

## Substack

# **Imagine if Congress was elected by Proportional Representation Illinois' 110-yr history with a form of PR resulted in more voter choice, more bipartisanship, less bitter polarization and better representation— a lesson for our times**

**By Steven Hill**

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A number of US cities and towns—from New York City, Cincinnati and Cleveland to Chilton County AL and a number of counties in Pennsylvania—have had a history of electing their city councils or county governments by one of several proportional representation electoral methods. But only one US state has ever used a proportional method to elect its state legislature. That's the state of Illinois.

For 110 years until 1980, Illinois used a method called cumulative voting to elect its state House of Representatives. Instead of single-seat "winner take all" districts, in which legislators were elected one district at a time, cumulative voting in Illinois used three-seat districts, and a candidate needed only 25% of the popular vote to win one of the three seats. Cumulative voting, which is known as a "semi-proportional" voting method, is designed to foster broad representation, more voter choice and less bitter partisanship. Illinois' experience with this method has a lot to teach us about how to address the severe crisis of American democracy.

Fortunately when I worked for the Center for Voting and Democracy (now known as FairVote), we conducted a project interviewing a number of former Illinois state legislators who had been elected by cumulative voting. We intended to make a documentary but our ambitions were bigger than our budget, so the documentary never happened.

But myself and a couple of others poured through the hours and hours of raw video footage, and what we heard was illuminating. Some of these state legislators went on to become members of Congress, US Senators, federal judges and law professors. Among the list were well known names like US Senators Paul Simon and Carol Mosely Braun (the first black woman elected to the Senate), US representatives Abner Mikva, John Porter and more.

But before many of them found political fame in higher office, first they all had been elected to the Illinois House of Representatives by cumulative voting. Below are excerpts from the transcripts of these interviews, presenting some of the insights from these savvy leaders about the impacts of cumulative voting and how it improved representation, increased bipartisanship and reduced bitter partisan warfare between Democrats and Republicans.

When we conducted the interviews, many of the former legislators were then elder statesmen and stateswomen, most of them retired, so with fewer political axes left to grind. It was a joy to listen to their illuminating reminiscences. What these former legislators had to say about Illinois's use of this system speaks directly to our national dilemmas regarding toxic partisan polarization, declining voter interest, low competition, poor representation, and a loss of political ideas.

Indeed, as a result of using cumulative voting in three-seat districts, Illinois enjoyed bipartisan representation from all parts of the state, including frequent sightings of now extinct species – Chicago Republicans, as well as downstate Democrats, all of them elected, as if by some kind of democratic magic, in strongholds of the opposing party.

Here are some excerpts from these revealing interviews, grouped by major themes. (Note: while cumulative voting technically is a semi-proportional representation method, in Illinois it was often known simply as 'proportional representation')

### **BIPARTISAN REPRESENTATION IN ALL PARTS OF THE STATE; LESS URBAN/SUBURBAN SPLIT**

Congressman Abner Mikva, Democrat: "Proportional representation gave a voice to a critical minority so that Democrats in the [heavily GOP] suburbs had a spokesperson from their district who they could rally around and generate some party activities. Similarly, in Chicago you had Republican representatives and these Republican outposts in a city that was dominated by the Democratic Party."

Lee Daniels, Republican, former Speaker of the House in Illinois: "I thought proportional representation worked well. I thought it gave a guarantee of minority representation. In the Republican caucus, frequently we had Republican legislators talking about the needs of the city of Chicago. Today, generally speaking, there are very few [elected] Republicans that come from the city of Chicago so that the views of the city are very difficult to be communicated within our [party] caucus."

Daniels, who served in the state legislature for thirty years, was elected under both a three-seat PR system and a single-seat, winner-take-all system, and speaks with great conviction about the advantages of proportional representation.

Congressman John Porter, Republican: "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 work with members on both sides of the aisle in, I think, a very collegial atmosphere."

Harold Katz, Democrat, former representative from the Chicago north suburb of

Glencoe, a heavily GOP area: “The House [under proportional representation] was a very exciting place. It seemed to be the center of activity in the state capital. It was like a symphony, really, with not just two instruments playing, but a number of different instruments going at all times.”

Congressman Mikva, Democrat: “Between us we represented just about every organized point of view within the district. And that’s something that you can’t do with just one representative. If you represent the Democrats, the Republicans will feel voiceless; or you represent the organization, then the independents will feel voiceless. Or represent the conservatives, and the moderates will feel voiceless. Whereas with this multimember district, and particularly with proportional representation, it made it possible to give a legitimacy to the delegation that you don’t have with single-member districts.”

What these former state legislators experienced with proportional representation is that nearly every Illinois three-seat district benefitted from two-party representation. Both parties won seats in all parts of the state. As a result, Republicans didn’t ignore cities, and Democrats didn’t ignore Republican strongholds. Illinois was not carved up into a balkanized red and blue partisan checkerboard.

In fact, for many years the Speaker of the House was a Democrat elected from heavily GOP DuPage County. When you only need 25 percent of the vote in a three-seat district to win a seat, Democrats in conservative areas and Republicans in liberal areas could win one of those seats. Congressman Porter was so impressed by his experience of PR in Illinois’s state government that he began working with other members of Congress to bring proportional representation to elections for the federal House of Representatives.

## **MORE CIVILITY and REDUCED POLARIZATION**

Both Republicans and Democrats saw other advantages to cumulative voting that addressed the dilemma of partisan bitterness, polarization and regional balkanization.

Giddy Dyer, Republican, female state legislator: ““I think the lack of civility began when we did away with [proportional representation] and the multimember districts. Because now, it’s just like two armies in full regalia fighting each other. There’s just total squashing of many good ideas.”

Congressman Porter, Republican: “By its nature the system encouraged moderate viewpoints to be brought to bear. There’s a great deal more independence for each member than there is under the present system.”

Congressman Mikva, Democrat from Chicago: “This idea of balkanizing the state that way, it’s not healthy. [Proportional representation], I think, helped us synthesize some of these differences, made us realize even though we were different than the downstaters,

different than the suburbanites, that we also had a lot in common that held us together as a single state.”

Congressman Porter, Republican: In Illinois’s three-seat districts with PR, “we operated in a less partisan environment because both parties represented the entire state.”

Giddy Dyer, Republican state legislator: “I get back to the reason it’s so important to have some Republican representatives from the city of Chicago is that they, many of them, had children in the Chicago public schools, and rode the CTA [metro transit system], and cared about Chicago’s problems. And now, it seems to be polarized, between the city, the suburban ring, and downstate.”

### **IDEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY WITHIN THE PARTIES — INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES BEAT THE PARTY MACHINES**

Illinois’ experience showed that cumulative voting allowed for a broader spectrum of representatives, not only bipartisan but also within each party. A liberal three-seat district would elect two Democrats and one Republican, but the two Democrats often would be two different types of Democrats—a liberal Democrat and a moderate Democrat, or an independent Democrat and a machine Democrat.

It was the same with the Republicans. Voters all over the state, whether Democrats, Republicans, or independents, had a vote that counted for something. Judge Abner Mikva was an independent Democrat who ran against the Democratic Party machine in Chicago. He said that under proportional representation, because a candidate needed to win only 25% of the popular vote, legislators were not so beholden to monied interests and political machines. You could run independent of the political machine.

Congressman Mikva, Democrat: “Proportional representation gave the opportunity for outsiders like me to win a seat. I never could have gotten elected if the party could have simply beat me one-on-one. I didn’t have a lot of money.”

Giddy Dyer, GOP state legislator, who had to fight her own party’s machine to get elected: “My county chairman was from the other branch, the right-wing branch of the Republican Party, and I would never have been, quote, asked to run by that county chairman. So when I decided to run, I really had to form my own campaign committee and not depend on the party for any help...And Gene Hoffman in the neighboring district was in the same situation. He was a schoolteacher, and very strong on education, and from the moderate wing of the party, and he had to build his own organization to run.”

In Judge Mikva’s Chicago district, one Democrat represented the Daley machine, Mikva represented a more independent Democratic perspective, and the dean of the John Marshall Law School was the elected Republican.

Congressman Mikva, Democrat: “You ended up with more independent people in the legislature. They weren’t that responsible to a particular political party. Paul Powell couldn’t dominate all of the downstate Democrats because Paul Simon could get elected thanks to proportional representation. Richard Daley couldn’t command all of the Cook County Democrats because Tony Scariano, Bob Mann, and others got elected...The representatives in both parties had a lot more freedom. Everybody understood that you didn’t have to toe a particular party line, or you didn’t have to kowtow to a particular leader. So it generated a lot more independence within the legislature...it really gave the local, legitimate parochial concerns better presence and better voice than they have now.”

Because a candidate only needed support from 25% of the voters in a three-seat district, this had campaign finance implications. Independent candidates could run and win without a lot of money or the backing of the party machine. A candidate could run a grassroots campaign on a shoestring budget.

Congressman Mikva: “You could appeal to a much smaller set of voters. That involves a much smaller amount of money being spent on them...advertising, media, so on.”

Campaign finance reformers should take note that grassroots candidates were able to win because money played a much-reduced role since a winning candidate only needed to reach the 25% victory threshold.

## **BETTER FOR WOMEN AND MINORITIES**

Proportional representation didn’t serve only political minorities like Republicans in liberal areas and Democrats in conservative areas. It also helped women and racial minorities win representation.

Emil Jones, black Democratic president of the state senate: “The district I was elected from was a district that comprised only about 20 percent of African American constituencies. So, what I did was I organized the African American community. And, the other three candidates, they split the white vote. And I received a certain percentage of the white vote, and I ran second and won.”

Barbara Flynn Currie, Democrat, longtime House majority leader: “As a result of proportional representation, my district became the first in Illinois history to send two women from the same party to the state legislature, myself and Carol Moseley Braun.”

Currie was the longest serving woman in the Illinois legislature, serving for 40 years, twenty-two years as House majority leader.

Adeline Geo-Karis, a Republican legislator elected under both PR and winner-take-all systems: Proportional representation “made it easier for women and minorities to get elected.”

Barbara Flynn Currie, Democrat, former House majority leader: “In the days of proportional representation, we had African Americans representing majority white districts, and white representatives coming from districts that were predominantly African American.”

PR even helped elect black Republicans, but now the Republican Party in Illinois—as in the rest of the nation—is mostly lily-white.

When you listen to these Illinois legislators, Republicans and Democrats alike, one quality stands out: their belief that the other side deserved representation. They took seriously the Golden Rule of Representation: “Give unto others the representation you would have them give unto you.” They believed doing so was good for their state’s welfare and good for the political and legislative process.

Compare that view to national politics today, to the down-and-dirty, zero-sum “winner take all” game it has become in this age in which hyper-partisan leaders will do whatever it takes to beat the other side. The current battle over mid-decade redistricting is just the latest tragic fiasco as our representative democracy tumbles over the cliff’s edge into the dark deep fissures of post-democracy

Indeed, Chicago Tribune political reporter Rick Pearson wrote that the rolling coalitions which formed in the Illinois House “often helped lead to centrist pragmatic policies.” The Chicago Tribune has opined that “many partisans and political independents have looked back wistfully at the era of cumulative voting. They acknowledge that it produced some of the best and brightest in Illinois politics.”

## **BYE BYE CUMULATIVE VOTING...**

So if cumulative voting in three-seat districts was so great, what happened? Why did Illinois get rid of it in 1980?

It was the dawn of the Reagan “government is the problem” era, and the Illinois state legislature, failing to take the temperature of the times, foolishly voted itself a hefty pay increase. With a populist battle cry of “get rid of the politicians,” an opportunistic politician sponsored what was known as the Cutback Amendment—a statewide ballot measure that sought to “cut back” the size and cost of state government by shrinking the number of elected politicians by a third. Little recognized, unfortunately, was that the ballot measure also did away with cumulative voting (today, under many state’s initiative process, combining repeal of cumulative voting with a reduction in the number of

legislators would likely be a violation of the “single subject” rule).

But the return to winner-take-all, single-seat districts quickly led to the by-now-familiar litany of problems: little competition, partisan polarization, “if you win I lose” winner-take-all dynamics, regional balkanization, low voter turnout, and so on. It virtually wiped out the Democratic Party in DuPage County and other conservative areas, and killed the GOP in Chicago and many other cities. It led to so many lopsided, one-party districts that ever since then nearly half of Illinois’s House races have been uncontested by one of the major parties because everyone knows who will win those races. This is the legacy of “winner take all” elections in Illinois, indeed in all 50 states.

The return of “winner take all” elections in Illinois also has led to an alarming concentration of power in the hands of the “Four Tops” – no, that’s not a Motown singing quartet, that’s the majority and minority leaders in both the House and the Senate. According to the Chicago Tribune’s Pearson, the Four Tops now “use the cudgel of the potential loss of campaign cash to dictate the issues to be considered and how a member should vote. The formation of a true bipartisan coalition now is rare.”

The Illinois story strikes at the very heart of Americans’ notions of “representation.” Millions of “orphaned voters”—Republicans living in Democratic areas, Democrats in Republican areas, and third-party supporters and independents everywhere—usually do not have a voice. But in Illinois under proportional representation, Republican legislators were elected in the blue liberal cities, as were Democrats in the red conservative areas. Independents, moderates, and the wings of the parties had a place at the table; so did women and minorities. In Illinois, purple America had a home.

A federal bill called the Fair Representation Act (H.R.4632) has been introduced in the 119th U.S. Congress by Rep. Jamie Raskin and Rep. Don Beyer, which would implement proportional representation for electing the US House of Representatives. Instead of cumulative voting, the FRA would use an even better method known as proportional ranked choice voting (also known as “single transferable vote”). PRCV has all the benefits of cumulative voting but it also has other desirable features, such as ranked ballots that prevent spoiler candidates, split votes and wasted votes that can sometimes happen with cumulative voting.

The various 50 US states are often laboratories for innovation and experimentation for each other. The Illinois experience with proportional representation has a lot to teach us as we grapple with the demanding challenges that our failing democracy is facing.

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**SCOTUS voting rights demolition opens door to better representation  
Advocates for proportional representation see their opening –  
but they are already making mistakes**

**Steven Hill  
May 4, 2026**

In reaction to the right-wing Supreme Court majority's decision last Wednesday to gut the Voting Rights Act, numerous experts and pundits have rushed to get their reaction pieces out there to catch the news cycle. I thought I would take this past weekend to read through a range of commentary about the likely impacts, and think about what comes next. The decision, *Louisiana v. Chavis*, is a terrible ruling, whether on the legal merits or its utter illogic and hypocrisy, as well as on the expected consequences. But it also was wholly expected, this has been coming for some time in decision after decision. As has been said before about the John Roberts Supreme Court, "Five votes beats a reason, any day."

But amidst all the justifiable shock, I've been surprised that more expert commentators haven't recognized what an opportunity this is – both for an overall better democracy as well as the potential for better representation for most race-identified voters who never lived in the 133 House districts out of the 435 that elected a minority congressperson. The unspoken truth is that, six decades ago with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the advocates of representational justice for black Americans made a devil's bargain with the winner-take-all, single-seat district electoral system. Winner-take-all methods, by design, only elect majorities. By definition, minorities of all stripes – whether racial, party-based or geographic – do not normally win representation in majoritarian systems.

For understandable reasons, the advocates of representational justice accepted the only deal that was offered to them by the passage of the Voting Rights Act, which was to contort and manipulate the district lines – often times drawing ridiculously shaped districts, such as the infamous Z-shaped district, districts shaped like dumbbells, another that was compared to the shape of a smashed mosquito, still another the shape of splashed spaghetti sauce – to turn a racial minority constituency into a majority within a particular district (alongside the zany Picasso districts drawn for incumbent protection reasons). With the careful gerrymandering of legislative district lines to capture the right pockets of racially-minded voters, the winner-take-all electoral system was literally twisted and wrenched and forced to do something that it was never meant to do – elect representatives of a minority perspective.

And lo and behold, over time, racial gerrymandering worked. Not perfectly, it had some real downsides which I'll get to in a minute, but the ghost white United States Congress began to resemble the burgeoning racial diversity of the nation. A decades-long full court press of legal actions to enforce the drawing of black-majority districts was unleashed,

later followed by efforts to draw Hispanic-majority or -influence districts. Long-overdue representational justice was achieved relatively quickly, with the number of elected black House members tripling in 15 years, from 6 to 18, and continuing to climb steadily to today's record of 61, along with 46 Hispanic, 18 Asian American (also a record) and 3 Native American members out of 435 – whites are still vastly overrepresented, with 69% of House members and only 59% of the U.S. population.

## **Backlash at the Supreme Court**

But as the US Supreme Court has turned more right-wing (due to the constitutional bias that gives overweighted representation and influence to US Senators from low-population conservative states), the federal courts began turning against the goals of racial representation. Supreme Court decisions like *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1986), *Shaw vs Reno* (1993), *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) and *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee* (2021), have been making Swiss cheese of voting rights jurisprudence for many years now. Indeed, law professor Rick Pildes observed, following this latest ruling, “For many voting-rights scholars, a surprising aspect of this week’s decision is that *Gingles* survived as long as it did. Almost 20 years ago, the court’s trajectory had already become clear, as I wrote in an academic article back then: ‘*Gingles* now looks more like the last gasp of an older, dying era than the framework for a new one.’”

Now that the shining star of the VRA has reached its white dwarf stage, in which it will gradually cool and fade to a dead core, it’s a good time to review why its achievement was always a pyrrhic victory, and for reasons that are particularly important to review and remind ourselves about at this time.

### **1. More minority representation = fewer Democrats elected?**

First, as racial representation expanded and grew, it became clearer that it was resulting in the election of fewer Democrats. As it turned out, the packing of high concentrations of minority voters into “majority-minority” districts not only elected more minorities, it also had the effect of bleeding minority voters out of all the surrounding districts. Given that minority voters have been the most reliably Democratic voters, that made all of the neighboring districts more Republican.

It was a surprise to many when, during the 1991-92 redistricting, GOP House minority leader Newt Gingrich embraced this strategy of drawing majority-minority districts, as did the Bush Administration’s Justice Department. But the reason quickly became clear. In Gingrich’s home state of Georgia, the US House delegation went from 10 Democrats -- one black -- and one Republican (Gingrich) in 1992 to eight Republicans and three Democrats -- all three black -- in 1994. The newly elected black (and later Latino and Asian) representatives mostly were replacing white Democrats, and the increase in minority representation came at the expense of electing fewer Democrats overall.

Virtually overnight, white moderate Democratic House members disappeared from the South.

The regional partisan demographics expressed within a district-based, winner-take-all electoral system turned the Voting Rights Act into an effective GOP tool that allowed the party to take control of the House of Representatives in 1994 for the first time in four decades (Gingrich became Speaker of the House). The Democrats and minority voters were tripped up by a classic Catch-22: even as legislatures were becoming more diverse, they were ironically becoming less friendly to the agenda of racial minorities. Not only that, with the disappearance of many white Democratic House members, that allowed GOP strategists to further “racialize” the Democratic Party and alienate it from white working class voters.

## **2. The VRA didn’t empower “orphaned” minority voters**

Second, another reason racial gerrymandering should have been only a short-term stop gap solution – instead of the institution it became -- is because it only representationally empowered those minority individuals who lived within those districts that elected minority representation. In today’s US House with 133 minority electeds, all other minority-minded individuals living in the other 301 districts are not blessed with any representation at all, unless you can argue that a black person in Wyoming gets her or his representation from Congresswoman Maxine Waters in Los Angeles or Cleo Fields in Louisiana. Which is obviously a stretch, by any reasonable definition of the term “representation.” These are “orphaned” voters – voters without an electoral home. There are actually a lot more orphaned minority individuals living in those 301 districts than there are minorities fortunate enough to have an electoral home in those 133 districts. The current system, even at its best, never provided tens of millions of minorities with a chance to elect a minority representative. Election after election, most minority individuals learned through repetition whether they were deserving of representation or not, contributing to an understandable cynicism toward American democracy and its recurring representational shortcomings.

## **3. White individuals can be orphaned voters too**

Third, it must be recognized that white people living in those 133 majority-minority districts were in the same boat – no representation according to their race. Today, for example, in most legislative districts, a white Christian Republican can be living next door to a Latina single mom Democrat who lives next door to a gay independent Korean small businessman living beside a Sierra Club member and Green Party supporter, etc., etc., ad infinitum. But with only one seat being elected, only one of these voters will end up with “representation” in any genuine sense. In actual fact, the real minorities who have been damaged, election after election, by the winner-take-all single-seat district system has been any geographic minority living within any district. There are entire sub-regions

where geographic minorities of many persuasions are swamped by the winner-take-all avalanche that dominates their electoral districts. The rising star of the Voting Rights Era for these last 60 years ignored all of this and accepted these on-the-ground realities as part of the devil's bargain.

#### **4. The “racialized” environment contributed to Trump’s rise**

Fourth, it's clear that decades of successful voting rights actions only served to perpetuate the continued use of winner-take-all districts and their racially-tinged context. It has unintentionally reinforced the same racialized culture that has fed into the current MAGA white backlash. It is understandable why voting rights leaders have continued down this loaded path, since it has led to levels of electoral success that had not been seen since pre-Jim Crow Reconstruction. But it contained the seeds of its own undoing.

And so now, here we are. Faced with these four buried secrets that have been churning beneath the surface for so many years. It's a good time to unearth them, in the hopes of better understanding the path forward.

#### **What now? Many ideas, so little time**

Perhaps this moment gives us an opportunity to finally get this right. There are other methods, under the broad category of proportional representation, that arguably would do at least as good a job as racially gerrymandered districts, and might even do a better job because it would allow minority voters -- no matter where they live -- to have a chance to cast a vote that actually helps elect their preferred candidates. However, some of these proportional methods are better than others for the specific purpose of electing racial representation.

Possible options include cumulative voting, which has a long and successful history of being used to settle voting rights cases in over 100 jurisdictions. It's a good method, but its defect is the problem of spoiler candidates and split votes -- if too many minority candidates run in the same contest, race-minded voters can easily split their votes among all those minority candidates, who all spoil each other, resulting in none of them winning.

A better method therefore than cumulative voting is proportional ranked choice voting (RCV), because its feature of using ranked ballots mitigates cumulative voting's defect of split votes among spoiler candidates. Voters have the option of ranking their ballots, and if their first choice can't win their vote goes to their second choice. Multiple candidates of color won't spoil each other and minority voters won't split their votes. Some critics claim that RCV is too complicated for voters, but the many studies of real world RCV elections has found the opposite, though there is certainly a lot of bogus research out

there. In New York City's city council elections using single-winner RCV, women of color tripled their numbers and won a majority of seats on the city council in the first RCV election. That success for candidates and voters of color in RCV elections has been repeated in cities as diverse as Portland OR, Minneapolis, St. Paul, San Francisco, Salt Lake City and more.

Dan Cantor, co-founder of the Working Families Party and now with the Center for Ballot Freedom, has proposed fusion voting as part of the salve for this bitter moment. Calling fusion voting "America's own unique form of proportional representation," it allows a voter to vote for a single candidate on multiple political parties' ballot lines. It is used in New York and Connecticut, and there's little evidence that it has done much of anything to elect more minorities. It's hard to imagine how fusion voting offers voting rights advocates a lifeline in this confusing, lost moment.

Over at New America, political scientist Lee Drutman has proposed an "open party list" proportional system as the remedy that racial representation advocates need. It's a method with some merit, but from the point of view of advancing minority representation, open list PR has real problems. Like cumulative voting, it would likely result in spoiler candidates and split votes among minority-minded voters that result in poor racial representation. If the goal is a "mirror legislature" that reflects the face of a racially diverse population, there are better methods than open list PR.

In a second article to come, I will write a more detailed review that compares and contrasts different electoral methods and their ability to facilitate racial representation. This is an important moment in the history of our representative democracy, and it is worth taking some time to try and understand the best pathway forward for the very diverse, complex and bitterly divided society that we have become. Hopefully in this delicate, vulnerable moment we can avoid the usual political opportunism, as everyone tries to push forward their favorite method, regardless of the evidence of whether it will actually help facilitate racial representation.

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