MEMORIES OF CUMULATIVE VOTING IN ILLINOIS

FairVote in 1998 commissioned Daniel Johnson- Weinberger to interview Illinois political leaders about the state's use of cumulative voting to elect its lower house from 1870 (when it was adopted to help promote unity after the Civil War) to 1980 (when it was repealed in a populist initiative that also reduced the size of the legislature). The interviews have demonstrated strong all-partisan support for cumulative voting, including the senate majority and minority leaders at that time.

Illinois' cumulative voting elections were a modest departure from winner-take-all elections. Representatives were elected from districts with three representatives. Voters could vote for one, two or three candidates. If just over 25% of voters supported one candidate, that candidate was sure to win.

This relatively minor modification of winner-take-all rules had a profound impact on the state's politics. Perhaps most significantly, nearly every district had two-party representation, the positive implications of which are mentioned repeatedly in our interviews. Following are excerpts from the interviews.

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(**John Porter** is a Republican Member of Congress from Illinois. He was elected by cumulative voting to the Illinois state legislature in the 1970s.)

I thought it led to a much more independent and cooperative body that was not divided along party lines and run by a few leaders on each side and it allowed individual legislators to pursue the ideas that they had for improving government apart from party considerations and to work with members on both sides of the aisle in I think a very collegial atmosphere. I'm told today that things are so divided and so partisan in Springfield that the so-called reform has been a disaster in terms of the kind of government that was envisioned by our founders in America which obviously is a government that seeks to find where the American people are and find the compromises that are required to be made between different viewpoints and find the middle and therefore to govern where the people are rather than where one party is or the other.

By its nature the system encouraged moderate viewpoints to be brought to bear. We are as a matter of fact looking to see whether a system like this ought to be and could be a part of our national legislature because I think it worked so well in Illinois.

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(Senate Minority Leader **Emil Jones** is a black Democrat from the South Side of Chicago.)

[Since the repeal of cumulative voting] it's gotten more regional. Chicago has been cut off regionally. There are some swing districts that can go either way, but Chicago has gotten isolated because it's so heavily Democratic.... I know many critical issues where cumulative voting was a great help, because you always had that other voice. You had that person who would stand up and do what they felt was right to do. And they had enough support in their district to keep winning even though that support was minority support....

You always have that minority view out there, one that does not support the view of the majority. Cumulative voting took care of that. In a winner-take-all election there is no one there to also express the minority view. So in the legislature I thought it was very intriguing. It was a very good concept to ensure that the views of the minority are respected. Otherwise you end up in a government where you have sheer tyranny to a certain degree, where the majority will run roughshod over the minority. Cumulative voting prevented that from happening.

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(**Dawn Clark Netsch** served Illinois as a delegate to the 1970 constitutional convention, as a state senator and as state comptroller. She was the Democratic nominee for governor in 1994.)

[As a state senator] I had a chance to see how the House operated. I came to realize that in those days there was such a marked difference between the house and the senate. The house had lots more free-wheeling, innovative people, and ours was just like a prison practically. I came to realize how much cumulative voting and multi-member districts were responsible for that difference. Some of the best legislators were Democrats from the suburban area who would never have been elected in single-member districts and some of the best legislators on the Republican side were legislators from Chicago districts who would never have been elected under single-member districts.

I realized how important it was that when the Republicans went into their caucus in the House, there were a couple of people who were from Chicago. That was very important. I think by the same token it was important to have suburbanites -- very strong voices, good progressive Democrats -- in the Democratic caucus who could say "Hey wait a minute, you guys from Chicago, you don't own the whole world, people are going to the suburbs and here's something you ought to be taking into account."

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(**Jeff Ladd** served as a delegate to the 1970 constitutional convention. He is now the chairman of Metra, the commuter rail authority for suburban Chicago, and chairs a commission looking into state legislative redistricting.)

Cumulative voting offered an opportunity for a lot of people to get involved in politics who today can't because of how things are set up. If you could show community support through the kinds of activities that you were involved in -- whether charitable or something else -- and thought there was a good chance to get a quarter of the votes plus one, you could get elected. The party bosses couldn't stop you. It resulted in a much less partisan legislative body, one that was much more open to dealing with members on the other side based on the strength of ideas rather than the party relationship. I think that's absent today. Almost everything is a partisan vote and very uncivil.

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(State Senator **Arthur Berman**, a white Democrat, was elected to the Illinois House in 1968 and served there until elected to the Illinois Senate in 1976.)

Cumulative voting brought legislators with a different point of view. They added something to the debate and added something to the discussions that I thought was very helpful. True democratic, with a small "d" process, because you had different points of view from the same areas of the state.....

It diminished the role that we see being played today by legislative leaders. Today you see the very, very powerful role that the legislative leaders play in raising money and diverting that money to candidates that they want to support. Back under cumulative voting, the power of the leadership wasn't what it is today because candidates for the House only needed one-quarter of the vote. They could concentrate on the people they wanted to have vote for them, and they didn't have to go and get Big Money from the leadership. They could do it primarily through their own resources.