Looking Back, Moving Forward:  
The State’s Political Leadership Weighs in on Democracy in Minnesota

By Kathy Bonnifield, Colleen Gross Ebinger, Leota Lind, Colin Marsh and Nance Purcell

Minnesotans have called for the legislative session of 2014 to be an “Unsession,” a time for eliminating outdated laws and making government better, faster, and simpler. As Humphrey Policy Fellows, we spent eight months surveying elder statesmen and women, current government officials, activists, lobbyists, and community groups that interact with government. Focusing on the legislative branch, we asked the following questions, “What has worked well in the past, what works well now and what changes could be made to create a legislature that better serves us all?” The results alternately reinforced our perceptions and surprised us.

Research Methodology
Our research process was two-pronged:

- First, we conducted interviews with 20 past and current leaders – including elected officials from both the legislative and executive branches, former members of Congress, appointed state officials, civil servants, community advocates and activists, and professionals from think tanks, lobbying firms, and the media. (See Appendix A for a list of those interviewed and Appendix B for the questions they were asked.)

- Second, we culled through these interviews to identify common themes and questions, and used that information to construct an eight-question survey (see Appendix C) that we distributed to all members of the 2013 Minnesota legislature. We then analyzed these results by answer and by demographic information (including party affiliation, legislative chamber, length of time in office, gender, and geographic location). The overall response rate was 24 percent, including 20 percent of all House DFL members, 16 percent of GOP House members, 25 percent of DFL Senate members, and 11 percent of GOP Senate members. See Appendix D for broad results and data sets from this survey.

On Minnesota’s Political Culture
Several themes emerged from our conversations with 20 past and present political leaders.

On Minnesota’s governing culture: There was a general sense that Minnesota has long been a state of clean politics, generally collaborative government and strong ethics. One long-time, highly regarded legislator noted that, “Minnesotans take government seriously.”
On positive attributes of Minnesota government: Many cited a state culture of collective action and of policy innovation, with some specifically lauding policy incubators such as the Citizens League and Minnesota Center for Fiscal Excellence (formerly Minnesota Taxpayers Association), which they say help to create bipartisan and “common sense” policy solutions to the state’s problems.

On what’s not working in Minnesota government: Common concerns raised by those we interviewed included the corrupting influence of money in politics (and the unintended consequences of some efforts to mitigate the influence of money, such as campaign finance laws and the gift ban), the unending election cycle, low pay for legislators, political polarization and demonization, and the caucus/party system (being either too strong or not strong enough). A number of politicians who served mainly in the ‘70s, ‘80s, and/or early ‘90s bemoan today’s proliferation of advocacy groups that focus on very narrow topics; they believe that this dilutes the ability of elected officials to focus broadly on “good government”.

In our poll of legislators, we probed whether or not they agreed with the positive attributes of Minnesota government that had been identified from our interviews. The charts below show the two chambers’ overall degree of agreement with each of the characteristics:

![Chart showing agreement levels for positive attributes of Minnesota government]

When responses are broken out by party, however, we see some dramatic differences of opinion. The Republican Party, currently in the minority in both chambers, has a far less positive view of state government than does the majority DFL Party.
“The characteristics below were cited as positive attributes of Minnesota government. Please respond to the following: Minnesota government is/has...”

### Transparent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>House DFL</th>
<th>House GOP</th>
<th>Senate DFL</th>
<th>Senate GOP</th>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
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### Innovative

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<th>House GOP</th>
<th>Senate DFL</th>
<th>Senate GOP</th>
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<td>23%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>8%</td>
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Ideas for Structural Change and Legislators’ Reactions
In the survey we conducted with legislators serving during the 2013 session, three possible structural changes received the most intense responses—either positive or negative. They are: officially moving redistricting responsibilities to the courts, implementing ranked choice voting statewide, and staggering Senate terms. We explore each one below.

Officially move redistricting responsibilities to the courts

How it works now
Redistricting of congressional, legislative, and Metropolitan Council districts is a statutory responsibility of the legislature. However, given deadlocks between the legislature and governor, the courts had the final say in drawing the boundaries for each of the last two redistricting cycles.

How other states do it
While Minnesota is not unusual in redistricting through the legislature and falling back on the courts in cases of deadlock, other options are available. 21 U.S. states utilize some form of a redistricting commission. Of those, 13 use those commissions exclusively (meaning the legislature does not have a role in the process); seven use the commissions as “advisory committees” to the legislature; and Iowa has a process unlike any other in which it relies on nonpartisan legislative staffers to draw the new lines.

Changes to explore
Our survey asked whether officially turning redistricting over to the courts (we did not ask about a commission) would improve Minnesota’s quality of government. When reviewing all survey responses on this question, only 15 percent believed that the change would negatively impact Minnesota. There was some difference in belief according to branch of state government: while not one Republican senator responded negatively to the idea of courts handling redistricting, 40 percent of Republican House respondents were against the idea. Over 85 percent of the House DFL members and 70 percent of the Senate DFL members indicated that the change would either greatly improve or somewhat improve Minnesota’s quality of government. “I was very surprised by this result,” remarked Professor Larry Jacobs, director of the Center for the Study of Politics & Governance, which houses the Humphrey Policy Fellows program. “It may be a good time to review the system and make any changes now, long before the next redistricting battle looms.”
Implement Ranked Choice Voting Statewide

*How it works now*
In Minnesota, Ranked Choice Voting has been implemented in two municipalities—Minneapolis and St. Paul. In St. Paul, it applies to municipal elections for mayor and councilmembers. In Minneapolis, however, it also applies to elections for the Board of Estimate and Taxation, and the Park and Recreation Board (both at-large and by district).

*How other states do it*
Typically RCV applies only to municipal elections (mainly mayoral elections, but in some instances its use is expanded to other municipal contests). However, five states allow an RCV option for overseas and military voters in some elections. Louisiana was the first state to implement RCV for overseas and out-of-state military voters in both federal and state runoffs in the early 1990s. The remaining states that implemented RCV for overseas voters started in the mid-2000s. South Carolina, for example, implemented RCV for overseas voters in federal and state primary elections in 2006.

Champions of RCV contend that this method creates avenues for third party candidates, results in more civil candidate debates and—because it is one single election—is less expensive than having a primary followed by a general election. They also point out that if there are two rounds of elections, fewer voters turn out during primaries. Finally, overseas voters need only mail one single ballot.
Changes to explore
Since the issue of Ranked Choice Voting was often raised during our interviews, we used our survey to ask legislators what impact they expected it would have on the quality of Minnesota government. Survey responses indicated both limited support and strong opposition to a broad-based Ranked Choice Voting system in Minnesota. Over 35 percent of respondents believed that ranked choice voting would have a negative effect on Minnesota’s quality of government. But, when looking at party affiliation, Republicans opposed it at a much greater rate than Democrats.

Improvements made to Minnesota’s elections system—including allowing election officials to deliver blank ballots by email and fax, eliminating witness and notary requirements, and centralizing communications with a UOCAVA board—had a positive impact for overseas voters in the 2008 election. According to an Overseas Vote Foundation report that focused on the 2008 election, "quantitative and qualitative evidence marks Minnesota as a clear electoral success story for its absentee voters abroad." Furthermore, the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, which was signed into law in October 2009, created additional safeguards to assure overseas voter participation. Specifically, within Minnesota, primary election dates were changed from September to August. This change provides additional time for overseas voters to return ballots for general elections. Without a groundswell of support or compelling additional reasons for converting to RCV for overseas voters, it is hard to imagine such a change being adopted.

Stagger Senate terms
How it works now
In Minnesota, all state Senate seats were up for reelection in 2010 and 2012, and will be contested again in 2016 and 2020. Thus, some terms last two years while

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others last four. Regardless of the length of the term, all state senators are up for reelection at the same time.

**How other states do it**
While 28 states have staggered terms, the length of the Senate terms differs. For example, in Montana terms are four years; half of the Senate is elected biennially. After redistricting, senators who are not up for reelection are assigned a new district. In Illinois, they have a two-year term and two four-year terms. The sequence could be 4-4-2, 4-2-4, or 2-4-4, which means that every two years some state senators are up for reelection.

In the remaining states all Senate seats are up for reelection at the same time. Seven states—including Minnesota—have state Senate terms lasting either two years or four years; twelve states have two-year terms.

**States with Staggered State Senate**

Data based on information from Ballotpedia: Yellow indicates states that have staggered elections. Note: Nebraska is a special case. Although there is no Senate, the state’s unicameral chamber does stagger its terms and thus is depicted here in yellow.

**Changes to explore**
Advocates for staggered terms argue the change would improve the institution by forcing its membership to have some political skin in the game during every election. They also contend that the Senate can lose touch during four-year stretches...
when none of its members face the voters. Further, staggered terms can help maintain institutional memory by limiting the number of senators up for reelection during any one cycle. This is especially true for swing elections that create high turnover. The institution is more likely to change abruptly based on temporary political winds. This was not the historical intent of the Senate as a moderating body.

The guidelines for House and Senate terms are outlined in the State Constitution and any change would thus require passage of a constitutional amendment. Constitutional amendments require passage by both the House and the Senate, and then a ‘yes’ vote on a majority of all ballots cast in a particular election. While Minnesota has amended its constitution 120 times, a change would still require strong legislative champions and a highly organized campaign.

Also of note, because of the redistricting charge to adjust both House and Senate districts every decade (based on population), it is likely (though not inevitable, as some states have shown) that all Senate seats will be in contention at least one election every ten years. Working under this assumption, some advocate changing to 4- and 6-year staggered terms (beginning after redistricting), while others support staggering the current 2-4-4 system.

Among our survey respondents, only two percent of all House members reported that staggering Senate terms would have a negative impact. House GOP member responses leaned more towards the belief that staggering Senate terms would either greatly improve or somewhat improve the institution than did House DFL members. The Senate’s response differed from the House’s response, with an equal number of senators indicating that staggering the terms would either have no effect or would improve the Senate. Slightly less than 20 percent of senators indicated that they believed it would have a negative effect. One might interpret these responses as legislators being more enthusiastic about recommending changes to the other chamber, and less enthusiastic about changes to their own.
Looking Ahead
While we do not purport to have created a scientific process, we do believe that our findings offer a window into possible improvements to government from those who know it best. We hope that they seed and spark more conversations about opportunities to improve our current system. At the very least, they give us something we rarely hear: a collective opinion from our state's legislative body.
APPENDICES

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Appendix A. INTERVIEW LIST

The authors gratefully acknowledge the following people for generously giving of their time to help our team better understand Minnesota’s political landscape, both past and present. We were consistently impressed by their love for this state and their commitment to improving the lives of the people who live within its borders.

Note: Positions and affiliations for each person are not exhaustive.

- Margaret Anderson Kelliher – President & CEO, MN High Tech Association, 2010–Present; DFL-endorsed candidate for Governor, 2010; Speaker of the MN House of Representatives 2007-2011; State Representative, 1999-2011
- Marcia Avner - Avner Consulting, 2010-Present; Public Policy Director, MN Council of Nonprofits, 1996-2010
- Terri Bonoff – State Senator, 2005-Present; Former Member, Minnetonka Planning Commission; Former Co-chair and Lobbyist, Hopkins School District Legislative Action Commission
- Bill Clausen - Director and Assistant Director, Management Analysis & Development, 1997-Present; Consultant, State Planning Agency, 1988-1997
- Matt Dean – State Representative, 2005-Present; Majority Leader of the MN House of Representatives, 2011-2013
- Nina Huntington – Steele County Commissioner, 2012-Present; Founder and Director, Access to Dental Care, 2003-2009
- Sheila Kiscaden – Olmsted County Commissioner, 2013-Present; State Senator 1993-2006
- Tom Lehman – Lobbyist, The Lehman Group
- Ian Marsh - Government Relations Republican Strategist and Senior Lobbyist, Lockridge, Grindal & Nauen, 2012-Present; Legislative Director, Minnesota House of Representatives Republican Caucus, 2004-2012
- Rebecca Otto - State Auditor, 2006-Present; State Representative, 2003-2005; Former Member, Forest Lake School Board
- Tim Penney – President and CEO, Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, April 2007 – Present; State Representative, 1983-1995
• Jeffrey Schiff – Medical Director for Minnesota Health Care Programs, Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2006-Present
• Vin Webber – Senior Fellow, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1994-Present; Managing Partner, Clark and Weinstock, 1994-Present; U.S. Representative, 1980-1992; Senior Aide, Senator Rudy Boschwitz, 1977-1980; Press Secretary, Representative Tom Hagedorn, 1974-1975
Appendix B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of government?

2. What key attributes contribute to successful government in Minnesota?

3. What gets in the way of successful government in Minnesota?

4. What makes a legislator effective?

5. Based on the attributes you identified:
   - Who is a current legislator from your party that you think is effective? Why?
   - Who is a current legislator from a different party that you think is effective? Why?

6. What do we do well in Minnesota government? ... key components or examples?

7. Are there aspects of Minnesota government that are not working? If yes, what would you like to see changed?

8. Other thoughts on current political realities?

9. Some have proposed specific changes that they believe will improve Minnesota's system of government. In your opinion, what impact would the following possible changes have on the quality of governing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Would greatly improve</th>
<th>Would somewhat improve</th>
<th>Would have no effect</th>
<th>Would have a negative effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tightening restrictions/reporting requirements on political fundraising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abolishing the caucus system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turning redistricting decisions over to the courts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repealing or amending the gift ban</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instituting ranked choice voting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increasing salaries for legislators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other?</td>
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10. Would you like to comment on your responses?

Closing questions:
11. Is there anything that we haven’t covered that you would like to comment on?
12. Do you have suggestions of others we should interview?
Appendix C. SURVEY QUESTIONS

The characteristics below were cited as positive attributes of Minnesota government. Please respond to the following:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transparent</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong ethical standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effectively communicates to constituents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
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What impact would you expect the following changes to have on the quality of government in Minnesota?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greatly Improve</th>
<th>Somewhat Improve</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
<th>Negative Effect</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tighten restrictions/reporting requirements on political fundraising</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn redistricting decisions over to the courts (making official what is currently the de facto situation)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Amend the gift ban</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Revise compensation structure to expense reimbursement vs. per diem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lengthen terms in the House to mitigate a continuous campaign cycle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stagger Senate terms to maintain some institutional history across elections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implement ranked choice voting</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Biographical Information

Seniority (please choose one):
- First elected in or before 1995
- First elected between 1997-2003
- First elected between 2004-2007
- First elected between 2008-2011
- First elected in 2012 or after

Member of the:
- House
- Senate

Gender
- Female
- Male

Party Affiliation: ___________________________
- Metro
- Suburban
- Rural
Appendix D: ADDITIONAL DATA SETS OF SURVEY RESPONSES

Demographics - All Responses

**Length of Service**
- no Response
- after 2012
- 2008-2011
- 2004-2007
- 1997-2003
- Before 1995

**Member of:**
- No Response
- Senate
- House

**Location**
- No Response
- Suburban
- Rural
- Metro

**Party Affiliation**
- No Response
- GOP
- DFL

**Gender**
- No Response
- Female
- Male

**Response Rate**
- Overall
- DFL House
- GOP House
- DFL Senate
- GOP Senate
The characteristics below were cited as positive attributes of Minnesota government. All Responses

- Transparent
- Innovative
- Strong Ethical Standards
- Effectively Communicates to Constituents
- Collaborative

- Agree
- Disagree
- No Response
- ?
The characteristics below were cited as positive attributes of Minnesota government. House and Senate comparison.
The characteristics below were cited as positive attributes of Minnesota government.

House GOP/DFL and Senate GOP/DFL Comparison

**Transparent**

<table>
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<th>House DFL</th>
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<th>Senate DFL</th>
<th>Senate GOP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
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<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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**Innovative**

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<th>Senate GOP</th>
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<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
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**Ethical Standards**

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<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
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**Effectively Communicates**

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<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
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**Collaborates**

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<th>House GOP</th>
<th>Senate DFL</th>
<th>Senate GOP</th>
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<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The characteristics below were cited as positive attributes of Minnesota government. Length of service comparison (year first elected)
What impact would you expect the following changes to have on the quality of Government in Minnesota? All responses.

1. Tighten restrictions/reporting requirements on political fundraising.
2. Turn redistricting decisions over to the courts (making official what is currently the de facto situation)
3. Amend the gift ban
4. Revise compensation structure to expense reimbursement vs. per diem
5. Lengthen terms in the House to mitigate a continuous campaign cycle
6. Stagger Senate terms to maintain some institutional history across elections
7. Implement ranked choice voting
What impact would you expect the following changes to have on the quality of Government in Minnesota?

House and Senate Comparison

1. Tighten restrictions/reporting requirements on political fundraising

2. Turn redistricting decisions over to the courts (making official what is currently the de facto situation)

3. Amend the gift ban

4. Revise compensation structure to expense reimbursement vs. per diem

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What impact would you expect the following changes to have on the quality of Government in Minnesota?

**House GOP/DFL and Senate GOP/DFL Comparison**

1. Tighten restrictions/reporting requirements on political fundraising
2. Turn redistricting decisions over to the courts
3. Amend the gift ban
4. Revise compensation structure to expense reimbursement vs. per diem
5. Lengthen terms in the House to mitigate a continuous campaign cycle
6. Stagger Senate terms to maintain some institutional history across elections
7. Implement ranked choice voting

The charts above show the percentage of respondents from each party (DFL, GOP) in the House and Senate, and how they rate each change in terms of impact. The options for impact are: Negative Effect, No Effect, Somewhat Improve, Greatly Improve.
What impact would you expect the following changes to have on the quality of Government in Minnesota?

Length of service comparison (year first elected)

1. Tighten restrictions/reporting requirements on political fundraising.

2. Turn redistricting decisions over to the courts

3. Amend the gift ban

4. Revise compensation structure to expense reimbursement vs. per diem

5. Lengthen terms in the House to mitigate a continuous campaign cycle

6. Stagger Senate terms to maintain some institutional history across elections

7. Implement ranked choice voting
Appendix E. AUTHOR BIOS

Kathy Bonnifield’s nonprofit experiences include working at the Center for Victims of Torture, The McKnight Foundation, Citizens for Election Integrity Minnesota, and Planned Parenthood Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota. She volunteers her time as a board member at the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota and has been on a number of missions as a short-term election observer with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. She recently served on the Electronic Roster Task Force.

Colleen Gross Ebinger is founder and CEO of Impact Strategies Group, a strategy consulting firm that partners with people and organizations working across sectors to address public problems. She also writes about the intersection of politics, policy, and social innovation, and has been published by the MIT Innovations Journal, Harvard University Press, MN Journal, and Public Management Magazine. Colleen holds a Masters in Public Policy from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and a B.A. from the College of Saint Benedict. She is a proud Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (Honduras).

Leota Lind is the Chief Executive Officer of South Country Health Alliance, a County-Based Purchasing plan that administers Minnesota Health Care Programs benefits to over 28,000 members in twelve rural Minnesota counties. An employee of South Country since 2000, Leota has had the unique experience of participating in the planning, development, implementation and ongoing operations of the organization. She was previously employed with Freeborn County Human Services and Fountain Centers.

Colin Marsh is a legislative specialist for Almeida Public Affairs, a firm representing a wide range of clients within Minnesota state government from Fortune 100 companies to nonprofit organizations. Colin is highly involved in the legislative process from working with legislators to engaging in the committee process. His past political experience includes candidate campaign work and employment in the Minnesota House of Representatives. In addition to political work, Colin taught English to Spanish speakers while living in Panama City, Panama. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in business entrepreneurship from Palm Beach Atlantic University. Colin enjoys reading philosophical literature, music and travel.

Nance Purcell is on leave from Stillwater Area High School where she taught U.S. Government and American History, served as debate coach and recruited for Close-Up Washington D.C. She is past-president of the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies. Nance is a grant writer and works on program development and education in the nonprofit sector. She earned a Sociology degree from the University of Illinois and a Masters from University of St. Thomas. Nance paddles with the Dragon Divas, a dragon boat racing team for breast cancer survivors and lives in Stillwater. She is committed to campaign finance reform.
About the Policy Fellows Program at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs
Since its inception in 1990, the Policy Fellows program has trained over 600
Minnesotans, many of whom are now influential figures in their communities and
around the world. Begun by Vice President Walter Mondale and Ambassador Geri
Joseph, the program was directed for a dozen years by former Congressmen Tim
Penny and Vin Weber. Today, nationally prominent political science professor
Lawrence Jacobs directs the program, continuing the tradition of convening the best
and brightest emerging leaders in Minnesota. Program activities are conducted by
recognized leaders from business, government, and nonprofit organizations, as well
as experts from the University of Minnesota and academic institutions around the
country.

As part of the fellowship year, participants work together in small groups to
propose and create projects on topics of their choosing that can make an impact in
the community. In June, groups present on their process and outcomes to their
cohort members and guests. More on the Policy Fellows program [here](#).