



Illinois Sen. John Cullerton

Longtime legislator became Senate president in 2009, and has been in middle of effort to improve state's pension, fiscal outlook

by Kate Tormey (ktormey@csg.org)

Illinois Sen. John Cullerton says that his decision to run for public office was a bit of “a lark.” He even jokes that his first win was due in part to a good ballot position.

But genetics could have been at play, too. Cullerton comes from a long line of public officials who have served in various levels of government dating back to the 1870s.

Despite growing up in an extended family that was active in Illinois politics, Cullerton didn't originally think he'd follow that path. But after law school, Cullerton began practicing as an assistant state's attorney, got involved in the state Democratic Party, and soon realized that he not only had the family history for the job, but the passion for it, too.

More than three decades later, as president of the Illinois Senate, Cullerton is now helping lead his home state through an especially challenging period in its political history.

When he and his legislative colleagues return to Springfield, they will once again face some difficult questions. How can we shore up our state's financially troubled public pension system? How will we balance the state's budget, especially with a temporary income-tax hike set to expire? (With no legislative change, Illinois' flat income-tax rate will fall from 5 percent to 3.75 percent in 2015.)

“That's going to be the big question next year. How do we get enough revenue to pay for our budget?” Cullerton says.

And those questions will have to be answered under a new political power structure in Illinois. Cullerton and fellow Democrats still control the House and Senate by comfortable margins, but after 12 years, one-party rule is over in Illinois. The state's new governor, Bruce Rauner, is a Republican.

Transition to legislative leadership

But this shared-power dynamic is not new to Cullerton. He has worked with Republican governors in the past, for example, and has also served in the minority.

Cullerton first joined the Illinois General Assembly in 1979 as a member of the House, and was soon called to action on a topic that hit close to home.

After getting married the same year he was sworn in, Cullerton and his wife had three children in a span of 2 1/2 years. And the new father soon turned his attention to promoting the safety of young children in automobiles, inspired in part by his wife's work with a nonprofit car-seat loan program.

At the time, only one state required that children ride in a safety seat, but Cullerton introduced a bill in Illinois — which became law — requiring the use of car seats by young children. Later, he successfully carried a bill making seat belts mandatory for adults. Under that law, police could issue tickets only when the vehicle was stopped for another offense.

In the 1990s, Cullerton aimed to make it a primary offense to drive or ride without a seat belt. But some critics feared such a law could lead to racial profiling.

Bio-sketch: Sen. Cullerton

- ✓ first elected to Illinois General Assembly in 1979
- ✓ moved to state Senate in 1991 after six terms in the House
- ✓ has been Senate president for the past six years
- ✓ began career as assistant public defender in Cook County; currently a partner in the law firm Thompson Coburn, LLP
- ✓ represents a part of the north side of Chicago

That's when he teamed up with Barack Obama, who was then an Illinois state senator working on legislation aimed at reducing racial profiling by law enforcement. Together, the pair shepherded their bills successfully through the legislature.

“When you get to sponsor a bill, or to push a button, or to stand up and say ‘yes’ to pass a law that you know is actually going to save lives, that is really powerful,” Cullerton says.

“It is very gratifying, and it's one reason why I got so interested in politics.”

His legislative focus has shifted since being elected president of the Democrat-controlled Senate in 2009.

In this leadership role, Cullerton now focuses less on bills of his own and more on encouraging others to reach their legislative goals and to develop policy solutions for the state. While in session, he has dinner with a small group of legislators every night.

“It's great because you don't have to talk about politics; you can talk about your family, your kids or whatever you want, and you get to know people better,” Cullerton says.

Those personal relationships help make the legislative process work.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Senate President Cullerton talked about legislative leadership and the future of his state's pension system. Here are some excerpts from the interview.

Q: You've said that when you get to be a leader, the whole world changes. How so?

A: As an example, most legislators, unless they serve on an appropriations committee, don't know much about the [details of the] state budget — in Illinois especially because most legislators are from the Chicago media market and the state budget is not as big a factor in the Chicago media as it is Downstate.

But when you become a leader, obviously you have to deal with the budget. That was my biggest crash course: the budget and the pension fund.

Q: Illinois' pension system has made national news because of the huge funding shortfall that it faces (an estimated \$100 billion). Why is the system and situation in Illinois unique compared to other states?

A: First, we have a specific Pension Clause in our state Constitution, and it was put in there specifically to make it impossible for us to take away people's pension benefits once they're accrued. That really ties your hands.

The second thing about Illinois is that not only do we take care of state employees, we take care of all the university employees, all of the community-college employees and 80 percent of the teachers in the state. So because of that, we have more active retirees than any other state in the nation.

Our pension systems are strong, but we're paying a lot of money, and that's the objection folks have. They would like not to have to pay so much of our general revenue fund into pensions; it's about 17 percent of our total budget.

Q: In 2013, state lawmakers passed a long-debated bill to reform the state pension system. Do you think it was a good compromise?

A: The law reduces people's pension benefits, and I think it's very likely to be found unconstitutional. I didn't want to pass it ... but the only way to find out if it was unconstitutional was to have a test case, so that's what we're doing.

That's in the Supreme Court right now and we'll see, but if [the justices] were to find it unconstitutional, we have a backup [bill] that is constitutional. It doesn't save as much money but ... we are willing to do that if and when the court rules.

Q: Some have called specifically for a change to the current system in which Chicago's public-school teachers' pensions are paid for by the city. What is your stance on that issue?

A: Clearly it makes no sense, and no one can justify a situation where the state of Illinois is employer for the suburban and downstate school districts but not for Chicago.

So there are two ways of looking at that: either we have the suburban and downstate school districts start paying for pensions themselves, or have the state be the employer for Chicago teachers [and pick up the cost of pensions]. One of those two things would have to happen for it to be fair.

The city of Chicago has four pension systems (for fire, police, municipal employees and laborers), and those are really in trouble, worse so than the state. So we have to assist the city of Chicago, maybe not necessarily with money, although that's one way of doing it.

We could maybe just allow them to spread out the payments and figure out a constitutional way to perhaps reduce some people's benefits to make sure that the whole system stays solvent. ★