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## Rezko convicted in 'pay-to-play' trial

By [Kevin McDermott](#)

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In what could prove a blow to Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich — and a political headache for presidential candidate Barack Obama — campaign fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko was convicted Wednesday of using his political connections to manipulate state contracting decisions so he could squeeze contractors for bribes.

The federal jury deliberated 13 days before finding Rezko guilty on 16 of the 24 counts in his indictment, including mail fraud, wire fraud and aiding and abetting bribery.

Rezko showed no emotion at the reading of the verdicts, which concluded that he led schemes to get kickbacks from money management firms wanting state business and a contractor who wanted to build a hospital in northern Illinois. He was acquitted of charges that included attempted extortion.

Blagojevich and Obama haven't been accused of wrongdoing.

But Blagojevich was referred to in testimony that raised questions about whether administration jobs were traded for political contributions, and the trial has clearly damaged the governor's already-shaky status with the Legislature and the public — especially because few believe that Rezko was the final target of federal prosecutors in Chicago, who got to him by squeezing less-prominent associates involved in his schemes.

"The legal question is, 'Will Fitzgerald get Rezko to help him indict the governor?'" asked Kent Redfield, political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield, referring to U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald, whose office prosecuted both the Rezko case and the corruption trial of former Gov. George Ryan. "I don't think there's any question that's the goal."

The political question, others say, may be more immediate.

"It makes this cloud that's been hanging over (Blagojevich) a lot bigger," said Sen. Dave Luechtefeld, R-Okawville. Like others, he speculated that the Democratic governor's already weakened clout in Springfield got dramatically weaker with Wednesday's verdicts.

Several political players Wednesday noted the ominous fact that Ryan — currently sitting in a federal prison for corruption — was sent there by associates who were convicted of their own crimes, and then cut deals to testify against him in exchange for lighter sentences.

The Rezko verdicts paint a picture of a political insider who had no official government position but was given free run of state boards that made crucial decisions about where to build hospitals and invest pension money — and then used that power to enrich himself and a small set of conspirators.

The jury acquitted Rezko of eight of the charges, including the allegation that he attempted to extort a campaign contribution from an investment firm.

Blagojevich's office on Wednesday released a statement acknowledging Rezko's place as "a friend and a supporter," but did not address questions about why a political fundraiser was allowed that level of power in state government.

"The jury's decision is yet another reminder that ours is a system of government that is ruled by laws, and not by men," Blagojevich said in the statement. "I respect the decision made by the jury."

Rezko also has ties to Sen. Obama of Illinois, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, who has had to field questions in the past about a personal real estate arrangement with Rezko involving Obama's Chicago home.

Republican officials wasted no time reminding the public of those connections Wednesday.

"On the day Barack Obama hoped to unite his party ... a jury in his hometown of Chicago convicted his longtime friend and fundraiser Tony Rezko of multiple felonies," the Republican National Committee said in a statement e-mailed just minutes after the verdicts were announced Wednesday afternoon.

"This is further proof that Obama's high-flying rhetoric is just that and in no way represents the kind of change our nation demands," the statement continued. "Today's verdict and Obama's friendship with Rezko raise serious questions about whether he has the judgment to serve as president."

Obama issued a statement saying he was "saddened," adding, "This isn't the Tony Rezko I knew, but now he has been convicted by a jury on multiple charges that once again shine a spotlight on the need for reform."

Rezko, 52, is a fast-food mogul who became a top political fundraiser for Illinois Democrats from his base in Chicago. His clout has been centered mostly on Blagojevich, to whom he has been a longtime friend, fundraiser and member of the governor's "kitchen cabinet" of unofficial advisers.

Blagojevich was cited in the trial by the title "Public Official A" and was described in testimony as having discussed a state job with a political donor who had just handed him a \$25,000 campaign contribution.

Blagojevich's strained relations with the Legislature have been worsened by the ongoing Rezko trial, especially on ethics reform, which Blagojevich once claimed as his legacy.

The Legislature last week passed a bill aimed directly at Blagojevich that would outlaw campaign contributions from state contractors, a method by which Blagojevich has raised millions of dollars. Blagojevich has threatened to alter the bill, saying he wants to make it stronger. Critics say that's actually a ploy to try to stall and eventually kill it — and that Wednesday's verdicts will make that threat more difficult to carry out.

"He is in no position whatsoever to tell the Legislature and the people of Illinois how to make ethics laws 'better,'" said Cynthia Canary of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, which championed the ethics bill.

Rezko's sentencing hearing was set for Sept. 3.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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