

Why can't Illinois be more like Minnesota?

By Jim Nowlan

When I was a graduate student in the 1960s, my professors pointed to Minnesota as a model state—corruption free, collaborative, with values of what's good for the community trumping what's in it for me.

These memories from days long past were prompted by a recent column from Eric Zorn in the *Chicago Tribune* about how Minnesota has its act together, while Illinois struggles, to say the least.

Zorn noted that Minnesota in 2011 upped its highest income tax rate to 9.85 percent for those earning over \$250,000 (the rate in Illinois is a flat 3.75 percent). Nevertheless, in 2014 conservative *Forbes* magazine ranked Minnesota ninth best for business while it put Illinois at 40th.

On all indicators I could put my hands on, our northern neighbor ranked ahead of Illinois. For example, a 2014 ranking of quality of life factors such as health, public safety and income put Minnesota in second place (after New Hampshire) while Illinois was smack dab in the middle among the states.

Social media site Wallet Hub recently looked at 26 metrics such as emotional health and sports participation and came up with a “happiness index.” Minnesota came in second, after Utah, while the Prairie State was again right in the middle, at 25th.

The Illinois economy, long tops in the Midwest, has been growing at a snail's pace in recent decades. In the meantime, our comparison state has moved ahead of Illinois on that

measure, with Minnesota's median household income at \$59,836 in 2013 versus \$56,797 for Illinois.

[Even folks outside our two states perceive differences. A 2011 survey of Americans by Public Policy Polling found that 27 percent of respondents had favorable opinions of Minnesota while 17 percent had unfavorable perspectives (the rest were not sure).

[This contrasted with Illinois where only 19 percent had favorable opinions of us whereas 29 percent had unfavorable views of our state. This put Illinois as the second "most disliked" state in the nation, after California.

[Now, our economy may have slipped in recent decades as a result of the shrinkage of our generally good-paying manufacturing base, which Minnesota never had. And opinions of Illinois in 2011 may have suffered in the wake of publicity at the time over the impeachment of our governor.]

The sharpest differences between the states are found, to my mind, in public policies. In 1973, Minnesota enacted a local government tax-sharing program for the seven county metropolitan Twin-Cities, which shifts some tax revenues from wealthy to poorer communities.

Such an idea would be laughed out of the Illinois General Assembly.

In contrast, school funding in Illinois suffers the greatest disparities in the land between poor school districts, which have maybe \$7,000 per pupil to spend, and rich ones that have \$20,000 and more per pupil.

So, the question: Why can't Illinois be more like Minnesota?

The obvious answer is that we are simply a lot different from Minnesota, in the mix of who we are and in the residue of values that our forebears brought to our respective states.

Minnesota was settled by Yankees, Scandinavians and Germans, all white. They brought with them a political culture that, according to political scientist Daniel Elazar, was “moralistic” and viewed government as an instrument for doing good.

In contrast said Elazar, Illinois was settled first by Upland Southerners who tolerated corruption, and then by Yankees who saw government as just another marketplace in which to do business. Later came the Irish, Poles, Italians and other hyphenated Americans, who saw government and politics as a way to get ahead, that is, by doing good—and also doing well.

Being more homogeneous, Minnesotans found it easier to be supportive of their own “tribe,” whereas polyglot Illinois, with its downstate and Chicago, and then suburban, regional differences, has seen intense conflict as more the order of the day.

For this piece, I spoke with a professor, an editor and a business writer in Minnesota, the last having significant experience in Illinois as well.

All three worry that their state is becoming more like Illinois. Minnesota is more diverse now, with 82 percent white population rather than 90+ percent in the 1970s (Illinois is 63 percent white).

There is also more polarization in Minnesota than before. Steve Dornfeld, former editorial page editor of the *St. Paul-Pioneer Press*, notes, for example, that the abortion issue has contributed to this.

Today, he says, candidates must be either pro-choice Democrats or pro-life Republicans. There is no longer room for moderates in politics, largely because of this issue.

The trio I spoke with is also unanimous that tax-sharing could not be enacted in Minnesota today, as regional rivalries among out-state, suburban and the urban Twin-Cities regions have developed.

In Illinois, we are undergoing at present a political experiment that is the opposite of once-communitarian Minnesota. We have a GOP governor who is trying to destroy a long-entrenched Democratic majority, with apparently no quarter to be given, if successful.

Illinois can never be politically like Minnesota once was. Yet I can long for that state's old attitude of "we're all in this together," as opposed to the "what's in it for me?" values of, respectively, our state's public employee unions, the 1 percenters, business, minorities and regional interests.