The Court Archive:
Illinois Supreme Court Among Most Diverse in the Nation

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The current Illinois Supreme Court made history even before it heard its first case. For the first time in the state's 200-year history, the court has a female majority. But history does not stop there: three African American justices sit on the current Court. Today's Illinois Supreme Court is the most diverse Court in the state's history, and it is also among the most diverse in the nation.

It was not always this way. For the first 172 years of Illinois history, 103 different white men served on the Illinois Supreme Court. The only diversity appeared in the form of religious affiliation and geography.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Illinois women challenged the laws that prevented them from serving as lawyers. By 1901, there were more than 100 women lawyers in Illinois. Similarly, Illinois women served as leaders in the suffrage movement and in 1914 achieved the right to vote in state elections. In 1992, Mary Ann G. McMorrow became the first woman to serve on the Illinois Supreme Court and became the first woman to serve as Chief Justice in Illinois in 2002.

The current Illinois Supreme Court has a 5-2 female majority. By holding 71 percent of seats on the Illinois Supreme Court, women have made history in Illinois and are leading the way nationally. Just two other states have a higher percentage of women on their highest court: Wisconsin (86 percent) and Washington (78 percent). Nevada is currently tied with Illinois for the third-highest percentage of women on the state's highest court.

Across the nation, women currently occupy 42 percent of seats on state Supreme Courts and other courts of last resort. Illinois is one of 15 states with a female majority. Chief Justice Mary Jane Theis is one of 18 female Chief Justices in the country.

Similarly, the current Illinois Supreme Court is also among the most racially diverse in the nation. This is a remarkable transformation in the state's history. The first 103 members of the Illinois Supreme Court were white. In 1990, Charles Freeman became the first person of color elected to the Illinois Supreme Court, and in 1997, Freeman became the first African American to serve as Chief Justice in Illinois.

Today, for the first time in the state's history, three African American justices sit on the Illinois Supreme Court. According to a recent study by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, Illinois ranks sixth in the country in terms of racial diversity on its highest court with 43 percent of its seats held by persons of color.

The Brennan Center study noted there are currently 24 states with no Black justices on its highest court and 15 states have never had an African American serve on its highest court.

Though there have now been four African Americans who have served on the Illinois Supreme Court, there has not yet been a Latino member, despite Latinos making up 18 percent of the state's population.

Research has shown that judicial diversity is critical. A diverse bench made up of justices with different backgrounds and life experiences often results in richer deliberations, more nuanced opinions, and inspires the public's trust and confidence in the judicial system.