Divisive politics can be disheartening for both constituents and elected officials, but collaboration across party lines still happens in government.

Vermont Lt. Gov. David Zuckerman, a Progressive/Democrat, is proud of efforts that have been made in his state to put individuals before party affiliation. A former state representative and former state senator, Zuckerman said members of the minority party have served in some of the committee chair and vice chair positions for most of the 20 years that he has been in office.

Several states have rules or practices in place to limit majority control of chair assignments, but the effectiveness of these rules varies.

In Vermont, the speaker appoints committee chairs and vice chairs in the House, and a three-member committee on committee—which is made up of the lieutenant governor, president pro tempore and a third member—decides Senate committee assignments.

Placing members of the minority party in committee chair and vice chair positions can be an effective strategy for fostering collaboration within the Legislature and presenting the public with a positive image of a government “by the people, not a government by a particular party,” Zuckerman said.

“I think it really benefits the state in terms of the long-term view by the people of what democracy is and can be,” he said.

Since 2005, both the Vermont House and Senate have been held by Democrats. However, of the 15 House committees listed on the Legislature’s website, there are six Republican vice chairs and one Republican committee chair: Rep. Patrick Brennan, chair of the House Committee on Transportation. Additionally, of 13 Senate committees, there are two Republican committee chairs and three vice chairs.

“Our mindset in the world of politics is so binary... there’s a winner and a loser, but the general public is looking for something more than that,” Zuckerman said. “I think this shows there is something more.”

A report by FairVote and the Bipartisan Policy Center titled, Best Practices for Collaborative Policymaking: Learning from Power-Sharing Arrangements in State Legislatures, described the agenda-setting powers of committee chairs in many state chambers and the considerable influence of committee chairs outside of their gatekeeping role.

“Most state chambers follow the example of Congress, allowing majority party leadership to name committee chairs, each of whom will be a member of the majority party,” the report says. “However, norms in several chambers dictate that members of the minority party also be given some
chairmanship positions. Other chambers have unique rules for the appointment of committee chairs that make the selection of members of the minority, or less partisan members of the majority, more likely.”

In Vermont, Brennan said his chair appointment may have raised a few eyebrows, but “it’s more about doing a good job” and having the committee support you and your efforts.

“I think the tradition normally is for the speaker to appoint all chairs from his or her party and the vice chairs from the other party,” said Brennan, who has worked with two speakers.

In addition, whether or not a minority party member is appointed as a committee chair often still depends on party objectives. Brennan said appointments depend on the committee.

Zuckerman said he thinks state government officials in his state value the tradition of collaboration and, therefore, it continues.

“Vermont, being such a small state, there are a lot of friendships formed in the House and Senate across the aisle that are maintained outside of the Legislature and even outside of people’s terms of service,” Zuckerman said.