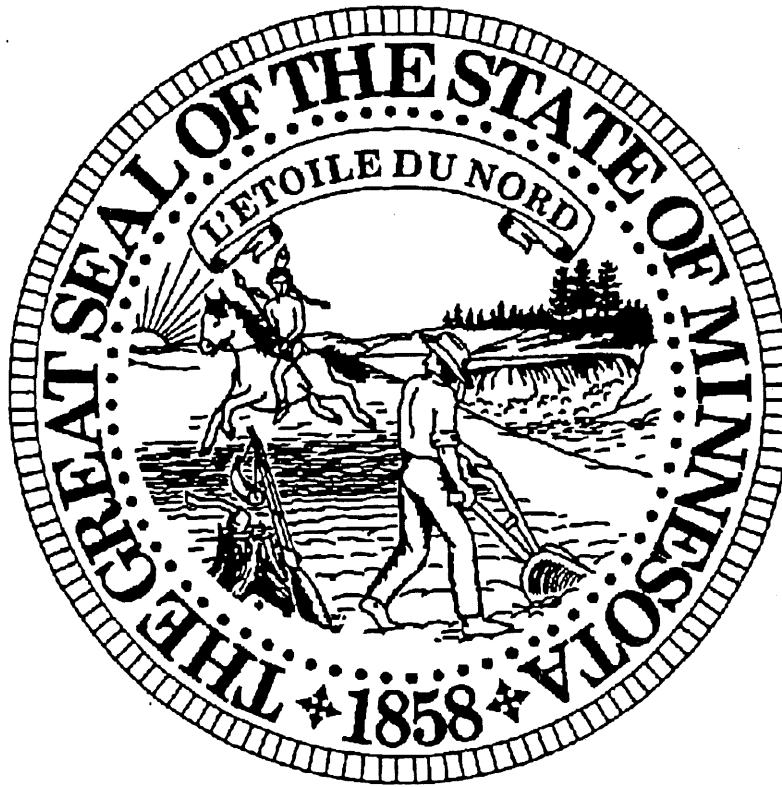


**REPORT OF THE  
GROWE COMMISSION ON  
ELECTORAL REFORM**



SAINT PAUL  
JANUARY 1995

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## MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROWE COMMISSION

CHAIR: Joan Anderson Growe, Secretary of State

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Frank Sorauf  
Political Scientist  
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Former DFL State Party Chair  
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## INTRODUCTION

During the past thirty years, Minnesota has witnessed a steady decline in the level of participation in the political process, from attending precinct caucuses to voting in the elections. Many Minnesotans have become estranged from the political process and view its results as unrepresentative of their views. Others believe that the process is too long and drawn out and that the caucuses are held at times that are inconvenient to them. In 1994, fewer than 2% of the eligible voters in Minnesota participated in the precinct caucuses.

In an effort to reverse this trend, Secretary of State Joan Grove convened a group of 17 citizens, each uniquely experienced in the political process, to consider ways in which participation in Minnesota party processes might be increased.

## OVERVIEW

A representative democracy is the best political system yet developed because it has the capacity to balance majority passions with minority rights, intense convictions with moderate caution and the need for change with the reliability of the past. For this form of government to reach its potential, those who represent the citizens must be skilled in recognizing the relevant issues, articulating appropriate responses and building working majorities. A procedure for the selection of political leaders which avoids critical issues, inhibits the emergence of effective responses, or contributes to fragmentation of authority fails to meet the essential requirements of our form of government.

The main concern of the Commission is that too few people take part in the political process, be it the precinct caucuses or the primary elections. Participation in these methods for selecting our political leaders is concentrated among system insiders and those who have a special interest in the activities of the government. Widespread apathy reflects disengagement of voters from the political process, even in general elections. Mistrust and cynicism compromise the satisfaction available in political life, leading to high and unacceptable levels of frustration with our governing institutions.

In Minnesota, as in other states, we rely on the major political parties to select qualified individuals to stand for election to public offices. The procedure by which political parties select their candidates involves the participation of the public in precinct caucuses and party conventions, which are attended by those most intensely interested in party affairs, as well as a primary where a broader range of public opinion can be expressed. However, many major party candidates currently are able to gain access to the state primary election ballot with little or no connection to the parties. Other candidates who do not wish to affiliate with any of the major political parties may gain access to the general election ballot solely by nominating petition.

The Commission concluded that the current sequence of precinct caucuses, party nominating conventions and primary elections is well-designed to select qualified candidates, for the following reasons: first, the caucuses permit open access to party

decision-making at the grass roots level; second, endorsing conventions enable majority coalitions to form among party activists; and third, primaries provide a check that endorsed candidates have the broad public support necessary to succeed in the general election.

Our current system for nominating candidates is characterized by declining participation in caucuses, divisive and negative campaigning in party primaries and avoidance of or lack of time to discuss substantive issues in the general election. This system needs to be corrected to enable the parties to again perform the essential tasks for which they were organized. Many voters have indicated that they fail to participate in the precinct caucuses and primary elections because they have little or no information on either the parties or the candidates that seek to run under their banner. They note that the news media often focus attention on a few highly visible candidates and that little information is made available about the others. Even the location of the caucuses and polling places is not commonly known to many voters.

The changes proposed by the Commission cannot achieve the results desired unless both the political parties and concerned voters commit themselves to making these changes work. People who have a concern or interest in the affairs of their community need to publicly voice their views at the precinct caucuses. The political parties need to design the caucuses to make it as easy as possible for the public to make its views known to those who wish to serve in public office. To assist these efforts, the news media

can play an important role in promoting the public interest of the communities they serve by publishing the locations of the caucuses.

## GOALS OF THE COMMISSION

The goals of the Commission were to increase the vitality of the political process by 1) encouraging more extensive and broad-based public participation in the precinct caucuses and the party conventions and 2) to increase voter participation in the state primary election. It is in the interest of all Minnesotans that we increase public participation in the parties and their processes.

In pursuit of these goals, the Commission sought to review and consider reforms in the nominating process from the precinct caucuses to the primary election. As part of this process, the Commission examined existing laws relating to the nomination of major party candidates, listened to public testimony on this and other subjects and discussed creative responses to address the existing problems. The result of the Commission's deliberations was a list of specific recommendations to the legislature and the political parties that are intended to increase participation in the political process generally and the precinct caucuses in particular.

Beginning its proceedings in September, 1994, the commission adopted three operating principles to guide its actions.

- Political parties are an important part of the electoral process.
- Creating a common interest for the larger community is important to increase public participation.
- The political system should be more "user friendly."

## REVIEW OF COMMISSION PROCEEDINGS

The Commission held meetings open to the public on September 27, October 25, December 1, December 15, and December 28, 1994. Summaries of the proceedings at these meetings are on file for public reference with the Secretary of State. At its five public meetings, the Commission heard testimony from 16 persons, ranging from the chairs of the major political parties to interested citizens. (See list of speakers in Appendix A.) Several other persons submitted comments and suggestions in writing.

The Commission heard testimony from attorneys about the relationship between legislative bodies and political parties. While in most instances the courts have ruled that political parties are in charge of party business, if there is public funding available to political parties, then the legislature has some authority to direct how the parties conduct their business.



Several of the speakers indicated a need to disseminate more information to the public concerning participation in the precinct caucuses and voting in the primary election.

The Commission also discussed several alternative schedules for conducting the precinct caucuses and the state primary election. (See list of alternative schedules in Appendix B.)

## CONCLUSIONS

The Commission concluded that changes are necessary to increase participation in the precinct caucuses, reduce the divisiveness that currently results from many primary campaigns and facilitate more substantive discussion of issues by candidates in the general election. The Commission has identified four major areas to be addressed by action from the legislature and the political parties.

### **Precinct Caucuses:**

The precinct caucuses allow the political parties to renew themselves with new issues and people every two years. The Commission believes that changes in the operation of the precinct caucuses will increase the relevance of the political parties by encouraging broader attendance and more tangible results.

**Party Conventions:**

Political party conventions can serve as the platform for public debate on the important issues of the day. The Commission believes that the convention process will attract more participation by candidates and their supporters when party candidates are required to demonstrate some level of support at party conventions in order to appear as candidates on that party's primary ballot.

**Party Nominating Process:**

A large portion of the general public believes that primaries are mini-general elections when in fact they are actually an integral activity of the party nomination process, the final step in the series of events begun at the precinct caucuses. The Commission believes that the reality of this situation needs to be made clear to the public and that a new, more descriptive name for the primary is a start. The Commission believes that a shortened process resulting from later caucuses and an earlier primary will encourage candidates for endorsement and nomination to include the concerns of the wider party electorate in their campaign messages. It will also allow for a longer period for the voters to examine the candidates' messages prior to the general election. The Commission believes that this somewhat longer general election period will discourage sound-bite, negative campaign sloganeering and encourage a more thoughtful approach to dealing with public issues.

**Public Information:**

The Commission believes that information and ideas are the currency of democracy and that there is a great need for more of both. These ideas must be expounded by the political parties and their candidates, discussed and understood, if not embraced, by the public. The Commission unanimously agreed that voter information and voter education are critically important to improved citizen participation, particularly when major changes are being implemented. This information can and should be provided by an institutionally stable and reliable source. The Secretary of State's office is well suited for this role with its responsibility for elections and history of voter participation efforts. The Commission commends Minnesota's civic organizations and the state's adult educators, including those in community education, Extension, higher education, and libraries, for their past efforts in building public knowledge and participation in civic life. The Commission calls upon these civic organizations and adult educators to extend their efforts to develop further knowledge and participation in public issues and electoral processes. The Commission believes that the news media also has a responsibility to fulfill its public trust obligations as democracy's fourth estate by providing the voters with more thorough information on the candidates as well as more general information, such as the location of the precinct caucuses and polling places.

Based on these four areas of interest, the Commission developed a list of 12 specific issues for intensive discussion. These issues included:

1. Earlier primary date.
2. Weekend caucus date.
3. Demonstrate party support for ballot access.
4. Designate party-endorsed candidates on primary ballot.
5. Later caucus date.
6. Provide voter information.
7. Outreach/information for caucus, primary and general election participants.
8. Increase/strengthen the use of tax credits for contributions to political parties (targeted).
9. Four week period for circulating nominating petitions.
10. Corporate contributions (fair campaign practices law).
11. Recommendations to parties to streamline caucus process.
12. Utilize technology.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE LEGISLATURE

The Commission makes the following recommendations to the legislature for enactment and implementation in time for the 1996 state elections.

1. Conduct the precinct caucuses on the first weekend in April, during daytime hours. (Approved without opposition) (Refer to Appendix B, Alternative 3)
2. Conduct the state primary during the first two weeks in August, on either a Saturday or a Tuesday. (Approved, with seven members preferring Tuesday, seven members preferring Saturday.) (Refer to Appendix B, Alternative 3)
3. Conduct the presidential primary by mail on the same day as the precinct caucuses in presidential election years. (Approved without opposition)
4. Require major party candidates for state and federal offices to receive at least 20% of the vote on any ballot at the party endorsing convention for that office or submit a petition signed by eligible voters equal to 10% of persons voting for nomination for that office at the last state primary to obtain a place on the state primary election ballot. (Approved without opposition for statewide and congressional offices; approved with five members opposed for legislative offices.)
5. Identify endorsed candidates on the state primary election ballot. (Approved with two members opposed for statewide and congressional offices; approved with six members opposed for legislative offices.)
6. Rename the state primary the "party nominating election". (Approved without opposition)

7. Permit corporations to make tax-deductible contributions to the secretary of state to promote voter participation in precinct caucuses and elections on a nonpartisan basis. (Approved without opposition)
8. Require and provide funding for the secretary of state to make voter information available to the public via a toll-free telephone line, to produce and make available to the public a video explaining how to participate in the precinct caucuses, and to prepare and distribute to each household in the state a voter's guide prior to the precinct caucuses, the state primary election and the state general election. (Approved without opposition)

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE POLITICAL PARTIES

The Commission makes the following recommendations to the major political parties.

Make the precinct caucuses and party conventions more user-friendly by:

- \* streamlining and simplifying the caucus process
- \* using "good meeting" principles and common sense rules
- \* limiting opportunities for procedural squabbles
- \* reducing the time between the precinct caucuses and the state conventions
- \* combining the congressional district and state party conventions
- \* simplifying voting procedures and using the same rules at all conventions
- \* using name tags and introducing caucus participants
- \* conducting straw polls and promptly reporting results to the public
- \* preparing instructional videos for caucus participants
- \* using technology, like telephone voting, at caucuses and conventions

(Approved without opposition)

## Appendix A

### Persons Providing Testimony to Growe Commission

Amy Klobuchar, President, DFL Education Foundation

Bob Weinholzer, former Chair, IR Party

Donald Dow, United We Stand

Andrew Davis, interested citizen

Phil Madsen, Independence Party

Peter Ackerberg, Assistant Attorney General

Peter Wattson, Senate Counsel

Rick Stafford, Chair, DFL Party

Chris Georgacas, Chair, IR Party

Todd Otis, former Chair, DFL Party

Kent Eklund, former President, Citizens League

Mary Birmingham, Executive Director, Metronet

David Brueggemann, interested citizen

Shawn Towle, interested citizen

Steve Kelley, State Representative

Mahmoud El-Kati, History Professor, Macalester College

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**APPENDIX B**  
**Grove Commission on Electoral Reform**  
**December 28, 1994**

*Alternative Schedule Suggestions for Precinct Caucuses and State Primary in 1996*

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Alternative 1</u> Early Caucus, Compressed Schedule	<u>Alternative 2</u> Early Caucus, Expanded Schedule	<u>Alternative 3</u> Later Caucus, Earlier Primary	<u>Alternative 4</u> Later Caucus, Current Primary
Precinct Caucuses	Mar 2-3	Mar 2-3	Apr 6-7	May 18-19
County/District Conventions	Mar 23	Mar 30	May 4	Jun 15
Congressional/State Conventions	Apr 12-13	Apr 26-27	May 31-Jun 1	Jul 12-13
Certification of Candidates by Party	Apr 16	Apr 30	Jun 4	Jul 16
Last Day to Decline Certification	Apr 17	May 1	Jun 5	Jul 17
Last Day to File Petition for Primary	Apr 17	May 1	Jun 5	Jul 17
Certification of Candidates to County Auditors	Apr 19	May 3	Jun 7	Jul 19
Absentee Voting Begins	May 10*	May 24*	Jun 28*	Aug 9**
State Primary Election	Jun 25	Jul 9	Aug 13	Sep 10
Canvass of State Primary	Jul 5	Jul 19	Aug 23	Sep 20
State General Election	Nov 5	Nov 5	Nov 5	Nov 5

*Note: Under current law, the presidential primary is scheduled on April 2 in 1996.*

\* Alternatives 1-3 use the 45 day period for absentee voting recommended by the Department of Defense.

\*\* Alternative 4 uses the currently authorized date for the state primary and the current 30 day time period for absentee voting.

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