

Legislative Effectiveness Committee

Meeting Summary

August 2012

Meeting Session: **Balancing the Powers of Governors**

Overview & Trainers: **Balancing the Powers of Governors**

Legislatures often fare poorly when taking on the governor--the deck seems stacked in favor of the executive branch. Alan Rosenthal, the leading academic expert on state legislatures, advised legislative leaders on how to work with governors and play a consultative role in shaping their agendas. He has just published a book, "The Best Job in Politics," which looks at why governors are so successful at achieving their goals.

Speaker: Alan Rosenthal, Rutgers University, New Jersey

Summary: Alan Rosenthal first described the remarkable transformations in state legislatures beginning in the 1960's. Legislatures built capacity, increased staff, held longer sessions, revised procedures and made other changes to make them more powerful. However, compared to governors, legislatures are at a distinct disadvantage, especially in term-limited states. Governors can act swiftly and reach decisions in secrecy, while legislatures have to build consensus in an increasingly transparent world. The media love governors, while legislators may struggle to make similar connections. Even the weakest governor has built-in advantages over the strongest legislature.

Some traditional legislative powers are important:

- The legislature can say no to the governor. This is rare if the governor is of the same party as the legislative majority.
- Legislatures can modify the governor's proposal.
- Legislatures can override governors' vetoes.

However, much of a legislature's influence is at the invitation of the governor. Alan contended that regular and frequent consultation by legislative leaders is the best way to influence the governor. Some governors are not the "consulting type," but his research showed that 70% of governors are consultative. They tend to meet regularly with leaders of the majority party, occasionally with the minority party, although this is affected greatly by the governor's own party status. Governors may take a while to warm to the consultative role, as was the case with former Massachusetts Governor Weld. Alan noted that consultations tend to work best when the governor is willing and pragmatic, has legislative experience and understands the legislature has a role to play. On the legislative side, consultations work best when the legislature has strong and able legislative leaders. They have the knowledge, experience and trust from colleagues that make them effective. Alan maintained that part of the training of new legislative leaders must address this consultative give and take with governors. Strong leaders can deal; weak leaders can't.