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Corruption winds through Illinois politics

Weak laws and entrenched culture lets officials put personal gain ahead of public service.

By [Amanda Paulson](#) | Staff writer / December 11, 2008 edition

Reporter Amanda Paulson talks about Illinois politicians who don't look to benefit from their positions.

Chicago

In the annals of corrupt Illinois politicians, Gov. Rod Blagojevich may go down as one of the most brazen. But he has plenty of company.

Three of the state's seven previous governors have been convicted and served time. Since 1971, by one count, 31 Chicago aldermen and some 1,000 public officials and businessmen have been convicted.

"We're the corruption capital of the United States," says Dick Simpson, a political scientist at the University of Illinois in Chicago and a former Chicago alderman, who maintains that state corruption count. "We have more [corruption] even than New Jersey and Louisiana, which are our competitors."

Politicians blame, in part, Illinois's loose system of ethics and campaign-finance laws. But the deeper issue may be an entrenched political culture in which trading favors – and money – is often expected and encouraged, people enter politics thinking more about power and personal gain than public service, and the public holds their elected officials to a low standard of ethics.

Governor Blagojevich, charged on Tuesday with mail and wire fraud and conspiracy to commit bribery, is under increasing pressure to resign. President-elect Obama and several prominent Democrats have called on him to step down, while Illinois Democrats have threatened impeachment. On Thursday, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan told CNN she was prepared to ask the state supreme court to have Blagojevich declared unfit for office.

One of the key accusations against him is that he was trying to sell the US Senate seat vacated by Mr. Obama. The president-elect said Thursday neither he nor his staff had been contacted about the case. State legislative leaders say they will strip Blagojevich of his power to choose the new senator at a special session Monday.

Blagojevich's alleged conduct, while quite aggressive, is not an isolated case.

"We tend to treat politics as a business," says Kent Redfield, a political scientist at the University of Illinois in Springfield. "It's not about public interest, it's just the aggregate of individual self-interest.... It's about power and winning and jobs."

"That kind of culture is pervasive," he says, noting that even former Gov. Jim Thompson, who rose to power as the US attorney who convicted Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner and several top aides to Mayor Richard J. Daley, eventually bragged about the extent of his patronage operation.

When he worked in state government several decades ago, Professor Redfield says, seasoned politicians would talk derisively about "goo-goos," or "good government" types, implying that unlike those people, they were about "real politics."

The list of high-profile Illinois figures tainted by corruption is a long one. There's Paul Powell, the former Illinois secretary of State who was famously found with \$800,000 in shoe boxes in his hotel room when he died.

Or Otto Kerner, the 1960s governor who was convicted of taking bribes from a racetrack owner while he was governor. The bribes were discovered because the owner, seeing them as a normal business expense in Illinois, had deducted them on her income tax returns. Blagojevich's predecessor, George Ryan, was convicted on corruption charges two years ago and is currently serving time. In the 1990s, US Rep. Dan Rostenkowski, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, was brought down by a corruption scandal and later pled guilty to charges of mail fraud.

Mr. Rostenkowski's case, which involved relatively small amounts of money, "shows how ingrained the culture is," says Jay Stewart, executive director of the Better Government Association, a nonpartisan Chicago watchdog group established in the 1920s to combat Al Capone's influence. "Why was someone in his position of authority doing that? The attitude is, 'If I can get it, I'm going to take it.' "

Mr. Stewart is an advocate of strengthening and changing the state's ethics and transparency laws – particularly putting limits on the amount of campaign contributions – but agrees that it will take more than laws to change the state's culture.

County attorneys need to start prosecuting corruption, and Illinois voters, he and others say, need to stop turning a blind eye to underhanded behavior.

"In Illinois, a majority of the people place a higher priority on getting the snow cleared in a timely fashion than in having pristine politicians," says Mike Lawrence, former director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University. New laws won't change much, he says, noting that both Governor Ryan and Blagojevich were charged with breaking laws already on the books.

Not all Illinois politicians succumb to those temptations. Many insiders point to examples like former Sen. Paul Simon and current politicians like Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn and Attorney General Madigan.

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Comments

1.Daryl Atamanyk | 12.11.08

“In the annals”, you say. Wellllll.... “innocent until proven guilty” is what many say.... but... yeh... he might get it in the annals yet. We just have to wait and see. So don't jump the gun... I mean guv'... quite yet.

2.Don Howlett | 12.11.08

Yes, corruption does wind through Illinois politics. Let's not forget that Obama bought his home from a crook. That's a pretty clear demonstration of his ethics....

3.R Blago | 12.11.08

Sounds like it was a busy day at the office for Blago; deleting those pesky emails, and erasing all those irritating phone messages...

4.Anonymous | 12.11.08

I think it's clear - as the numerous Palin and Stevens scandals have told us - that Alaska is at least as corrupt and quite likely more corrupt than Illinois. After all, who keeps an eye on them up there in frontier country?

5.Currupt Politician | 12.11.08

The article doesn't mention any of the unnamed politicos in the Affidavit or the many others that we must wait for Fitzgerald to uncover.

6.steve | 12.11.08

What about NY? who was that senator got caught after campaigning on a platform of moral ethics? Illinois is just the story of the week. same story as last week, different place.

It wouldn't be to hard to fix corruption and instill transparency. Just offer public a financial reward for evidence of misconduct by politician or government official like Larry flint did? I think he paid out a few hundred thousand in reward money and accomplished the resignation of a few senators and congressman.

7.Dr Linda Shelton | 12.11.08

Don't bet your life on the honesty of Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan. She's up to armpits in inappropriate actions. They just have not yet been fully revealed to the public. Start reading: <http://illinoiscorruption.blogspot.com/>

8.troy | 12.11.08

If you really want corruption to stop in government, take the their power away. When you have people spending Billions of other people's money. What's a few dollars here and their. Make your local government the most powerful one then state, and last Federal. Thats what the founders believed. Stop asking government for stuff.

9.Dissapointed Illinoian | 12.11.08

How about making it mandatory for EVERY person seeking public office to provide a clean record before being allowed to run for office.

Afterwards, be subject to regular and unannounced mandatory “state of the office” reports provided by one-year-term monitored watchdog groups, whose results would be released by a one-year-term board, elected by the public, and consisting of teachers, parents, small business owners, etc., who would then provide televised reports to the public.

Any clear criminal activities would be mandatory grounds for the politician's immediate dismissal.

Just a thought.

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