

SNG-nobody trusts nobody-12-25-17

Nobody trusts nobody anymore

By Jim Nowlan

The Kewanee League of Women Voters asked me to speak about trust, civility and bipartisanship in American politics, all that in 20 minutes, “and leave a little time for questions”!

I focused on trust, or lack of it, as civility and a spirit of bipartisanship are dependent upon trust.

Gathered recently at a popular pub, I told the ladies, and a few men, that if a poll asked about trust in the LWV, I’d bet the organization would rank high—because their members have absolutely no interest in anything but what they consider “good government.”

Oh, sure, when I was a state lawmaker decades ago, and there weren’t many women in public office, we fellows would sometimes joke about “the Plague of WV” and “the Beleaguered WV.” Yet most of us did so with respect, for they represented about the only interest not out for something for themselves.

The League had what I call “moral authority,” the equivalent of trust. And they could be potent. In the 1960-70s, the LWV played a key role in passing a referendum to call a constitutional convention for our state.

At the 1969 convention, according to nonpartisan convention parliamentarian Ann Lousin, so many LWV activists were elected delegates they were nicknamed “the League of Women Voters housewives,” which they didn’t appreciate.

The LWV went on to rally voters to support the work of the convention. They did it without money, maybe one paid staffer, and no shrill TV ads. And our 1970 Illinois Constitution is far superior to the century-old document it replaced, though not without its flaws.

I fear that normally sedate, let's-have-a-discussion types of organizations like the LWV and service clubs are being overshadowed by our obsession with social media.

Cable TV and internet purveyors of political entertainment need, for some reason—ratings undoubtedly—to cast a Devil as the root of our ills, whether Obama in the recent past or President Trump's tweet du jour against this or that hapless soul.

I talked about trust with Frank Mackaman, an American historian and director of the U.S. (Everett McKinley) Dirksen Center in Pekin.

Mackaman said this relatively new, take-no-prisoners media are the most inflammatory factors in stirring up our angry and divided nation.

“News has on too many outlets become entertainment. Computer algorithms even select our news for us,” he says.

In a society where, maybe from our insecurities, ever fewer of us are willing to admit any blame for the situation around us, we have to project that blame onto others. This corrodes trust.

I recall with a chuckle the apt Walt Kelly cartoon of Pogo and a sidekick, much like the Lone Ranger and Tonto, gazing from atop a butte out over the valley below: “We have met the enemy, and he is us!”

Frank Mackaman tells me that if he could wave a wand, he would eliminate partisan redistricting, which he considers maybe the most pernicious element in dividing and polarizing our nation.

The historian Mackaman observes that big data can now identify partisan leanings, even ideological bent, down to the individual household. This allows mapmakers to draw squiggly lines that concentrate partisans of one party and, perforce, do the same for the other party.

I have had space here to touch on only a couple of factors that arguably have diminished trust in our political life over the past half-century. So, let's wrap up our discussion of redistricting.

A redistricting case was recently heard by the U.S. Supreme Court. The court may demur, that is, not step in to tell the other branches of government how to redistrict.

Yes, some academics say it wouldn't make much difference, as Americans are rapidly self-concentrating themselves into ideologically comfortable neighborhoods. Even if so, I hate being manipulated by my elected officials.

So, why don't "We, the People" step in and force the change. That's our job, not that of the courts. A tough job, but doable.

So, I propose the minority party (Republicans in Illinois, Democrats most everywhere else) and good government groups like the LWV make it a cause celebre, pestering candidates for the legislature at every meeting: "Will you support nonpartisan map drawing?" Get them on the record. "If not, we won't support you in the fall."

We may never again have pillars of moral authority like George Washington, Dwight Eisenhower and news broadcaster Walter Cronkite, yet we can take at least a step toward helping rebuild trust in our political world.