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**Capitol View**

***Commentary by J.L. Schmidt***

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**The End of the Nonpartisan Legislature Could Be In Sight**

Plans by a gaggle of Repelicans to end secret ballots for legislative committee chairs are nothing short of a power grab, a move that threatens the very nonpartisan nature of the Legislature.

The money behind the move, which is falsely labeled as transparency, comes from a Political Action Committee funded by none other than multi-millionaire Charles Herbster. You remember, he's the guy who lost the Republican gubernatorial nomination to that other millionaire Republican who was supported by the millionaire incumbent Republican governor. Do you see a pattern here?

You'd get transparency all right. The names of every Republican senator who voted for a Democrat -- oh the horror -- because they thought they were a better person for the job, would be public.

That would allow the governor and his loyal followers to openly chastise and fight against anything that turncoat might try. Do you see the threat to a nonpartisan Legislature?

So, let's just give everything to the Republicans, let out a big cheer of "Go Big Red State" and go home.

We don't need no stinkin' nonpartisan Legislature. This here is Big Red State country.

Seventeen of Nebraska’s state senators have signed the first pledge pushed by Herbster’s political action committee vowing to scrap the Legislature’s unique system of electing committee chairs by secret ballot. Republicans have sought that change for the nonpartisan body for years.

The list of senators signing onto the pledge from Herbster’s Nebraska First PAC include three of his vocal supporters: Steve Halloran of Hastings, Steve Erdman of Bayard and Tom Brewer of Gordon.

***For Release Wednesday, September 28, 2022 – Page 2***

The list also includes four senators who supported Jim Pillen in the gubernatorial primary — Lou Ann Linehan of Omaha, Joni Albrecht of Thurston, Suzanne Geist of Lincoln and John Lowe of Kearney — as well as Speaker of the Legislature Mike Hilgers, who remained neutral during the primary. He is running for Nebraska attorney general.

 “This is the right policy,” Linehan said. “You should have to stand by your votes.”

Let me repeat, the push to remove secret balloting for committee chairs is not about transparency but is an attempt by the state’s dominant political party, the GOP, to assert partisan control of the Legislature.

Can you imagine how horrible it must be to support a Democrat to lead the Education or Judiciary or Urban Affairs Committees, as happens now? The chairs of those committees have done a fine job and made an impact on the state with their leadership. Ask a teacher or a student if they care about party affiliation of the Education Committee chair. Ask an incarcerated person if the Republicans or the Democrats put him or her behind bars.

The 49-member Nebraska Legislature, unlike Congress or statehouses elsewhere, does not have a structure for partisan discipline to be enforced by a party whip. That, of course, hasn’t stopped the Governor from meddling.

Take that secret ballot away and you’ve opened the door for more involvement – ok, punishment -- by the parties.

University of Nebraska at Omaha political scientist Paul Landow told the Nebraska Examiner “these are George Norris reforms that are critical to the operation of a one-house, nonpartisan Legislature. You cannot get along without them.”

PAC spokesman Rod Edwards said, “Transparency in voting should be a nonpartisan issue. We believe voters support transparency and will support candidates who do, too.”

"A recorded vote for legislative leaders would cripple nonpartisanship and severely damage senators' independence," Nathan Leach, founder and executive director of Nonpartisan Nebraska, has written in letters sent to members of the Legislature.

***For Release Wednesday, September 28, 2022 – Page 3***

"The eventual result would be a de facto partisan body," he says. A legislature organized along party lines.

I agree. We’ve seen how well the partisan Congress gets along.

Just don’t go there!

-30-

*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.