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 was in middle of effort to improve state’s pension, fiscal outlook

A: 

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 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 downtown school districts but not for Chicago.

So there are two ways of looking at that: either we have the suburban and downtown 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.