

# Obama draws spotlight to Illinois' lawmakers

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Not long ago, Barack Obama was a state senator from Chicago, working at the Statehouse on key issues and looking for his next political break. Tuesday, he could be chosen the nation's next president.

Obama's lightning-quick ascent from the shadows in Springfield has thrust the Illinois legislature into the international spotlight — both the good and the bad.

Obama's opponents and media from around the globe have scoured his record and time in the state Senate, where he served from 1997 until being elected to the U.S. Senate in 2004. In the process, how this legislature works — both in policy and politics — has come under a microscope, and in some cases what's examined gets distorted.

"When people go to review Barack's legislative experience, it's inevitable that the entire legislature is under a new focus," said Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago.

## Legislative 'presents,' records

Much has been made of what Obama was like when he served in Springfield — the late-night poker games with legislators and lobbyists, the compromising approach on key issues, the left-leaning social agenda.

But the focus also has turned more on the institution of the legislature. The most prominent case involves presents — "present" votes, that is.

Obama has been criticized frequently for voting "present" nearly 130 times during his eight years in the Senate. Democratic primary foe Hillary Clinton, and Republicans since then, claim it shows indecision on tough issues by Obama — the antithesis of what the chief executive office requires.

Obama counters that the charge distorts the reality of voting "present" here, and some former colleagues agree. "Present" votes are fairly common, used when lawmakers have a conflict of interest or when they want to support a bill's goal but have problems with how it's put together.

Charlie Wheeler, a professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield and a former longtime Capitol reporter, said those arguing that "present" votes are a sign of indecision are either intentionally misleading people or don't understand how the General Assembly works.

Obama's camp even compiled a rundown showing at least 11 other senators voted "present" 100 or more times when he was there.

"Statistically, Senator Obama was on the high end of failing to vote 'yes' or 'no,' but there were many other fine legislators who voted 'present' about the same number of times as Senator Obama," said Sen. Kirk Dillard, a Hinsdale Republican who supports John McCain for president but appeared in a campaign commercial for Obama earlier this year.

Obama has been rapped for repeatedly voting against a bill requiring medical care for fetuses surviving abortions — also known as "born alive" abortions.

Obama worked with abortion rights groups and other lawmakers to oppose the measures, arguing that technical language inserted could interfere with a woman's right to have an abortion.

Fritchey, who later helped work out a legislative compromise on the issue, said the debate illustrates how divisive the topic is.

"It's a great example of the same issue being capable of being spun two different ways," Fritchey said.

Wheeler said it's one of those issues lawmakers long have liked to avoid whenever possible.

"No matter how you came down on it, you were going to aggravate people back in the district," Wheeler said.

Even Obama's paper trail has become campaign fodder.

After Clinton was slow to release records from her time as the nation's first lady in the 1990s, Obama said he didn't have the resources to keep his records from when he was in Springfield. His staff said any correspondence with state agencies and any records Obama requested from them were

available and being publicly reviewed.

Illinois lawmakers say they frequently throw out old papers for storage room and because there's not much demand for such papers unless you're a presidential contender.

"There's nothing sinister in not having those records," Dillard said.

Obama spokesman Justin DeJong said in a statement that the senator aligned with both Republicans and Democrats to work on key issues in Springfield.

"By working with both sides of the aisle, the lives of working people across Illinois are better today and he hopes to bring about similar change as president," DeJong said.

Sen. Terry Link, a Waukegan Democrat and close friend of Obama's in Springfield, said national portrayals of Obama's legislative background are disappointing because they minimize the work done at statehouses.

"If you're not a governor or you're not a U.S. senator, you're not equipped to be a president," Link said.

### **Positive flip-side**

Some legislative watchers see Obama's run as a positive for lawmakers, despite the sometimes-twisted message.

Chris Mooney, a political science professor at UIS, says he expected Illinois to take more of a drubbing on the national scene because of an ongoing corruption investigation in state government and the conviction of a fundraiser for both Gov. Blagojevich and Obama.

"I think it's held up pretty well, maybe because he's done well," Mooney said.

Mooney and Bill Pound, executive director of the National Conference of State Legislatures, say if Obama becomes one of the rare presidents with a state legislative background, that could give legislative work more prestige.

"It is important stuff. It's where basic public policy gets formed," Pound said.

### **What's next?**

An Obama win Tuesday would thrust Illinois even more into the spotlight, including lawmakers.

"We'll be getting continued attention as long as he's in the White House," Mooney said.

Obama is expected to bring some Illinoisans with him to Washington. With Obama, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and U.S. Rep. Rahm Emanuel, Illinois could have unparalleled influence in the top levels of government, lawmakers here predict.

It's not likely that an Obama presidency will end gridlock among Democrats at the Statehouse, but it could cause them to rethink public infighting and discourse under a new microscope, lawmakers say.

"Maybe on a certain level, too, people will be more mindful of their colleagues. Your colleague today could be president tomorrow," Fritchey said.

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