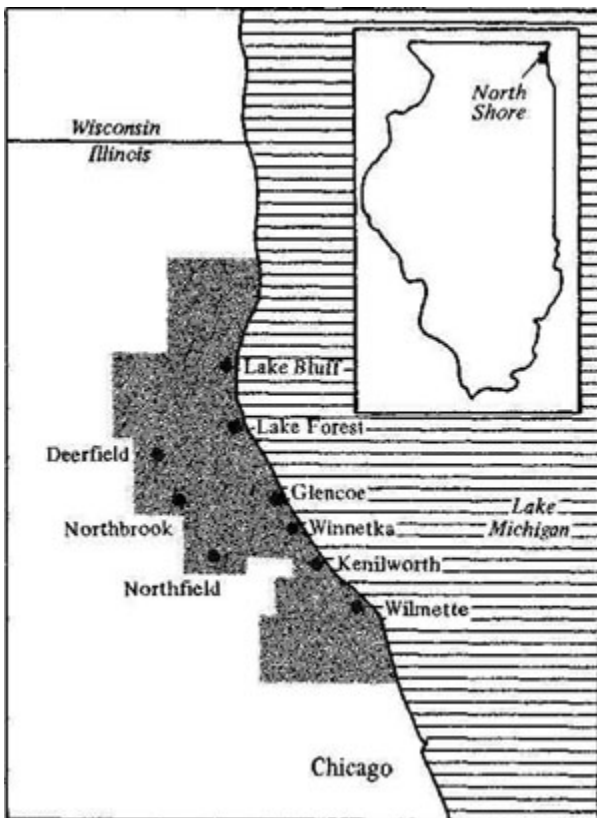


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'Caucus system' North Shore flourishes on the North Shore



Local officials in eight Chicago suburbs are nominated through a nonpartisan process which solicits the views of residents and culminates in an annual town meeting. The nominating process works so well that voter turnout in elections is usually poor

OLD-TIME ME party politics, as we all know, are alive and well in Illinois. But coexisting with the old politics is a nonpartisan method of selecting municipal candidates called the caucus system. This political system operates successfully in several suburbs along Chicago's affluent North Shore. The municipal caucus method, which is based on the philosophy that "the job seeks the man," has been functioning for over 50 years and its candidates will win many local elections in April.

The eight suburbs presently using this system vary in population from Northbrook with 27,681 residents to tiny Kenilworth with 2,980 residents. Three of the suburbs, Winnetka, Kenilworth and Glencoe, are old established villages whose populations and boundaries have changed little during the past 20 years. Lake Bluff and Lake Forest, also old

North Shore communities, still have some land expansion possibilities to the west. Northfield, Northbrook and Deerfield, lying inland from Lake Michigan, are more recently developed communities and still have both population and land expansion potential. The residents of all eight suburbs are above average in education levels and per capita income, according to 1970 U.S. Census figures.

Each of the communities has taken the concept of a nonpartisan caucus system and adjusted it to fit local needs. In one form or another, the system has operated on the North Shore since it began in Winnetka in 1917. The caucus idea soon spread to Glencoe, Lake Forest and Lake Bluff and later, westward to the newer suburbs of Deerfield, Northbrook and Northfield.

Each year following the local elections in April, a local caucus begins anew with different members and a different name, i.e., "The 1974 Caucus" or "The 1975 Caucus." The process consists of interviewing and selecting candidates, but it does not lead to a primary election. If a caucus operated as a continuing political party, a primary election would be required by state law. Seven of the eight communities determine caucus representation on a geographic basis either by appointment or election at the precinct level. Individual precinct representation varies from three to eight members depending on the community. Full caucus membership varies from 27 in Northfield to more than 70 in Winnetka. Bylaws set staggered terms and provide for 1/3 to 2/3 of each caucus to be replaced each year. Kenilworth is the only community which bases its caucus on organizational representation. Twenty-three civic organizations send two delegates to the Kenilworth caucus. Caucus bylaws also provide for delegates-at-large if an individual has obtained signatures from 25 residents.

Preparing for an election

A caucus may have an "on and off year depending on duties of the caucus and the election calendar under which that community operates. Caucus systems in Kenilworth, Winnetka, Glencoe, Northbrook and Lake Forest are responsible for the selection of candidates for village (Lake Forest has a city council), park, library and school boards. The village caucuses in Northfield, Deerfield and Lake Bluff are not responsible for proposing school board candidates and were dormant this past year. The next village election in these communities is in April 1977.

Caucuses preparing for this April's local elections began work last summer by compiling village concerns and soliciting names of potential candidates from local residents through villagewide mailings and public meetings. The Winnetka Caucus Committee sent a

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detailed questionnaire to ail residents asking specific questions with regard to each elected board in the village. The caucus then developed a platform based on a 26 percent

response rate to the questionnaire. Although no other community has the sophisticated questionnaire method used by Winneika. caucuses in Glencoe. Northfield and Northbrook do solicit citizen views on local issues in preparing a caucus platform, All caucuses provide for individual interviews with possible candidates, in some communities, subcommittees interview candidates and report recommendations to the total caucus, in some cases, the entire caucus commit interviews each candidate.

Many residents see community service as one of their village responsibilities and volunteer to serve on a local board. Last fall, the Winnctka caucus interviewed 40 candidates for four openings on its village council. The Glencoe caucus interviewed 17 for its four village board vacancies. Questions put to the candidates ranged from "When did you last attend a village board meeting?" and "How many hours do you think the job of trustee entails?" to asking for specific views on a local zoning or land use issue. Generally, caucus interviews consider a candidate's education, work experience and background in community service more thoroughly than his views on a specific issue. But caucuses have been known to reject a qualified candidate because he spoke out strongly on a highly controversial local concern.

After the initial interviewing is completed, the full caucus may accept the subcommittee's recommendation, or it may decide to interview the finalists again before voting. Usually a 2/3 vote by the full caucus determines the slate that will be presented for ratification at a town meeting.

The town meeting, which usually takes place in late January or early February, resembles in spirit the meetings which have been taking place in many New England towns for more than three centuries. However, these meetings in the North Shore communities exist by virtue of caucus bylaws; they are not official bodies and should not be confused with the statutory meetings of township governments which also exist in Cook County outside Chicago and in 84 other Illinois counties.

Except for Kenilworth, where only caucus members may vote in the town meeting, village residents confirm caucus slater and. in effect, determine the future course of their village. In an uneventful year. only a few hundred residents will attend a town meeting although all caucus bylaws make detailed provisions for advanced publicity of the meeting date. Public interest in the town meeting can change in a year when issues or candidates become controversial. More than 1,500 residents attended Northbrook's town meeting in January, some arriving by chartered bus — quite a change from previous years when attendance was four to five hundred. Residents at that town meeting altered the caucus slate which they felt had omitted a particularly able candidate for village trustee.

***The caucuses and
chairmen***

Donald Hoover, Jr.,
chairman

Town meetings in other communities have also. in some instances, rejected a recommended candidate and slated someone nominated from the floor, usually a person interviewed by the caucus, but not a finalist. Most caucus communities and town meetings look with some suspicion on

Deerfield Caucus Plan

Ira Weinberg, chairman
Village Nominating
Committee,

Glencoe Caucus Plan

Robert Balsley,
chairman

**Kenilworth Citizen's
Advisory Committee**

Donald H. MacKey,
chairman

**Lake Bluff Progressive
Party Advisory
Committee**

Thomas E. Donnelley,
II, chairman

Lake Forest Caucus

Jane Staley, chairperson
**Northbrook Village
Caucus**

David Mason, chairman
**Northfield Village
Caucus**

John Clark, chairman
**Winnetka Caucus
Committee**

a new candidate who has not presented himself to the caucus for interviewing. In Glencoe, participants at a town meeting can refuse to ratify the proposed slate and direct the caucus committee to report back to another town meeting with a different slate. Whether a town meeting is a poorly attended event or a highly charged meeting lasting until 2 a.m., the majority of residents at the meeting determine the caucus party slate to be presented to the voters at the April elections. The caucus then proceeds with the legal necessities of circulating and filing petitions, publicizing candidates and the upcoming election and, finally, campaigning for its candidates if the caucus slate is contested at the polls.

Municipalities are subject to the Election Code, and the petition, as provided in Article 10 of the code, is the usual method of placing candidates' names on the ballot. The way is left open, of course, for an opposition group — and this did happen, as noted below, in Wilmette several years ago. The caucus method is not, of course, a true nonpartisan system because candidates run under the label of a local party — although not using the names of existing statewide parties. It is, correctly, a form of one-party system, but with a "new" party name each year to avoid the primary election required for established parties.

With crises occurring at every level of partisan politics, caucus supporters point to definite advantages of the nonpartisan caucus system. It offers the opportunity for wide citizen participation in the nominating process. Caucuses interview all persons expressing interest in serving on a local board, and caucus members take seriously the responsibility for soliciting names from the community.

Perhaps the most obvious advantage of the caucus system is that it eliminates the need for an expensive, time-consuming and divisive campaign. When the conscientious delegates of a broadly based caucus do a good job of candidate selection, the best available people can be slated to serve. The responsibility for publicity and financing rests with the total caucus and not on the shoulders of individual candidates. Caucus supporters believe more qualified and dedicated people are willing to volunteer for noncompensatory board service under these circumstances.

Finally, proponents of the caucus system say that a nonpartisan, communitywide caucus allows for local issues to be considered in a rational manner

In one recent election for village president only 50 votes were cast. A resident of that village said, 'Its scary to think that a carefully concealed write-in campaign could have easily elected someone else'

— villagewide surveys, early public meetings or caucus representation.

Caucus critics say the caucus method has drawbacks that are inherent in the very nature of the system. Heavy committee work, late meetings and time commitments extending over a number of months put demands on a caucus member that many people refuse to accept, and therefore, some caucuses are not at full delegate strength as designated in local bylaws. In addition, the possibility always exists that a caucus may be dominated by a particular interest group. New residents may be confused by the system and take longer to get involved than long-time residents who are familiar with the caucus system. Every caucus community also remembers a year when people "came out of the woodwork" to serve on the caucus because they were interested in a single local issue.

Although a variety of special interests represented by caucus members may encourage good discussion at caucus meetings, critics say once a slate has been accepted by the caucus, the fact that it is a single slate may preclude the discussion of local issues in the wider community. Sometimes the town meeting at which candidates are presented and ratified may be the scene of public debate, but decisions made at that meeting end community discussion. Seldom do candidates debate issues at candidates' meetings or in the press before an April election unless that election is contested. Consequently, voter turnout in caucus communities is often poor during an uneventful year. Communities with registered voters in the thousands will turn out a couple of hundred voters to reaffirm the caucus slate.

In one recent election for village president only 50 votes were cast. A resident of that village said, "It's scary to think that a carefully concealed write-in campaign 'could have easily elected someone else.'" Another resident noted with some embarrassment that the 50 votes cast were less than the full caucus delegation, which meant that not even all caucus members had remembered to support the slate on election day. But if there is a choice of candidates or a controversy, the voters do turn out. In a 1971 election in the small community of Lake Bluff which had supported a caucus system for 40 years, 60 per cent of the 2,500 registered voters turned out to vote on a contested slate. Previously, Lake Bluff local elections attracted 10 per cent of the voters. After the 1971 election, residents were sufficiently concerned about the health of their caucus that opposing factions worked out by law changes to the satisfaction of both sides. Currently, the uncontested elections in Lake Bluff once again attract 10 per cent of the potential voters.

In most other caucus communities a caucus challenge comes at the town meeting rather than at the polls. Proponents and opponents of a candidate or issue will get their

supporters to the meeting and decisions at the town meeting will usually settle the matter. If a candidate recommended by the caucus is dropped at the town meeting, that normally ends the matter. Unsupported candidates usually feel that to file and run as an independent would threaten the existence of the caucus. In the few instances when a candidate has chosen to ignore the caucus and run outside the system, he or she is usually defeated at the polls. On the other hand, if an "outsider" is elected and the caucus candidate is defeated at the polls, the caucus is not seriously damaged. Instead, the defeat may be used as the impetus for examination and perhaps modification of the caucus system to better deal with the changing needs of the community.

Wilmette, another North Shore suburb (population 32,134). is an exception to the traditional growth and strength of an established caucus system. In Wilmette, a 30-year-old caucus blew apart in 1969 when a serious split developed in the caucus. In reviewing the proposed slate for that year, it appeared to a group of old-time residents that a younger, possibly more liberal group, had seized control of the caucus and ignored certain candidates, including incumbents. Unlike its sister suburbs, Wilmette caucus bylaws did not provide for a town meeting. The older dissident group withdrew from the caucus before the final caucus meeting and presented their own slate to the electorate.

This contested election resulted in such an overwhelming voter turnout that the polls were unable to handle the volume, and a federal court required an election rerun due to voter disenfranchisement. The insurgents' slate won both elections. If Wilmette caucus rules had provided for a town meeting this split might not have occurred. To date, caucus supporters have been unable to reestablish the system in Wilmette.

In contrast, heated debates at 1975 Northbrook and Deerfield town meetings and this past January in Glencoe, threatened, but did not shatter, local caucuses.

A venerable tradition

Caucus observers list several reasons for the durability of the system: (1) these affluent suburbs have few real problems causing controversy; (2) the highly trained administrative village staffs operate community services efficiently leaving little for residents to complain about; (3) the high level of competency and integrity of the elected officials negates charges of corruption and inefficiency; and finally (4) village residents believe there is not a Republican or Democratic way of street maintenance and garbage pick-up and don't want partisan parties "messing around" in their local government.

Whatever the primary reason, it's clear that the venerable tradition of a nonpartisan caucus system for selecting local office holders has outlasted special interest groups, local causes and individual candidates and continues to flourish on the North Shore. □

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