

## **Post-1915 Politics: The Caucus**

The position of village manager became a legal reality in Winnetka with passage of a short council resolution in January 1915. This simple act could just as easily be discarded by a subsequent council. Seeing what was at stake, leaders of the Citizens' Party orchestrated a knock-out victory in the 1915 elections by rallying an indomitable alliance of civic leaders.

This leadership group then set its mind to preserving those gains going forward. Much was at stake. The village manager plan needed a fair trial. Plus great plans were underway for other village objectives.

Winnetka needed to pull together to get things done by providing consistent political leadership on village council. To do this they assembled the political machinery that would win every election for decades to come – the Caucus.

### **A New Political Power**

As the term “caucus” implies, it was a political body established for the purpose of nominating “candidates of assured integrity and experience on a platform in agreement with village desires and needs.” Outgoing and incoming village presidents Sherman Goble and Eugene Rummeler were strong proponents of the plan.

Winnetka's Caucus functioned as a succession of central committees. The Committee of One Hundred and Five appointed the first, and each one thereafter would appoint the next, thus preserving the ideals of the original Citizens' Party. The Caucus Committee nominated candidates, drafted the annual platform, campaigned for its nominees and appointed its successors to the central committee.

Yet what distinguished the Caucus from typical political parties was its effort to include representation from all precincts. The Caucus Committee consisted of two members from each of ten precincts and five at large members. The selection process for Caucus Committee members was just as rigorous as for village council officials: local organizations would submit names and candidates would be vetted for suitability and *asked* to serve. It was a great honor.

Choosing individuals to serve on the Caucus Committee who were civic-minded and proven consensus builders was key to building its reputation as a source of sound political judgment. To some the Caucus was viewed as a self-perpetuating central committee. Others saw it as a means of protecting the community from the divisiveness of factions. Fundamentally, the Caucus provided a deliberate process through which candidates could be courted and slated for election separate from the passions over current controversies.

### **Limited Role in Policy**

The Caucus platforms, written by the Caucus Committee, focused on general matters of governance and gave voice to the priorities of the day. While the annual Caucus meeting was sometimes referred to as a “town meeting”, in fact it bore no resemblance to Winnetka’s lost tradition of public discussion. Controversies over policy were settled through new forms of public education and discussion.

Regular reports by the village manager and village president appeared in local newspapers. The village council would call public meetings to discuss large issues. For some they would look to the Winnetka Community House, with its 75 member organizations, as a source of guidance on policy.

### **Caucus Success**

Authors of a 1938 dissertation on Winnetka’s government noted that the Caucus existed as “one of those phantom-like organizations which defy exact definition.” While the organization was essentially the same as it had been in 1915, many citizens held vague impressions of the “caucus.” To some it was the annual meeting, To others it meant people who voted for candidates nominated by a central committee. Perhaps then, as now, they confused the political caucus organization with the governing body of the village council.

Despite its “phantom-like” role in village political affairs, the citizens of Winnetka came to trust the Caucus Committee. In time, it took on the task of slating candidates for the schools, parks and library boards as well.

Whatever the reality behind Winnetka’s Caucus format, the result was that Caucus candidates would win every election through the crucial years ahead, providing Winnetka with stable, quality leadership. By 1938 “the average citizen of Winnetka was proud of the caliber of members of village council and proud of the achievement of the village.”