Dec. 15: A day that changed state history

O n Dec. 15, 1970, the people of Illinois ratified the proposed new state constitution. The sixth Illinois Constitutional Convention had drafted a constitution designed to benefit and please all of the parts of Illinois: Chicago and Cook County, five suburban collar counties and the 96 downstate counties.

Yet it was the Chicago metropolitan area — the city of Chicago and its neighboring suburbs — that put the vote over the top.

The statewide approval vote was 55 percent. Cook County gave the constitution a 65 percent approval vote, while the 101 other counties gave it a 45 percent approval vote. Despite the efforts of the downstate convention delegates to persuade their neighbors to vote yes, the rest of Illinois, as usual, did not vote to support constitutional change.

Why did Chicago and the Cook County suburbs vote yes?

As to the city of Chicago itself, the answer is simple: Mayor Richard J. Daley. At that time, he controlled a political organization known as “the most efficient political machine in America.” When he turned out the vote, his patronage army, led by Democratic precinct captains, was a sight to behold.

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Perhaps the rest of Illinois would have agreed to enable Chicago and metro area to take their place on the international stage. But perhaps not. And if the downstaters had refused, I believe there would have been a serious movement to divide the state. Cook County, perhaps taking Lake and Will counties with it, would have petitioned Congress for statehood.

LAW AND PUBLIC ISSUES

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Although the one-man-one vote cases of the 1960s promised greater legislative power for Chicago, it was clear that Chicago and Cook County would still have to go hat in hand to Springfield for changes that affected only northeastern Illinois.

Sometimes the downstate legislators withheld approval out of spite; more often, they conditioned their approval on concessions from the Chicago legislators.

By the 1960s it was also clear that the Chicago area was becoming an international powerhouse. Chicago was already an international city, a world-class economic and cultural center. The leaders of Chicago’s political and economic communities realized that. So did the suburban leaders, who already benefited from O’Hare International Airport. The leaders of Chicago and the Cook County suburbs also supported home rule.

What would have happened to Illinois, and particularly the Chicago area, if voters had rejected the 1970 constitution?

While this is a “historical if,” I believe in all probability Chicago would have suffered greatly. Consider the strictures imposed by the ban on branch banking. If downstate legislators operating under the 1870 constitution, had continued to oppose branch banking, Chicago would not be the international banking center it is today.

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Who knows? Maybe the rest of Illinois really would have been willing to let Chicago and its surrounding suburbs go its way.

If the Chicago area had split off from Illinois, we would not have the diverse, exciting, even if sometimes exasperating Illinois we have today. So let’s lift a glass of a Chicago microbrew or Illinois wine tonight and toast the Illinois Constitution and the voters who adopted it 45 years ago today.