platform, and elect delegates to the ward conventions where City Council candidates will be endorsed.

In Wards 2, 3, and 4, DFL leaders have scheduled the ward conventions to immediately follow the precinct caucuses on March 10--and worse yet, at 5:30 on that Sunday evening. When has any important public meeting ever been scheduled on a Sunday night? With no DFL challengers to the City Council incumbents in Wards 2, 3, and 4 at this point, they are virtually guaranteed the party endorsement.

In Wards 1, 5, 6 and 7, the St. Paul DFL has scheduled the endorsing conventions from six to eight weeks after the precinct caucuses. In these wards, it is conceivable that new candidates will emerge in the intervening weeks, requiring all candidates to work hard to court delegates and weather debate and discussion. What delegate does not welcome the opportunity to get to know candidates better and make more informed choices?

The DFL has made a decision to protect its incumbent City Council members in Wards 2, 3 and 4, seemingly reluctant to expose them to potential new candidates and the shifting loyalties of demanding delegates. In fact, a prospective City Council candidate in Ward 4 deployed to the Middle East asked the DFL city chair if that ward's convention could be delayed until after he returns from active duty. The answer was "no."

Coincidentally, the residents of Wards 2, 3 and 4--the wards with the highest voter turnout in the city--have confronted vitally important and controversial issues over the past four years, including the selection of a modern streetcar as the preferred alternative in the proposed Riverview transit corridor, the approval of a master plan for the Ford site, the override of a two-year Marshall Avenue rezoning study, a study of the repurposing of the Highland 9-Hole Golf Course, the rezoning of Snelling Avenue and the building of a Major League Soccer stadium and proposed redevelopment of the adjacent Midway Shopping Center. These issues are redefining life in Wards 2, 3 and 4 and reshaping the city's future. And the three incumbents are going to be spared a process that would steel and toughen them and hold them accountable to the public?

The DFL is, in effect, tipping the scales in support of three incumbents and denying citizens any meaningful discussion of these huge and transformative community decisions. In a one-party town, the DFL endorsement almost guarantees election, giving the endorsed candidate party voter lists, money, volunteers, events, publicity, mailings and more. A City Council candidate needs to raise \$100,000 to be competitive today, and access to DFL Party resources is a major advantage.

Why is the St. Paul DFL leadership curtailing its own process and picking winners? Over the years, the DFL has fallen into this trap a number of times, trying to limit access to the process for candidates and newcomers so that incumbents are guaranteed re-election.

Paul Wellstone was the force in 1990 who blew the hinges off the doors of the DFL, bringing in party newcomers from all over Minnesota to make the DFL "the party of the people who show up." In 2008 Barack Obama did the same thing, advertising Minnesota DFL caucuses on TV while Clinton supporters in the state party, in hushed tones, counted on the party faithful to endorse their chosen candidate.

Foreclosing the democratic process, or the DFL Party process, is ultimately a prescription for the party's irrelevance. This is the capital of Minnesota. St. Paul should lead the way in reminding folks what democracy looks like. The words "inclusion" and "diversity" should mean something, and the DFL should walk their talk.