



League of Women Voters of Minnesota Records

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FINAL REPORT
2000 MINNESOTA COMPACT
ON CAMPAIGN STANDARDS

Anne Borgen, Chair
Minnesota Compact 2000
League of Women Voters of Minnesota

April 6, 2001



THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

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FINAL REPORT ON THE 2000 MINNESOTA COMPACT ON CAMPAIGN STANDARDS

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The League of Women Voters of Minnesota Education Fund took the lead in a 2000 campaign reform initiative known as the Minnesota Compact on Campaign Standards. The Compact promoted voluntary standards designed to raise the level of political discussion among Minnesota candidates, campaigns, the media, and the voters. It sought to persuade candidates, political parties and interest groups to stress issues and candidate qualifications and minimize attacks. It sought to strengthen the tradition of substantive debates. It asked news organizations to emphasize coverage of campaign substance over campaign strategy. It encouraged citizens to participate more fully in the election process.

The Compact standards were voluntary with the only enforcement that of public opinion expressed by the media, fellow candidates and political parties and the public.

This project was a continuation of an election reform initiative begun in 1996 when the Humphrey Institute assembled a coalition of community, education, media and political groups in response to an article by Star Tribune reporter, Tom Hamburger. During a period of highly negative campaigns on the national level he challenged Minnesotans to improve the tenor of political campaigns in our state. The coalition wrote and promoted standards, called planks, for candidates, campaign advertising, the media and the public. Those standards are still basic to the Compact.

In 1998 the Minnesota Compact became a project of the League of Women Voters of Minnesota Education Fund and operated as a part of a national project with the Alliance for Better Campaigns. That project was funded in part by the PEW Charitable Trust and by the Martin Foundation.

The 2000 Minnesota Compact, in its third election cycle, was once again an LWVMN Education Fund project and was funded by the Martin Foundation. The League convened the steering committee of interested individuals and organizations. All major political parties were invited to attend the meetings and to comment during the discussions. The group agreed that past efforts to involve

citizens directly in the Compact by forming discussion groups or debate watching parties were not effective. The involvement of individuals was strongly encouraged but without an attempt to organize them.

Committee members and three political scientists agreed to promote the standards and to discuss them if called upon by the media to do so. Members agreed that debates had played an important role in the last election cycle and agreed to meet with the major television stations in an effort to secure their cooperation again. The League agreed to revise, print and distribute the standards in a new brochure.

The Campaign Standards

Relatively minor revisions for simplicity and clarity were made to the wording of the campaign standards of earlier projects and submitted to the committee for comment. Those revisions were incorporated into a new brochure format and printed and distributed by the League to candidates, political parties and the media statewide.

Press Releases

The League issued a press release when the standards were officially mailed. *See a copy in this report.*

Candidate Debates

The steering committee met with representatives from WCCO, KSTP, KARE, KMSP, and Channel Two to discuss the possibility of cooperative debates for the candidates for US Senator from Minnesota. The "roadblock" debate put on by all of the stations except WCCO in 1998 was discussed. WCCO was committed to a League debate again and once more declined to participate in a general effort. KARE, KSTP, and Channel Two all expressed a high degree of dissatisfaction with the criteria used by the League for inclusion of candidates and in the end went their own way.

Those criteria called for the inclusion of major party candidates. Major party is defined in Minnesota as any party that runs a candidate for statewide office, receives a vote in every county and 5% of the total vote. By those guidelines four candidates qualified for the 2000 senatorial race - those of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor, Republican, Independence, and Taxpayer parties. WCCO and KMSP agreed to work with the League on producing debates with all four candidates. The others did not. There was no cooperative roadblock debate in 2000, but there were others produced independently. *A copy of the debates criteria is included.*

Other Media:

Anne Borgen spoke to a conference on election coverage for smaller Minnesota newspapers sponsored by the Minnesota News Council. She promoted use of the Minnesota Compact where appropriate as a basis for covering and evaluating regional and local races as well as candidates for state and national office.

She also wrote a commentary that was used by several smaller papers.

The *Star Tribune* did not give the Compact coverage in their paper and the *Pioneer Press* does not ever cover it- probably because it was a *Star Tribune* reporter who first issued the challenge in 1996.

Some representative clippings about the Compact are included in this report.

Conclusions:

The Minnesota Compact is a good concept and it was well worth the effort to keep it alive for another election cycle. The Compact is unique because it distributes responsibility for better elections among all of us. It asks for improved campaign conduct from the candidates, the political

parties, interest groups, the media and the public. It encourages a spirit of civility even in hotly contested races because that is better in the long run for the public.

There are, however, problems inherent in the structure of the Compact.

Political parties object to the more stringent provisions of the advertising standards and there is no way for a 501C.3 organization like the League to enforce it. Issuance of an ad watch report could be construed as support for those candidates whose ads we did find acceptable.

Promotion of the project in this election suffered from the lack of highly visible members of the past such as Tim Penny and Dean Barkley. Mr. Penny was considering a run himself and later managing a primary campaign for another candidate. Mr. Barkley was not involved at all. This kind of effort requires high name recognition to persuade candidates and the media to pay more attention.

The Minnesota Broadcasters Association did not promote working with the League on debates as it has in the past. That cooperation depends on the person who fills the job and on the current political climate. In 2000 there were more candidates than the broadcasters wished to cover. The League's criteria are issued well in advance of the time television stations plan their coverage and cannot be changed after the fact even if they prove awkward.

The League was not able to find a project director. While funding was adequate to cover the costs of formatting, printing, and distributing the revised standards and the letters to the media, the candidates and the parties, it was not adequate to mount a full-scale publicity campaign. The Compact's effectiveness could have been greater with highly visible and well-known spokespersons.