

Democratic chairman favors balance of parties

By Randy Essex

For six years, Dick White has worked to organize Nebraska's Democratic Party in a political atmosphere that he says weakens parties.

In addition, he has been trying to organize the party stereotyped as liberal in a largely conservative state.

daily nebraskan

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White has been chairman of the Nebraska Democratic Party for six years, making him one of the top two or three tenured state party chairmen in the nation.

When he was elected to the position in 1974, Nebraska had a Democratic governor and five Republican representatives in Washington. Now, although the governor is a Republican, both U.S. senators from Nebraska are Democrats, and one of the state's three members of the House is a Democrat.

"Nebraska is not safe for either a Democratic or Republican officeholder," White asserted in an interview three months before he will leave his post.

The fact that neither party can guarantee a candidate's re-election is good for the state because "it keeps them (elected officials) on their toes. The competition provides the state with good service and representation," White said.

Equal strength

"I wouldn't want either party to dominate," he added.

Although the parties are fairly even now, organization is a must in Nebraska, because the non-partisan Legislature "weakens both parties," White said.

The absence of partisan races in the 49 legislative districts puts a burden on the state's central committees because they "are without that local support," he said.

White said that when he became chairman of the party he wanted to avoid splits among Democrats and to bring the party toward the middle of the political spectrum.

The Nebraska Democratic Party probably is somewhat more conservative than the national party, White said.

"The party is best identified as moderate. The bulk of Democrats in the state are moderate to conservative people," he said.

A high percentage of Nebraskans are self-employed, or are older than 65, contributing to the state's conservative nature, he said.

Conservatism rising

Nationwide, White sees a resurgence of conservatism. "Since the 1930s, the liberals have been the driving force in politics," White said. "They were the ones pushing ideas. But somewhere during Vietnam, the liberal drive waned."

That, combined with Hubert Humphrey's death has brought about a lack of movement in politics, he said.

"Politics seem to be drifting now, ideologically," White said that has brought the renewed interest in conservative candidates, who provide "simple answers" to problems.

Republicans, stereotyped as conservatives, ruled Nebraska politics when White entered politics. A native of Nebraska's notoriously conservative 3rd District, White was elected to the 1968 Democratic National Convention as a delegate for Robert Kennedy.

At the time, the only Democrat holding a state office was a Public Service Commissioner. Not one to jump on the popular bandwagon, White started working as a lobbyist for the Democratic Party in the Legislature.

His salary was \$250 a month.

Voice needed

"We thought with no elected (Democratic) officials, it was important to have a voice for Democrats so people wouldn't feel their opinions were wasted," White said.

The Democrats became an "aggressive opposition party," White said, opposing then-Gov. Norbert Tiemann whenever they got the chance.

Tiemann's defeat in 1970 by J.J. Exon "was highly important in developing the party," White said.

Another factor leading to the Democrats' present stronger position in the state was a stability of leadership, White said. Hess Dyas was at the top of the party structure for several years before White started.

White said the average tenure for state party chairmen is about 18 months.

After the party was built to the point that it elected three of the state's five representatives to Washington, 2nd District Rep. John Cavanaugh's announcement in January that he would not seek re-election was perceived by some as a major setback to the Democratic Party.

Cavanaugh decision OK

White said the decision "is not as serious

as it looked."

"I think there is a good chance we can elect a Democrat from the 2nd District," White said, noting that party members have no hostility toward Cavanaugh, and have accepted his reasons for not running again.

Cavanaugh cited lack of time for his family in announcing his resignation.



Daily Nebraskan Photo

Dick White, State Democratic Party Chairman.

White, whose duties as state chairman end in June, does not know yet what he will do next, he said. Leaving the post during an election year is unavoidable, because the Democrats select a new chairman every two years. He said he has wanted to leave the post or some time, but was asked by Exon to stay for Exon's 1978 Senate campaign.

Among his concerns for Nebraska politics after he leaves his post is the time of Nebraska's presidential primary.

Both White and Dave Heineman, executive director of the Nebraska Republican Party, support the idea of a Nebraska-Iowa caucus to replace Nebraska's current primary. Iowa's caucus is the first test of presidential candidates in the nation, and has gained considerable attention from candidates and the media since President Carter's success there in 1976.

Change needed

"If Nebraska wants to assume a place of importance in selection of presidential candidates, there needs to be a change," White said.

Nebraska's primary used to be one of the earliest in the country, and was the first test for candidates in a farming area. But the number of states with primaries has jumped from 15 in the late '60s to 37 this year.

The proliferation of primaries has led to less exposure of candidates in Nebraska, White said. Noting that candidates have to land in Omaha to campaign in Western Iowa, and that most of Nebraska's population lives within 50 miles of Iowa, White said "it would be no big trick" for candidates to campaign in both states at once.

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