

# Blagojevich not shying away from spotlight

By DEANNA BELLANDI | Associated Press Writer  
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CHICAGO - What a difference a few months can make.

Not long ago, Gov. [Rod Blagojevich](#) would rarely venture out in public. When he did, he would bolt afterward, eager to avoid questions about the federal corruption trial of his former fundraiser.

Now the trial is over -- although with a conviction for Blagojevich money man [Antoin "Tony" Rezko](#) -- and Blagojevich is seeking the spotlight again, reminiscent of his early time in office before federal authorities cranked up the heat on his administration.

A feisty Blagojevich has challenged opponents and flaunted his veto power. He has been chatty with the media again after months of ducking when he couldn't escape questions about Rezko.

It's a switch for a governor who just a few months ago couldn't keep Rezko from stealing attention from the issues and agenda he wanted to advance, something that didn't help the gridlock in Springfield.

"I've got time. We're in good shape. Take your time," Blagojevich assured Illinois reporters as he stood around talking and answering their questions for about 25 minutes when he attended last month's Democratic National Convention in Denver.

Blagojevich spokesman Lucio Guerrero said the governor is doing what he likes best.

"There's been no meeting like 'You know, you really need to get out more,'" Guerrero said.

Blagojevich's instincts as a politician are to be active and out in public and some of the pressure that may have been keeping him under wraps is off since Rezko's trial ended in June, said [University of Illinois](#) at Springfield political science professor Kent Redfield.

Rezko was convicted of fraud and other offenses after a trial that exposed more crooked politics in Illinois that Blagojevich said he had no part in. Blagojevich has not been charged with any wrongdoing, but federal court records show he has been questioned by prosecutors multiple times.

After months of being barraged with questions about Rezko that Blagojevich wouldn't, or couldn't, answer, the governor is rarely even asked any longer because he's not likely to venture beyond his well-worn answers.

"He's got a pretty clear stage at this point," Redfield said of Blagojevich.

For Blagojevich that has meant keeping a steady focus on legislative and other matters. He spent days touring flood-ravaged areas of the state in June. He publicly blasted lawmakers for sending him an unbalanced state budget and not passing the capital construction program he wants. And he angered some lawmakers when he launched a campaign to rewrite some of the legislation they sent him because he said he could make it better.

Blagojevich has dismissed the suggestion that his being out in public more is anything new. He's also sloughed off a question about whether it's an indication that he's no longer worried about federal scrutiny of his administration, which has been under investigation for allegedly trading jobs for campaign cash.

"The truth shall set you free," he said after an event at a Chicago civic club when he took questions from a crush of reporters for more than 11 minutes.

But when Blagojevich is out, he can't always escape questions about Rezko. He reacted angrily to reporters' questions after a press conference in July, repeatedly saying it was "ridiculous" to ask if he was a target of the investigation that brought down Rezko.

"The answer is I am not," Blagojevich eventually said.

In recent months, Blagojevich has had new top advisers in some key roles with the departure of Deputy Gov. Sheila Nix and spokeswomen Rebecca Rausch and Abby Ottenhoff.

Blagojevich has used many of his public appearances this summer to keep the heat on powerful Democratic House Speaker [Michael Madigan](#) about a capital bill the two have been at odds over for months.

Blagojevich has hardly missed an opportunity to berate Madigan, casting himself as the good guy and Madigan as his foe in a fight over how to come up with the money to build roads, bridges, schools and other projects.

It's a move straight out of Blagojevich's early playbook that draws on the [John Wayne](#) Westerns the Democratic governor loves where every hero needs a foil.

In his first term in office, some of Blagojevich's most memorable battles included accusing lawmakers who overrode his budget cuts of spending like "drunken sailors" and vilifying the State Board of Education as a useless "Soviet-style bureaucracy."

Madigan spokesman Steve Brown said Blagojevich always has to have a "bogeyman."

Redfield said the flurry of activity by Blagojevich has the makings of a public relations campaign to try to restore some luster to the governor, whose image took a battering during the Rezko trial that even fueled talk of impeachment.

But Redfield has his doubts about how much it will help the unpopular Blagojevich.

"He certainly can command the news cycle, but I don't think he's making much of a dent in people's fundamental opinions about him," Redfield said.

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Associated Press Writer Christopher Wills contributed to this report.