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*Representation & Legislative Power:  
Overcoming Rural Minnesota's  
Representational Deficit*

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# **Representation and Legislative Power: Overcoming Rural Minnesota's Representational Deficit**

**Christopher P. Gilbert**

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In the 40 years since the United States Supreme Court offered its “one man, one vote” formula for political representation, state legislative district maps have come to reveal what might be termed a spatial paradox: geographically small districts represent concentrations of political power, while large districts equate to something of an empty power base. This paradox is driven home in presidential election years: the 2000 and 2004 county-level maps of voting patterns show broad seas of Republican red counties surrounding small pockets of blue, where Democrats dominate.<sup>1</sup> The rough parity that exists between the two major parties is obscured by the sheer amount of one color, denoting hundreds of sparsely populated areas that vote overwhelmingly Republican but that are balanced almost exactly by urban centers and several suburban areas that deliver numerically large advantages to the Democrats.

At the state level, a better though still misleading indicator of political power emerges from state legislative district maps. These, too, offer a mix of large and small geographic areas, and overlaying a color scheme would produce a similarly misleading portrait of political power. In fact, the physical size disparity across districts masks the essential point of recent representational jurisprudence: the most “fair” system of representation consists of districts with essentially equal populations, and deviations from this standard of fairness are at least unrepresentative and in some cases unconstitutional.

Any discussion of “fairness” when considering state legislative representation in Minnesota must acknowledge that for decades the division of the state into districts was less than fair to large metropolitan areas. In 1950, for example, Hennepin and Ramsey counties combined had 34.5 percent of the state’s population but less than one-quarter of the seats in the House and Senate (Kise 1958, 75). The 1959 redistricting plan (the first such plan in half a

century) began the state's movement toward greater equality in representation, while recognizing the concerns this raised outside the Twin Cities. Even this initial redistricting, however, left over half the state's House districts in rural areas (Mitau 1970, 87). As longtime University of Minnesota political scientist Charles Backstrom wrote in his 1981 analysis of these state legislative reapportionment plans, "Several small rural districts, all under DFL control, were allowed to remain in existence despite population losses so as not to give declining rural Minnesota the full shock treatment that complete population equality in legislative district populations would have entailed" (Backstrom 1981: 172).

Full shock treatment indeed. Today, 54 percent of state House and Senate districts (36 Senate, 72 House) are classified as lying in the Twin Cities metro area; including districts comprising the growing exurbs surrounding Minneapolis and St. Paul would push this figure over 60 percent. Eight more geographically compact House districts take in most of Duluth, Mankato, Rochester and St. Cloud. These concentrations leave the rest of the state with essentially one-third of Senate and House districts, approximately 60 percent of which are presently represented by Republican legislators.<sup>2</sup>

"Fair" representation by population is thus a relatively recent development, driven by court order and population shifts, whose full impact continues to unfold. The most obvious way to perceive shifts in legislative seats over the last century is to consider the Twin Cities metropolitan area to be the vortex of a whirlpool, inexorably sucking in seats from most corners of the state, and expanding in size as the Twin Cities region grows outward. In light of this trend, the key question to address is: in what ways does a numerical deficit of representation in rural Minnesota constitute a *representational deficit* — that is, a lack of political power that renders outstate communities unable to achieve legislative goals and dependent on the votes of urban and suburban legislators for their due share of state funds and attention.

### **Strength in number? Concepts of representation**

Common sense suggests that legislatures dominated by representatives from urban and suburban districts will make decisions that benefit those areas to some disproportionate degree. There is no reason to believe that the self-interest of urban and suburban representatives is stronger or weaker than that of rural legislators. Yet discerning what distribution of state resources would constitute a disproportionate share for any part of any state

is extraordinarily difficult and bound to be largely subjective. For one thing, state spending cannot help but to focus on the places where people live; population-based formulas will dictate spending levels in a host of important areas within the state budget, and high-population counties and cities have their own resource bases with which to fund schools, parks, social services, and other government functions and civic amenities. Moreover, the categories of urban and suburban might describe residential environments that differ from rural ones, but it is not true that urban and suburban legislators think and act alike (implying that their preferences will always outvote the wishes of rural members), or that they perceive local and state issues in identical ways.

Absent a simple measure that would indicate fairness in the distribution of state resources, it is more useful to understand the motivations of legislators in general, and to use these lessons to evaluate the concept of representational deficits for rural Minnesota in particular. Four factors in particular stand out in this analysis as essential to understand: styles of legislative representation; the unique political culture of Minnesota; the role of interest groups in the legislative process; and the role of legislative leadership, especially the presence of key legislative leaders who represent rural districts.

**Representation styles and consequences.** From the founding of the American republic, political leaders understood that legislators would represent their constituents and home areas with vigor; this understanding came with due concern for the resulting effects on government and the governed. Madison's classic commentary on factions in *Federalist #10* recognizes this tension in pondering the optimal size of districts in terms of the likely focus of legislators' interests:

By enlarging too much the number of electors [i.e., numerically large districts], you render the representative too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render him unduly attached to these, and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national [and state] objects.

Note the interplay of personal and public goals for legislators that Madison cites: "local circumstances and lesser [read numerically small but still important] interests" must be acknowledged and understood by representatives, but these same elected leaders must

also see the big picture, serving the interests of their state at large rather than only the narrow concerns of their constituents.

Madison believed as an article of faith that citizens would choose enough legislators possessing the proper attitudes to “refine and enlarge the public views,” so that factions — especially locally strong political interests — could be controlled by representative government at the national and state levels. But no guarantees exist, and the tension between a legislator’s role as delegate of her constituents’ desires and trustee of her state/nation’s best interests endures— in fact must endure within our system of government.

Most conceptions of representative roles assume that election results reflect underlying public preferences for a particular party or candidate, and by extension a ratification of sorts for party and candidate platform stances. The empirical evidence suggests this does in fact occur across the American states. In a major 1993 study, Robert Erikson and colleagues found that state Democratic and Republican party elites were more liberal and conservative, respectively, than their citizenry (1993, 96-119). This is no surprise, and it is surely still true today in a more polarized political environment. More importantly, Erikson and colleagues also found that state Democratic and Republican parties did respond to public opinion, were rewarded or punished at the polls for their responsiveness (or lack thereof), and tended to moderate their policy positions as a consequence of their responsiveness, “perhaps even to the point of enacting similar policies when in legislative control” (Erikson et al. 1993, 139).

**Political culture.** The tendency of state parties to move to the center is mitigated by state political culture, among other factors. In the late 1960s the political scientist Daniel Elazar devised a typology of political subcultures for American states, connecting his categories with styles of representation and policy enactment. Elazar conceptualized political culture as “commonly held assumptions about the proper roles of the citizenry and elites and about the appropriate goals of government action” (Erikson et al. 1993, 152). Elazar classified Minnesota as a moralistic political subculture, indicating an overriding concern for the public welfare and “the belief that government should be an active agent for the public good” (Erikson et al. 1993, 153).<sup>3</sup> Nearly all Minnesota political analysts have agreed with this classification, finding evidence of moralistic approaches to policymaking under both DFL and IR/Republican administrations, at least through Arne Carlson’s tenure as governor (e.g. Elazar, Gray and Spano 1999).

Using Elazar’s moralistic classification, Erikson and colleagues

found that when such states have political parties offering clear and distinct policy positions, small electoral shifts can produce sizeable changes in policy — that is, winning parties will seek to implement their own particular vision for the state, interpreting election results as a mandate for a shift to their policies (Erikson et al. 1993, 173-176). Indeed, this phenomenon is considered one of the signal virtues of a moralistic political culture. In one form or another, the general public considers it appropriate that a victorious political party will move toward enactment of its platform, thus perpetuating a cyclical process in which electorates reward or punish parties for their successes and failures in the policy process.

**Interest group politics.** Beyond political culture and the interplay of public opinion and party platforms, a third significant factor to consider when interpreting legislative behavior is the growing visibility and importance of outside influences — interest groups and lobbyists. Nearly every state has seen an increase in the number of organized interests since the mid-1970s; moreover, institutions (as opposed to membership groups and associational groups) constitute the largest share of organized interests in Minnesota and other states, with their share of the interest universe rising over time as well (Gray and Lowery 1999: 245-251). Even so, the universe of interest organizations and lobbying groups is not at all constant over time; one study found that a high percentage of Minnesota's registered lobby groups in 1980 had ceased to function as lobby groups (and in many cases had ceased to exist at all) by 1990 (Gray and Lowery 1999: 247).

The capacity of organized interests to influence the legislative process rests with resources as well as visibility and the possession of what political scientist James Q. Wilson terms a "niche," in which a group has "a distinctive area of competence, a clearly demarcated and exclusively served clientele or membership, an undisputed jurisdiction over a function, service, goal, or cause" (Wilson 1973, 263). One example of a successful niche organization in Minnesota would be Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (MCCL), the state's most visible pro-life organization. A major reason why leading national Christian conservative groups (most notably the Christian Coalition) have failed to gain a foothold in Minnesota politics is because MCCL has so effectively secured its niche, and the consequent flow of resources and attention that accompany its position (Gilbert and Peterson 2003).

Even the successful acquisition of a niche in some specific policy area ensures no success for organized interests. In practice, in Minnesota and most other states, interest groups find themselves

constantly struggling with competing groups as well as like-minded allies. As a consequence, legislators who are open to suggestion will rarely hear only one side of an issue. The common and simplistic wisdom, therefore, that interest groups frequently “buy” votes and significantly influence legislative outcomes is not borne out by logic or the empirical evidence. Instead, for most issues interests check other interests, which only complicates and impedes the passage of legislation in state governments (Gray and Lowery 1999, 262).

Moreover, in considering interest group influence from the perspective of rural legislators and rural issues, it is not clear that interests offer a significant advantage or boost to the chances of legislative success. Most statewide groups are organized around and focused on specific policy domains, not geographic areas, and hence their goals will surely include issues of greater significance to outstate Minnesota but are not likely to focus exclusively on such issues; nor are most groups likely to pose policy questions and solutions aimed specifically at rural communities and problems. This problem is worth returning to later, but it should be noted here that a relative lack of visible group focus on rural issues does not at all imply that most interest groups in Minnesota are unconcerned with specific issues facing rural communities. Organized interests, in other words, are inevitably part of the equation when analyzing legislative actions, but their organization along policy lines does not preclude the possibility that such groups can work together on outstate concerns.

**Legislative leadership.** A final factor that accounts for legislative behavior and the effectiveness of rural representation is who holds the leadership positions within the legislature. If it is true that all legislators will put the interests of their constituents at or near the top of their personal agendas in office, then it must also be true that legislators with more power inside legislative bodies will more effectively serve and satisfy constituent wishes. The academic literature and journalistic accounts of the U.S. Congress are filled with anecdotes about committee chairs bringing their districts more than their fair share of discretionary funds, using their influence to gain tangible benefits for constituents. Also worth considering, key committee chairs and party leaders can direct the flow of funds to other members’ districts, trading on such favors later when votes and support are needed.

State governments have a more limited capacity to offer specific benefits to legislators and their districts than does the national government. Regardless, Minnesota’s legislature has structured itself in ways quite similar to Congress, resulting in numerous power



centers to be occupied by senators and representatives. Who gets to serve in key positions depends on seniority, experience, expertise, adherence to party goals, personality and other tangible and intangible factors. There is no doubt, however, as will be elaborated later, that party caucuses seek to use major legislative appointments to satisfy different factions within the party coalition, a practice that certainly results in rural legislators holding some of the high profile, most powerful positions in the state House and Senate.

This is admittedly an overly simplified description of how particular legislators come to occupy their seats of power. The essential point is that if a representational deficit does exist for rural Minnesota, the most direct means of counteracting or offsetting that deficit is to have rural legislators occupy some of the most powerful positions in St. Paul. This is of course precisely the situation we find in Minnesota today, and its consequences are worth exploring at length below.

### **Evaluating rural representation in Minnesota today**

Each of the four factors discussed in the previous section has some role to play in considering how rural Minnesota is represented in St. Paul, and the extent to which rural representation is effective. The importance of representational style is perhaps the most difficult factor to pin down with any certainty. A typical rural legislator advertises her work in office with a strong emphasis on issues facing her own constituents. Sample press release titles on one current member's website highlight support for ethanol as a rural economic development strategy, comment on a local county as "a great place for farmers," and generally focus on what matters to constituents. While the specific issues may be unique to rural districts, the pattern of responding to local needs is no different in form to what one finds in the press releases of members representing Minneapolis or Stillwater. Moreover, a perusal of the press releases of DFL rural representatives versus Republican outstate legislators reveals nearly identical themes and issues. The stereotypical belief that all DFLers favor governmental solutions while all Republicans favor market-based and private solutions is not supported empirically; rural legislators of both parties tend to celebrate the unique nature of their communities and to call for greater government-sponsored economic development strategies targeted at rural communities and rural issues (not to mention support for school funding, health care, elderly programs, and law enforcement).

In other words, representational style alone cannot close the representational deficit that rural Minnesota faces. If all legislators

push their own district's needs to some extent, rural legislators are simply outnumbered and always will be. Intriguingly, a recent study of state legislatures that have implemented term limits for members found that in such states, legislators spent less time working to secure specific benefits for their districts and spent more time thinking about statewide concerns (Brace and Ward 1999, 93). But the term limit movement has petered out at all levels across the nation, stymied by court rulings and the changing views of former proponents who now find themselves enjoying seniority advantages they find hard to cede voluntarily. It is unlikely that a unicameral arrangement would alter the fundamental representational dynamic, either, although this possibility has at least a chance (albeit quite slim) of coming into existence.

Interest group activity, for reasons noted earlier, is also unlikely to advance the cause of rural Minnesota in ways that offset the numerical advantages of urban-suburban districts, let alone to promote policies that disproportionately benefit outstate communities. Environmental and education issues, broadly construed, might offer the most benefits from organized interest activity. To be sure, Minnesota like most states finds environmental issues often typecast into misleading either-or choices (i.e. "jobs versus preservation") that hamper progress, but the importance of parks and natural resources within the state's overall culture commits a broad segment of the state's population to caring about the future of these resources. Consideration of environmental challenges is an issue that resonates across the state, rather than within one type of community, a key factor that suggests rural legislators (in whose districts most state parks and national forests lie) will find many allies among organized interests and fellow legislators.

Political culture and leadership offer more direct venues for the exercise of political power from rural Minnesota. Beyond the moralistic style that leads legislators of all stripes to consider government intervention as a legitimate response to public policy concerns, issues facing rural Minnesota are also confronted most directly by a bipartisan legislative cohort. Most rural legislators today are Republican, as noted earlier, but outstate areas also include historically strong DFL regions to the west along the borders with North and South Dakota, and on the Iron Range. These areas represent the seedbeds of the DFL's founding era and remain highly important symbolically even as they shrink numerically. Considering the close divisions between the two traditional major parties in the state legislature today, every district is important and thus the

unique political interests of rural members from both parties must be accounted for in some tangible fashion.

A final consideration in this partisan analysis is whether legislative control by one party or the other inherently favors or hurts rural interests. Once again, the moralistic strain of Minnesota politics argues against significant differences. Although current Republican rhetoric (especially the battle cries of key interests like the Taxpayers League) is anti-government, often stridently so, one can point to numerous initiatives during the Pawlenty administration that have directly benefited rural communities, or that were consonant with issues of importance to rural legislators. In fact it is striking to find solid Republican support, from the Governor and legislative leadership, for several such initiatives opposed by visible Republican ally groups — for example the JOBZ program, expanding ethanol content in gasoline, moving pseudoephedrine sales behind pharmacy counters.<sup>4</sup> The evidence suggests that rural Minnesota is not disadvantaged by Republican control of the state government, nor it is necessarily advantaged by DFL control; as long as both traditional major parties hold a significant share of rural district seats, as is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future, rural interests will be represented and both party leaderships have a vested stake in responding.

Moreover, the visibility and salience of rural issues are heightened by intangible cultural factors as well. There is something politically important in the idea that the “real Minnesota” starts beyond the 494-694 beltway, and by extension the belief that real Minnesotans reside outside the Twin Cities region. Such an ethos often permeates uniquely Minnesotan cultural forms. Lake Wobegon most definitely does not lie inside the beltway, and images of church basement lutefisk dinners and Scandinavian social reserve describe rural communities much better than suburban ones. One consequence of this ethos is that candidates and public officials pay attention to rural Minnesota as a way of demonstrating authenticity with their political base. They show concern in part because concern for rural Minnesota’s future is warranted, but also because it is politically useful to appear informed and involved in order to gain credibility and win votes. A DFLer must do well on the Iron Range in any statewide race, mobilizing voters and generating some buzz, and this perception often rests out of proportion to the Range’s actual numerical contribution to DFL vote totals. Norm Coleman’s 1998 campaign for governor notably failed to connect with outstate issues and residents, leaving the impression that the city-bred St. Paul mayor wasn’t ready to serve the entire state; by contrast, in the

2002 U.S. Senate race Coleman was far more effective and credible in discussing agricultural and economic development issues, a significant factor that helped him achieve parity in his race with Paul Wellstone, and eventual victory over Walter Mondale.

Hence in numerous ways the political and social culture of Minnesota supports the interests of rural populations. But many of these connections remain intangible, and by themselves they offer a weak foundation for countering real or perceived representational deficits. More important to the equation is leadership, the most obvious and most salient way in which rural representational deficits are “corrected” in Minnesota today. Senate Majority Leader Dean Johnson represents Willmar, continuing the recent tradition of outstate DFL senators like Roger Moe and John Hottinger leading that body; Senate Minority Leader Dick Day hails from Owatonna, on the outskirts of the Twin Cities region. On the House side, farmer and Kenyon resident Steve Sviggum has served nearly a decade as Speaker; the GOP House leadership team is split between suburban and rural members. Interestingly, only the DFL House leadership team shows a tilt toward the Twin Cities (leader Matt Entenza and two of three minority whips; the third whip, Tony Sertich, represents Chisholm on the Iron Range).

We cannot definitively say that state-level interest in rural issues depends on having rural legislators in these positions of power; many more factors pertain to what kinds of bills are proposed let alone whether legislation passes or fails. However, in combination with political culture there is no doubt that more than mere symbolism accompanies the composition of the current state legislative leadership. Legislative leadership carries with it the capacity to direct policy agendas, to frame issues in ways that benefit the leaders’ constituencies, and to help reinforce unity among the disparate (geographical, if not ideological) factions that comprise the GOP and DFL. Unity within party coalitions is also a feature of moralistic political subcultures, and the presence of rural members in the highest legislative offices contributes not only to this unity (however imperfectly realized it may be in practice), but also to the presentation of significant issues as statewide, Minnesota concerns, rather than as concerns affecting one or two areas of Minnesota. This final point offers an important lesson for rural Minnesota’s political interests: the best means for rendering representational deficits moot is to frame issues in ways that bring rural and urban-suburban legislators into the same conversation about shared concerns, rather than separating issues in ways that highlight rural members as numerically weak or deficient compared to their Twin Cities area peers.

## **Concluding thoughts: Multiple issue clusters, one state**

Increasingly there are encouraging signs that legislators from both traditional major parties have begun — once again, returning to the norm in Minnesota for most of the post-World War II era — to perceive most critical state issues as common problems rather than as problems confined to one region, one type of community, or one economic sector. Framing policy problems as statewide involves more than rhetoric; it is a substantive approach that offers opportunities to build bipartisan coalitions, and it provides a way for representatives from all corners of the state to see their constituents' agendas translated into sensible, effective public policy.

Several recent examples suggest the possibilities. The problem of methamphetamine production came to the forefront just a few years ago due to concerns especially in outstate communities, where sparsely populated areas were more likely to be used for production. But meth usage and abuse, and their concomitant social problems, were never confined to small towns. Relatively quickly, a coalition of organized interests and legislators moved to implement solutions that so far look promising in addressing the problems — increasing attention to drug education, restriction of ingredient sales, stiffer penalties for producers, more detailed disclosure requirements in real estate transactions. This is a wide ranging list of reforms, most of which passed easily through the legislature.

A better example with considerable potential for reshaping Minnesota public debate is the bipartisan 2020 Caucus, a mix of urban, suburban and rural legislators with a forward-looking agenda framing key state issues in broad terms (Sturdevant 2005).<sup>5</sup> The issue agenda of the 2020 Caucus is replete with problems and concerns that strike directly at quality of life issues across the state: early childhood education as a wise investment for strengthening K-12 education and a host of related social systems; immigration patterns and the growing diversification of the state population; the “graying” of Minnesota’s population and its implications for health care, social services, and community life; supporting transportation systems that respond to energy concerns and residential concentrations. None of these issues, nor any of the other important problems identified by this group and its allies, is confined to one type of community or one region of Minnesota. More significantly, the proposals that will surely come from the 2020 Caucus’s work are most unlikely to devolve into “us versus them” political battles that burn bridges rather than building them. The founding principles guiding the development of specific policies to meet identified needs

already incorporate the tools that overcome such negative ways of thinking. And the presence of rural legislators among the mix of guiding hands will help ensure that the statewide focus remains central to this caucus's vision.

Judging from the public reaction to the last four state legislative sessions, it is clear to most Minnesotans that the work of their state legislature must take a different tack. Rural Minnesota can only benefit from positive, future-oriented, broad-based strategies to confront the problems facing rural areas and the state as a whole. Rural Minnesota will also continue to reap the benefits that attentive, highly qualified representatives — especially those serving in leadership capacities — can bring back to their constituents. Most important, an attitude change that frames the state's concerns as shared ones — and frames solutions that benefit all sectors — offers the foundation for a representative system that encourages all legislators "to comprehend and pursue great ... objects" rather than narrow, parochial goals. Rural Minnesota is not likely to ever reverse its numerical representational deficit; hence recasting rural interests as Minnesota interests offers the best prospects for the future.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> One such map, showing 2000 election returns, can be found at: <<http://nationalatlas.gov/printable/elections.html#list>>. Note the reverse color scheme of this map; Democratic counties are shown in red, Republican counties in blue.

<sup>2</sup> The most detailed, accessible state legislative district maps can be found in print via the *Legislative Manual* (2003-04 edition, pp. 294-295), available in most public and academic libraries; and on the web at the Secretary of State site: <[http://www.sos.state.mn.us/docs/state\\_mn\\_oss\\_website.pdf](http://www.sos.state.mn.us/docs/state_mn_oss_website.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> Political analysts today tend to vest the term "moralistic" with very different connotations. Elazar's use of the term does not imply or refer specifically to moral-social issues such as abortion or gay rights; the more general idea of government as a legitimate agent of change and societal improvement lies at the heart of this categorization. Certainly the advocacy of different policies on these highly charged contemporary issues is consistent with moralistic governing, but in fact any significant use of government to achieve social change is a hallmark of the moralistic subculture.

<sup>4</sup> See the Taxpayers League legislative scorecard (<<http://www.taxpayersleague.org/pdf/legscorecard2005.pdf>>) to note the language with which this group describes many of the proposals noted here.

<sup>5</sup> The founding eight members and their districts are: Senators Scott Dibble (DFL-Minneapolis), Geoff Michel (R-Edina), Mee Moua (DFL-St. Paul), and Julie Rosen (R-Fairmont); and Representatives Joe Atkins (DFL-Inver Grove Heights), Laura Brod (R-New Prague), Paul Kohls (R-Victoria), and Paul Thissen (DFL-Minneapolis).

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