Gary Moncrief: 5 trends that have changed legislative environments over past 25 years

This year marks the 25th anniversary of CSG Midwest’s BILLD program, which has now provided training to nearly 850 legislators since its inception. How has the environment for state legislatures — and the people who serve in them — changed since that inaugural BILLD program in 1995? Here are five notable shifts as BILLD approaches its silver anniversary.

1. **The impact of party alignment and rise of ‘unified’ government**

   A realignment of the political parties was underway in 1995. The core of this realignment occurred in the South. Of that region’s 30 state legislative chambers, Democrats were the majority party in 26 of them in 1995. Today, Republicans are the majority party in all 30. Partisan shifts in other regions have been far less dramatic, but still noteworthy. In 1994, Democrats had majorities in 10 of the Midwest’s 20 partisan legislative chambers. One year later, that number had fallen to four. Today, 17 of the region’s chambers are Republican-controlled and three are held by Democrats. The realignment has implications for the prevalence of divided government at the federal level and the increase in unified (“trifecta”) governments at the state level. In 2019, we again have divided government nationally, but 37 states with unified government: one party controls the governor’s office and both legislative chambers.

2. **Technological changes and how they transformed how we communicate**

   One of the most obvious changes since 1995 is in the area of technology. In 1995, 14 percent of Americans used the internet. Today, the figure is about 90 percent. Nowadays, too, about 70 percent of the population owns a smartphone. The first rudimentary smartphone was introduced in 1992, but the device did not become popular until the Blackberry (2002) and the iPhone (2007). Search engines such as Yahoo (1995) and Google (1998) were just beginning.

3. **The pervasiveness of social media and how it rewards ‘extremes’**

   In 1995 there was no social media as we now know the term. In fact, Facebook was not introduced until 2004. Twitter did not exist until 2006. Instagram until 2010. They are ubiquitous in today’s world, and virtually all elected officials have one or more social media accounts. Yet we do not currently fully recognize the implications of social media for facilitating self-selection and incivility. As Evan Williams, co-founder of Twitter, now recognizes, “The trouble with the internet is that it rewards extremes.”

4. **Partisanship triumphs over legislative process in era of ‘tribalism’**

   The evidence that the parties have become increasingly polarized is abundant. This is especially true since 1995. More importantly, this polarization has encouraged an “us-them” mentality often called “tribalism.” When we view the opposition party as “the enemy,” it becomes easier to justify winning by any means. We adhere to rules only when the rules are to our advantage. Process becomes less important than partisanship.

5. **More money, independent spending going to races for state legislature**

   One of the biggest changes since 1995 is the increase in campaign spending in state legislative races, and especially the increase in independent spending. More than $4 million was spent in an Illinois House race in 2016; over $10 million was spent in each of two state senate races — one in Florida, one in Texas — in 2018. Most surprisingly, control of the chamber was not in question in any of these races.

Legislators encouraged to apply for 2019 BILLD fellowship

State lawmakers from the Midwest in their first four years of service are eligible to apply for a fellowship to attend the 25th Annual Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD), which will be held Aug. 9-13 in Minneapolis. Applications are due on April 10.

Fellowships cover the cost of tuition, lodging and meals, as well as a partial travel stipend for the five-day program. The interactive curriculum includes a mix of sessions on public policy, professional development and leadership. Thirty-seven legislators will be selected to attend this year’s program. Visit csgmidwest.org for the application and more information about BILLD.

North Dakota Rep. Chet Pollert, BILLD Class of 2001, was elected by his caucus in November to serve as majority leader. Pollert, the owner of a grain and feed operation, was first elected to the North Dakota House in 1998. During the previous six sessions, Pollert had been chair of the Human Resources Division of the Appropriations Committee. During his two decades of legislative service, he has held numerous other committee leadership positions, including vice chair of the Transportation and Agriculture committees, as well as chair of the Interim Budget Committee in 2013-2014 and the Interim Correctional Facility Review Committee in 2007-2008.

Two other BILLD alumni join Pollert on his caucus’s leadership team: Rep. Scott Lousser (class of 2013) is assistant majority leader, and Rep. Shannon Roers Jones (class of 2017) is majority caucus chair. Other graduates of BILLD serving in North Dakota leadership this session include Rep. Karla Rose Hanson (class of 2018), assistant minority leader; and Sen. Erin Oban (class of 2015), minority caucus chair.

In 2018, several BILLD Fellows made successful bids for offices outside of the state legislature.

- Former Sen. Vicky Schmidt (class of 2006): Kansas insurance commissioner
- Former Sen. Kueame Raoul (class of 2007): Illinois attorney general
- Former Sen. Frank LaRose (class of 2013): Ohio secretary of state
- Former Sen. John Murante (class of 2014): Nebraska state treasurer
- Former Sen. Dan Watermeier (class of 2014): Nebraska public service commissioner
- Former Sen. Lynn Rogers (class of 2018): Kansas lieutenant governor

In addition to the re-election of dozens of BILLD Fellows, a few are returning to legislative service after a hiatus.

- North Dakota Sen. JoNell Bakke (class of 2009)
- South Dakota Rep. Fred Deutsch (class of 2015)
- Michigan Sen. Ari Neibolt (class of 2012)

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