

History repeats itself: Blagojevich not the first Gov. to be charged while in office

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SPRINGFIELD -- Gov. Rod Blagojevich further tainted Illinois politics Tuesday when he became the second consecutive governor nabbed on federal corruption charges, observers said.

"I'm nauseous," said state Rep. Bob Flider, D-Mount Zion. "It almost seems surreal."

Former Gov. George Ryan is now serving a term of more than six years in a federal prison after being convicted in 2006.

But Blagojevich's arrest Tuesday is virtually unprecedented because he is only the second Illinois governor charged with a federal crime while still serving as governor. Blagojevich has been accused of, among other things, trying to sell Illinois' open seat in the U.S. Senate to whomever could help him the most.

"The conduct would make Lincoln roll over in his grave," said U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald during a press conference Tuesday in Chicago.

Illinois voters are no stranger to corruption investigations. It was a probe into Ryan's time as secretary of state that in part helped Democrats -- Blagojevich specifically -- ascend to the post of governor in 2002.

Blagojevich presented himself as a reformer in that campaign, vowing to end "politics as usual" in Springfield and specifically criticizing Republicans over Ryan's tenure.

During his re-election campaign in 2006, even after investigations into his office had already reported, Blagojevich tried to link his Republican opponent, state Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka, to George Ryan's legal troubles.

"It's a pretty sad commentary that we elected him again two years ago," said University of Illinois-Springfield political scientist Kent Redfield.

Now, with two governors in a row facing serious corruption charges, observers say the negative stigma attached to Illinois politics will be even more difficult to overcome.

In addition, former Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner, who served in the 1960s, was convicted of bribery. Former governor Dan Walker, who served in the mid 1970s, was convicted on financial charges unrelated to his term in office.

They were charged after their terms ended.

The only other sitting Illinois governor to be charged with a federal crime was Gov. Lennington Small, a Republican who served from 1921 to 1929, said Robert F. Rich, a law professor and director of the university's Institute of Government and Public Affairs. He was indicted on charges that he embezzled and laundered \$600,000 when he was state treasurer.

He was acquitted. Four of the jurors in the trial subsequently got state jobs.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporters contributed to this report.

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