



City Club *of* Portland

Good citizens are the riches of a city

**Long-term Study Charge
September 2005 – August 2006**

**“An Analysis of Partisanship
in the Oregon Political System”**

Approved for Study by the Board of Governors on June 13, 2005

**City Club of Portland
901 SW Washington St.
Portland, OR 97205
(503) 228-7231
wade@pdxcityclub.org**

Preamble

Party ideology, party affiliation and organized activity by political parties are institutionalized elements of the political system in Oregon and throughout the nation. While most Oregonians would likely agree that our system dominated by two parties has served our state well historically, many people have new concerns about the nature and extent of partisan behavior in state government.

City Club's 1997 report, *Structure and Process of the Oregon Legislature*, mentions partisanship as an issue but concluded that it was not a significant problem at that time. However, in response to growing concerns about the effectiveness of state government in general, City Club interviewed four leading Oregon political figures in early 2005 to better understand how partisan behavior influences the Oregon political system. According to those interviewed, the factors listed below influence partisan behavior and at times do interfere with the functioning of state government. In response to these interviews, City Club's Research Board and Board of Governors charged a study to determine if and when partisan behavior is an impediment to effective governance and, if so, what should be done about it.

According to four leading political figures:

1. Structural elements of Oregon's political system contribute to extreme partisanship, especially the initiative and referendum process, term limits, precinct structure, and the way campaigns are financed.
2. Decisions made by the Legislature can easily be reversed by the initiative and referendum system, providing legislators with little incentive to compromise on the tough issues.
3. Legislators who go against their party line on key issues are punished in primary elections by those in control of their party's apparatus and purse strings.
4. Partisan behavior substitutes for long-term relationships in the Legislature because term limits (when in place) and natural attrition have eliminated the most experienced legislators.
5. Raising money for party members has become the primary means of achieving leadership positions in the Legislature.
6. Ideologues have taken control of political parties at the precinct, county and state level. Parties are more effective at fund-raising for candidates who toe the party line that they espouse.
7. Caucuses are now the dominant organizational structure in the Legislature – winning control is everything; governing effectively and addressing key policy issues is of secondary importance.
8. Primary elections have become more important than general elections as legislative districts have become party strongholds, enabling a small percentage of the most motivated voters to dictate who the representative will be in many legislative districts.
9. Closed primary elections disenfranchise the large percentage of Oregonians that do not register as either Republican or Democrat.
10. Related phenomena are a perceived deterioration of political discourse, lack of productive dialogue and disengagement of ordinary citizens from the political process.

11. The media also play a role, since they are the primary conduit for information about government and politics and are often suspect of not being complete and objective in their reporting.

Study Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are to:

1. Define partisanship and investigate its impact on Oregon's political system and state government's ability to effectively govern and resolve key issues.
2. Evaluate related legislative proposals and initiatives that may qualify for the November 2006 ballot.
3. Recommend possible solutions for any negative impacts of partisanship that are identified through the study process and recommend ways to support elements of the political system that should not be changed.

Scope

The study committee should focus its research within the following parameters.

1. Keep the issue sharply focused on Oregon's election laws and possibly other structural changes, not on ways to change people's values and beliefs.
2. Consider research and recommendations from existing City Club reports including *Structure and Process of the Oregon Legislature*, *The Initiative and Referendum in Oregon* (to be updated in 2005-06), and other reports and resolutions on campaign finance and term limits. As appropriate, synthesize this information into the proposed report.
3. Research political systems in other states and incorporate key findings.
4. Analyze the impacts of partisanship on the legislative branch and its relationship with the executive and judicial branches of state government.
5. Maintain a strict timeline for publication in September 2006 in anticipation of related ballot measures that may qualify the November 2006 ballot.

Suggested Questions

Possible study questions include:

1. What is partisanship and how does it manifest in Oregon politics? When does it have a positive, productive impact on the Oregon political system and when is it an impediment to good governance, as determined by the committee.
2. Has the nature of partisanship changed in Oregon politics in recent decades? If it has, describe the evolution of partisanship and its impact on the Oregon political system.
3. If partisanship has increased, what factors have contributed to it?

4. How has partisanship affected the legislative branch and its relationships with the judicial and executive branches of Oregon government?
5. If partisanship is negatively affecting the political process in Oregon, what structural or legal changes could moderate partisanship or mitigate its negative impacts?
6. What solutions have been or are being proposed to moderate partisanship or mitigate its negative impacts in Oregon? Identify potential unintended consequences of enacting these proposals. Evaluate the effectiveness of each.
7. What changes does the committee recommend to increase the effectiveness of the Oregon Legislature as it relates to partisanship? Consider viability of implementing recommendations.