

[Rod Blagojevich](#)

Blagojevich's promise crashes down

Governor who swept into office promising change indicted on corruption charges

By Ray Long

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SPRINGFIELD — In his first inaugural address, before a crowd of thousands, Gov. Rod Blagojevich railed against a "system of corruption that has become too commonplace, too accepted and too entrenched."

"You voted for change," said Blagojevich, the state's first Democratic governor in 26 years. "I intend to deliver it."

If what federal prosecutors alleged Tuesday is true, the 40th governor of Illinois failed his promise spectacularly.

Less than six years after becoming governor, Blagojevich now stands accused of trying to benefit financially from his power to appoint the U.S. Senate replacement for President-elect [Barack Obama](#).

Less than 24 hours before his arrest Tuesday, Blagojevich said the Tribune's report that federal agents had secretly recorded him in recent times indicated that the rest of his "past has been pretty good."

That view is far from unanimous. Even before Blagojevich's arrest, his populist agenda and erratic governing style won him few fans.

"Blagojevich has been the most incompetent governor that we've had in the last 50 years," said Charles Wheeler III, a longtime chronicler of state government who is now a journalism professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "He's a guy who was more interested in the razzmatazz and the press pop than in doing the nitty-gritty detail work."

No one could have predicted then that Blagojevich would crash so hard.

Blagojevich's first election gave hope to Illinoisans that change was in the air. A youngish-looking jogger whose fans dreamed of a Camelot in Springfield and someday a spot on the national Democratic ticket, Blagojevich polished the image of a man on the way up. He had the resume: former state lawmaker, former congressman and, for good measure, a former Cook County prosecutor. He had the look: One political operator talked of how Blagojevich liked the camera and the camera liked him. And he had the right mix of political connections.

Blagojevich's father-in-law is Ald. Richard Mell (33rd), who leads one of the most powerful ward organizations in the city. The new governor came with a photogenic family that included Patricia Blagojevich, a professional woman with her own real estate firm, plus a daughter with made-for-TV cuteness and another daughter on the way.

The timing of Blagojevich's election looked good for all Illinois Democrats. For the first time in a decade, Democrats took control of the Illinois Senate. Democrats retained the House. And Blagojevich led a Democratic sweep of all but one statewide office.

In Blagojevich's first legislative session as governor, Democrats made the spring of 2003 their own. They approved an increase in the minimum wage, a law requiring equal pay for women and a sweeping plan to let the state negotiate lower prices for prescription drugs for senior citizens. They approved major reforms in the state's death penalty law, including a breakthrough negotiated by Obama that required authorities to tape interrogations of suspects in murder cases.

The rookie governor persuaded legislative Democrats and a number of Republicans to go along with a \$10 billion borrowing package that mostly helped shore up ailing pension funds but also pumped cash into a faltering state budget.

Flush with success, Blagojevich took a rambling victory lap through rural Illinois communities, launching a three-day bus tour in Streator by taking a helicopter into the town, where local folks said a governor hadn't visited in 60 years. Inside a family restaurant in Monmouth, Blagojevich bumped into a man wearing a cowboy hat and singing a catchy ballad he wrote about the new governor.

"These kinds of trips are good for me," Blagojevich told a crowd at a steelworkers union hall in Hennepin. "They energize me. They motivate me to stay close to you—the people—so that I never lose sight of why I am the governor."

To supporters, Blagojevich made good on that commitment when he beefed up early childhood education. He pushed the legislature to give senior citizens free rides on Chicago-area buses and trains, part of a deal to avert a mass-transit crisis that also carried a Chicago-area sales tax increase. It was the only



significant crack in the governor's vow to hold the line on sales and income taxes.

But Blagojevich's fights with the legislature were the stuff of legend. He counted Senate President Emil Jones (D-Chicago), a candidate for Obama's U.S. Senate seat, as an ally, but the governor always appeared ready to pick a fight with House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago). The split cost Blagojevich a number of proposals.

Even before the weight of the growing scandals engulfed the governor, lawmakers questioned his credibility.

"It's all about trust and whether people are prepared to trust Gov. Blagojevich and trust his record of broken promises," Madigan said last spring.

That lack of trust, lawmakers said, became the single biggest reason Illinois has yet to launch a job-creating, multibillion-dollar construction program.

Since at least 2005, U.S. Atty. Patrick Fitzgerald has dug into the Blagojevich administration, looking into allegations of hiring abuses, influence-peddling and pay-to-play schemes in which contracts were given to the governor's biggest political donors.

This year's federal trial of [Antoin "Tony" Rezko](#), the convicted former Blagojevich fundraiser, provided alarming testimony from numerous insiders who said the governor freely spoke of rewarding contributors with state jobs and business. Christopher Kelly, the governor's former chief fundraiser, was indicted last December on tax fraud counts tied to gambling trips to Las Vegas. And the Tribune a week before Kelly's indictment had reported that Patricia Blagojevich's real estate deals were under federal scrutiny as part of the pay-to-play investigation.

The ongoing scandal prompted the House to approve legislation aimed at allowing citizens to recall statewide officials, but it failed in Jones' Senate.

In April, a Tribune investigation outlined an exclusive club of Blagojevich donors who contributed exactly \$25,000 to his campaign fund, and most of the 235 givers got something from state government, ranging from favorable state regulatory and policy moves to appointments and contracts. The next month, lawmakers approved sweeping legislation to prevent major donors from bidding on state contracts controlled by the statewide officeholder who doled out the business.

Blagojevich fought it relentlessly and then used his veto power to rewrite the bill. When Jones looked like he might block the law from going into place, Obama himself called the Senate president and asked him to let the override vote take place. Jones relented, and lawmakers overrode the governor's veto.

Despite his efforts to put a good spin to his troubles, Blagojevich faced headlines that became increasingly harder to explain.

A piece of Tuesday's chapter began to take shape when federal authorities subpoenaed records related to a client of Blagojevich confidant John Wyma. The client had won a favorable regulatory ruling, and its affiliate had given Blagojevich a \$25,000 donation. A former congressional chief of staff for Blagojevich, Wyma started cooperating with federal authorities. That helped lead to secret recordings of the governor and his arrest Tuesday.

A day earlier, Blagojevich had played down Wyma's role in the federal probe and said he would remain a close adviser.

"I consider him a friend, and I don't consider him as anything but a friend," Blagojevich said.

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