

Updated: Jun 15, 2008 - 02:52:15 am CDT

Pay-to-play ban not a done deal

By JOHN O'CONNOR - Associated Press

SPRINGFIELD - In most states, tight controls on political fundraising are the norm.

Yet in Illinois, with its reputation as the Wild West of campaign finance, legislation to limit pay-to-play politics by barring some contributions is a big deal.

But it's not a done deal.

After months of wrangling, the General Assembly approved in May a ban on contractors with state deals of \$50,000 or more from giving campaign contributions to the officeholders who hired them. Whether it becomes law depends on the signature of a governor who has been held up as the primary example of why such a ban is needed.

"Illinoisans have a right to expect that state contracts are awarded based on quality of services and not quantity of campaign contributions," said the bill's sponsor, Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago. "I can't think of a state in this country that more desperately needs to have its faith restored in state government."

From the Chicago maxim to "vote early and often" to the 6 1/2-year federal prison sentence former Republican Gov. George Ryan is serving for racketeering, Illinois has long been a hearth for political corruption. Patronage for politicians' relatives and cronies has seemingly been a right.

And Gov. Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat who ran as a reformer in 2002, now has federal prosecutors on his tail, investigating, among other things, pay-to-play politics: trading state contracts and jobs for campaign contributions. He has not been charged with any wrongdoing.

The idea of the new legislation is to limit the temptation to award big donors with taxpayer-financed plums - or at least to dent the perception of those trade-offs. If you get a big contract, you can't "pay back" your new boss with a campaign gift, goes the reasoning.

And there are stricter reporting rules on those contractors. They have to report if they give to another candidate, so taxpayers can monitor whether money is getting passed through to others.

Senate President Emil Jones, a Chicago Democrat, still worries the ban would simply encourage contractors to give money to state parties, which would then hand the cash to the officeholder.

There were suggestions the legislation is intended to hamstring Blagojevich. The governor, through the many state agencies he runs, has much more opportunity to award contracts than, say, the attorney general, comptroller or treasurer.

Those offices are all occupied by potential Blagojevich challengers in 2010.

But Blagojevich's prodigious fundraising would have taken the spotlight in the debate anyway.

The federal investigation into Blagojevich's administration gained momentum earlier this month. One of Blagojevich's top fundraisers and political insiders, Antoin "Tony" Rezko, was convicted on 16 of 24 federal felony counts of money laundering, bribery and fraud in attempting to twist campaign contributions out of companies seeking state business or regulatory approval.

“The governor is a lot of what's driving this, whether he's out in front of it or under it,” said David Morrison of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

Blagojevich has repeatedly denied a connection between contracts and contributions. A spokeswoman did not respond to a request for comment.

The governor hasn't embraced the legislation, which the General Assembly has yet to formally send him. He said “there's a lot more work to do” on it. Aides suggested he might want to change the proposal to regulate lawmakers' work outside the Capitol.

“The bill didn't get a single ‘no’ vote,” Morrison said. “He's got a long way to go if he wants to kill this and it's going to take a ‘Hail Mary’ pass.”

Kent Redfield, political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, noted the irony of depending on a governor who is “Exhibit A for why we need the bill” to sign it into law.

The measure is unique only because Illinois' campaign finance structure is so open. Most states and the federal government limit the size of contributions or the type of contributor, making legislation such as Illinois' unnecessary.

Whether this legislation works to combat corruption would depend on the desire to change the political culture, Redfield said.

“You have to change both the law and attitude,” he said. “And this is Illinois.”

Still, it's a huge step for the state. Reformers' next struggles to change Illinois' ethical climate could be tougher. Existing legislation that hasn't gotten sufficient support includes contribution limits, public financing of judicial campaigns, and lobbying reforms.

But each victory builds momentum, Fritchey said.

“I'd like to think of reform as a snowball rolling down a hill,” he said. “The more it goes, the more speed it picks up.”

In summary

THE HISTORY:

While the idea of limiting the size of contributions and who could contribute swept the nation after the Watergate scandal, Illinois remained the Wild West of campaign finance. Any donation is legal, as long as it is reported.

THE PROBLEM:

At the state Capitol and Chicago City Hall, where patronage has been a right for politicians' friends and cronies, there is a history of trading jobs and contracts for contributions. Just this month one of Gov. Rod Blagojevich's fundraisers, Antoin “Tony” Rezko was convicted on federal money-laundering, bribery and fraud charges involving a pay-to-play scheme. Blagojevich has not been charged with a crime.

THE RESPONSE:

Legislation banning anyone who gets a state contract of \$50,000 or more from contributing to the officeholder who awarded the contract, or in the case of existing contracts, to that officeholders' opponent in an election year. It would require stricter reporting for those contractors to monitor whether money is passed through other politicians.

Other measures might come

If legislation banning campaign contributions from big-time state contractors becomes law, it could be a momentum-builder for other ethics reforms that have not gained steam in the General Assembly, advocates say.

That legislation includes:

- **Contribution limits, HB3497:**

Would limit contributions to statewide officers, such as the governor, to \$3,000 for an individual and \$5,000 for a corporation, labor organization or other association during a two-year election cycle, and to \$1,500 from individuals for most other candidates. Introduced in February 2007. It has not been scheduled for House action.

- **Lobbyist registration, HB8:**

Would require a "cooling-off period" between working for state government and becoming a lobbyist and require lobbyists to reveal how much they bill and spend. Introduced in December 2006. A House committee approved it without opposition but the bill has not received a floor vote.

- **Judicial campaigns, SB222:**

Attempts to curtail runaway spending on judges' races by establishing a voluntary public financing system, offering \$750,000 to qualified Supreme Court candidates and \$250,000 for appellate court hopefuls. Those who participate but get outspent by opponents could receive additional funds. Those who don't participate could accept contributions of no more than \$2,000. It won Senate approval 46-12 in May 2007 but the bill has not been scheduled for action in the House.