Legislative caucuses bring together like-minded lawmakers and help create ways to work across the political divide.

BY SUZANNE WEISS

Following a tradition thought to be as old as state legislatures themselves, a handful of Texas House freshmen in 2013 created a mechanism to work together, across party lines, to advance a shared agenda.

The members of the Young Texans Legislative Caucus, all of whom were under age 40, were focused on issues important to their generation and the next, from college affordability to entrepreneurship to natural resources management.

Today, with just two sessions under its belt, the 32-member caucus has put together a string of modest but notable successes. Among them are bills that expand the use of crowdfunding for small businesses, create incentives to use alternative fuels and encourage financial institutions to establish branches in parts of Texas that are “banking deserts.” The caucus also pushed successfully for a bill mandating that public universities strengthen policies on campus sexual assaults, and another requiring hospitals to give parents of newborns safety information that includes a warning against leaving children in hot cars.

“No nearly six in 10 Texans are 40 years of age or younger, and that demographic definitely deserves to have a stronger voice in our legislative deliberations,” says Representative Eric Johnson (D), who co-founded the caucus.

“I realized we had a solid core of younger members on both sides of the aisle that we could organize around to get some things done.”

—TEXAS REPRESENTATIVE ERIC JOHNSON

Affiliations of like-minded lawmakers are nothing new, says Peverill Squire, a University of Missouri political science professor and an expert on American legislatures. “Caucuses have probably always been part of the legislative scene,” he says, and they have endured for a simple reason: “Their members see value in them.”

Squire cited a couple of ways in which caucuses benefit individual legislators and invigorate the policymaking process.

First, they provide a mechanism to “circulate information and collectively develop ideas, including ideas that, for one reason or another, committees won’t take up,” Squire says. “They provide a chance for things to gain traction.” In this way, caucuses “serve as alternative routes, as a challenge to existing structures and as a competing source of power to established leadership.”

Membership in a caucus also helps legislators “send a signal to their constituents that an issue is important to them,” he says. And because they are generally bipartisan, caucuses can serve as a countervailing force to the polarization that increasingly afflicts legislative deliberations.

James Henson, director of the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin, agrees. “Caucuses allow legislators to sidestep partisan conflicts and coalesce around issue areas,” he says.

Consider, for example, the experience of two members of the Louisiana Legislature’s Acadiana Caucus—Senator Dan “Blade” Morrish (R) and Representative Jack Montoucet (D),
who consider themselves party stalwarts and at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

For nearly a decade, the two have worked closely on a wide range of issues, from coastal restoration, bridge projects, flood insurance and workforce training to increased state support for the French-immersion language programs that serve more than 4,000 students, from kindergarten through the 12th grade, in the 22 parishes that make up the state’s Acadiana region.

“As caucus members, Jack and I work together to do what’s best for the people we represent,” Morrish says. “Democrat and Republican? That never enters into the picture.”

Linked by Party, Priorities, Passions

By far the most established and powerful legislative caucuses are partisan—one for the minority party and one for the majority, in each chamber. They are given staff, office space and other resources to carry out their business—setting rules, electing leaders, formulating policy and strategy—much of which is done behind closed doors.

By contrast, nonparty caucuses like the Young Texans are both more informal and more open, and typically receive no funding. Most are co-chaired by a Republican and a Democrat. Often, they come and go in the space of several years, giving way to new interests, priorities and affiliations.

In 2005 and again in 2013, NCSL surveyed legislative clerks and secretaries to get a clearer picture of the number and kind of special caucuses operating within the chambers in each state. Many of those caucuses no longer exist, according to a recent survey that included a 50-state search of legislative websites.

The survey showed that about one-third of states have no caucuses other than party caucuses. The other two-thirds have non-party caucuses numbering from one or two—typically a women’s and a black or Latino caucus—to between 15 and 20.

But the survey also showed that new caucuses are popping up all the time: in Virginia, a 20-member New Americans Caucus, which pledges to address issues involving undocumented residents and other immigrants; in Connecticut, a 27-member Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Caucus; and in Utah, a 21-member Clean Air Caucus.

The most numerous and longest lasting nonparty caucuses are those based on demographics. They emerged in the mid-1970s as the number of blacks, women and Hispanics elected to legislatures began to increase. Today, 35 states have black caucuses, 23 have women’s caucuses and 16 have Hispanic/Latino caucuses. Nineteen states have Native American caucuses tied to a national network.

Other ethnic and cultural affiliations around which caucuses have coalesced are Asian (California and New York), Filipino (Hawaii), Irish (Pennsylvania) and Italian-American (Connecticut). Among the newest are California’s three-member Armenian Caucus and a nine-member Jewish Caucus, both formed in the past year.

The majority of demographic caucuses, according to their websites, are open to all...
legislators, regardless of party, race/ethnicity or religion. But in fact, Democrats have long dominated the larger racial/ethnic caucuses—in some cases, to the point of excluding the other party.

When California Assemblyman Rocky Chavez (R) asked to join the 24-member Latino Caucus last year, for example, he was turned away and told that he ought to form his own caucus, where Republicans would be more welcome. Chavez complained publicly, accusing the caucus of discrimination.

**Mostly Bipartisan, Bicameral**

By and large, however, most caucuses are both bipartisan and bicameral.

About half of the nation’s legislatures have caucuses focused on regional needs and interests: the Everglades in Florida, for example, or the coastal counties of Maine, Massachusetts, Oregon and Washington, or rural and agricultural areas, such as Alaska’s Mat-Su Valley and California’s Inland Empire.

Some caucuses are organized around the interests of certain industries or sectors, from arts, culture, aviation and aerospace to coal, fisheries, manufacturing, steel and vineyards.

Michigan, for example, has a caucus promoting the growth of the state’s biosciences industry and another, the Dutch Caucus, nurturing long-term business, civic and cultural relationships between the Netherlands and the western region of the state.

In Texas, 16 legislators banded together in 2012 to create the Farm-to-Table Caucus, which supports the production and wider availability of home-grown foods, craft beers and regional wines. Lawmakers in Hawaii and North Carolina last year established similar groups.

The year-old TechHub Caucus in Massachusetts aims to further the state’s national and global leadership in the Big Data sector, which includes a range of advanced high-speed computing industries and data-analysis companies. And in Washington, a Competitive Caucus was established earlier this year with the goal of safeguarding the state’s competitiveness in international trade by, among other things, streamlining regulatory processes.

Another major caucus category includes those leading the charge on behalf of a special issue. Some work broadly on big topics such as education, the environment, mental health or transportation, whereas others are tightly focused on autism, hunger, outdoor recreation, diabetes, community colleges or veterans’ benefits.

In many cases, issue caucuses are part of a network, tied to national organizations—the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, for example, or the National Assembly of Sportsmen’s Caucuses, which has more than 2,000 members in 47 states.

Over the last several years, ideological groups—Mississippi’s Conservative Caucus, Utah’s Patrick Henry States’ Rights Caucus, Article V caucuses focused on federalism and limited government—have sprung up in about 20 states.

Finally, there are a handful of caucuses formed specifically for spiritual fellowship or social activities; they range from Bible study and prayer groups to Illinois’ White Sox Caucus and Pennsylvania’s Karaoke Caucus.

**Bridging Political Divide**

A new wrinkle is the formation of bipartisan legislative groups modeled along the lines of the Young Texans Caucus, and part of a network called State Future Caucuses, whose stated goal is to “break through partisan gridlock and create a more constructive governing environment for the next generation.”

In Maine, where there are now 13 legislators under age 30, the newly established Youth Caucus works to broaden education, training and employment opportunities for the state’s young people.

Similarly, the PA Future Caucus, established last year by and for Pennsylvania’s under-35 legislators, has set its sights squarely on working across the political divide to get things done.

The tendency of millennials to vote and otherwise engage in politics at a lower rate than older citizens, says Representative Nick Miccarelli (R), the new caucus’ co-chairman, is not so much political apathy as “an expression of frustration at the lack of progress and results.” He listed measures to address the related problems of soaring college tuition costs and high levels of student loan debt as the top items on the caucus’ agenda.

Although many legislative caucuses meet infrequently and focus their efforts on a handful of issues, others put together ambitious agendas, issue news releases, maintain websites and make use of Facebook, Twitter and other social media.

The Utah Legislative Clean Air Caucus, for example, recently held a news conference at which it unveiled a package of 17 proposed bills and six appropriation requests totaling more than $5.4 million. The proposals ranged from a higher sales tax on tires and new incineration regulations to a measure allowing the state to adopt pollution standards stricter than those set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

**Changing the Conversation**

Of course, not every bill backed by a caucus becomes law. But having a caucus to champion a particular measure provides a collective history that can strengthen members’ commitment to introducing it year after year.

The Hawaii Legislature, for example, last year passed a bill ensuring that women who are victims of sexual assault are provided with “accurate, unbiased information” about—and access to—emergency contraception when receiving care at hospitals. It had taken nearly two decades for the measure to gain acceptance, says Senator Rosalyn Baker (D), a 21-year legislative veteran, adding, “We just kept at it.”

In Nevada, the 10-member Hispanic Legislative Caucus recently scored victories on two measures that had died in committee for several years running. One is a $50 million program underwriting, for
the first time, English-language-learning programs in the state’s school districts. The other is a law allowing immigrants in the country illegally to obtain a driver’s privilege card, if they carry auto insurance.

“I wasn’t sure these things would happen in my legislative career,” says Senator Mo Denis (D), who was the only Hispanic in the Nevada Legislature when he was elected in 2004. “The Hispanic community is starting to come of age.”

The recent successes resulted from better strategies on the part of the caucus, coupled with movement into leadership positions by Denis and several other caucus members, says Andres Ramirez, who runs a political consulting firm in Las Vegas.

In years past, the Hispanic caucus largely touted its ability to stymie what it viewed as anti-immigrant legislation, Ramirez says. More recently, the caucus has moved from defense to offense, and managed to change the legislative conversation, he says.

“The tone of the past two sessions has been not about how to harm or exclude Latinos, but how do we help them and incorporate them in this state,” Ramirez says. “That’s a dramatic and tectonic shift.”

Not all caucuses will effect change on such a scale, of course. But in joining forces, often across party lines, legislators are finding ways to make progress on goals that otherwise might be impeded by partisanship or inertia. Their flexibility to coalesce and dissolve as needed can infuse caucuses with a sense of purpose, the urgency of a mission, not to mention the strength of numbers.

Considering the success these coalitions have enjoyed since the early days of the republic, and the appeal they have for a new generation of lawmakers, they’re likely to remain a fixture on the legislative scene for quite some time.