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## In Illinois, a Virtual Expectation of Corruption

By [KATE ZERNIKE](#)

As much as politicians in [Illinois](#) have had a tradition of corruption, the people of Illinois have had a tradition of accepting it, even expecting it, long before Gov. [Rod R. Blagojevich](#) was accused of trying to put a [United States Senate](#) seat up to the highest bidder.

Otto Kerner, who served as governor in the 1960s, was found to have accepted bribes of racetrack stock but only after the track owner deducted it on her taxes as a cost of doing business.

After Paul Powell, an Illinois secretary of state, longtime state legislator and infamous dealmaker, died in 1970, associates discovered \$800,000 in undocumented cash in shoeboxes, briefcases and strongboxes in his closet, a considerable cache for a man who had never earned a salary of more than \$30,000.

Mr. Powell had emerged unscathed from a grand jury investigation into accusations that he bought stock in a harness racing company. As he said, "It wound up with the grand jurors wanting to know from me where they could buy racetrack stock."

The state's unusually lax laws have allowed corruption to flourish — in fact, prosecutors say, it was the threat of a new campaign finance law that takes effect in January that set Mr. Blagojevich on a last spree of pay-to-play. The tradition was established by the immigrants who settled the state in the 19th century and nurtured by a stubborn system of machine politics that other states eradicated long ago.

"There is this attitude among politicians, and frankly among citizens, that this is the way things are," said Kent Redfield, a professor of political science at the [University of Illinois](#) at Springfield. "Politics is for professionals."

The surprise for many Illinoisans last week was not that their governor was arrested, but that he could be brazen enough to try to sell a Senate seat when he was already under federal investigation.

Now the culture of his adopted home state threatens to dog President-elect [Barack Obama](#), whose vacated seat in the Senate is the one that Mr. Blagojevich is accused of putting up for auction, much as swampy Arkansas politics dogged the last young Democratic politician elected on a platform of change, [Bill Clinton](#).

Prosecutors say Mr. Obama is not a subject of the investigation. And he has been a champion of ethics reform in the Illinois Legislature and in the Senate. But some Republicans have seized the opportunity to try to tie him to the worst side of the state's politics.

As he faced questions at a press conference in Chicago last week, Mr. Obama argued that there were two Illinoises — and that he came from the one not represented in the criminal complaint against Mr. Blagojevich.

Cindi Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, said, "It's as if we have a good angel on one shoulder and a bad angel on the other."

"We have produced some real leaders," Ms. Canary continued, mentioning former Senator Paul Simon, the former federal judge Abner J. Mikva and, of course, [Abraham Lincoln](#). "At the same time, for historic and systemic reasons, we have real institutional corruption."

Certainly, other states have their problems. The Corporate Crime Reporter ranked Illinois a mere sixth on a list of the most corrupt states last year, based on the federal public corruption convictions per 100,000 residents. (It was beaten by Louisiana, Mississippi, Kentucky, Alabama and Ohio; it was slightly ahead of New Jersey and New York.)

Still, as Mr. Mikva, who for many years was a member of Congress, said, "There's a kind of Gresham's law that operates: the bad drives out the good."

If indicted, Mr. Blagojevich would be the fifth of the last eight elected Illinois governors to be charged with a crime, and if he is sent to jail, the fourth to serve time.

Since 1971, said Dick Simpson, head of the political science department at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a former Chicago alderman, 1,000 Illinois public servants have been convicted of corruption, and in Chicago, 30 aldermen have gone to jail.

Mr. Simpson said corruption went back at least to 1869, when three Chicago commissioners gave out a contract to paint City Hall and then used whitewash instead, pocketing the savings.

Now Illinois remains the rare place where one governor who served jail time (he used fraudulent loans to repair his yacht) writes an opinion article in a newspaper accusing the current governor of “ranking with Al Capone in establishing a disgraceful image of Illinois,” as Daniel Walker did on Thursday in *The Chicago Tribune*.

“Some people say it’s in the water,” said Mike Lawrence, who was a spokesman for former Gov. [Jim Edgar](#) (one of the unindicted ones) and executive director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University. “But Paul Simon drank the same water that Paul Powell drank, and there couldn’t have been two more dramatically different politicians when it came to ethics.”

The deep-seated corruption, Mr. Lawrence and others said, has its roots in the settlement of the state in the 19th century.

Irish immigrants, and later Italians and Poles, faced discrimination in getting jobs and organized themselves politically as a way to assimilate and gain strength. New immigrants would come to local bosses for housing, work and food, and public office became the marketplace for jobs, contracts, rewarding friends and punishing enemies.

“It isn’t that the Irish are inherently corrupt,” Mr. Mikva said. “It’s that that’s the way you got power.”

Politicians mocked “goo-goo groups” like the “Plague of Women Voters” — good government being for girls and babies. “Politics was for people who had skin in the game,” Professor Redfield said.

After the convictions of [George Ryan](#), whom Mr. Blagojevich replaced in the governor’s office, and [Dan Rostenkowski](#), whose seat in the House of Representatives Mr. Blagojevich once held, their allies complained that prosecutors had criminalized politics. (Mr. Blagojevich’s lawyer, too, insisted that anything he had done was “just politics.”)

“I think for a while Illinois was sort of proud of their scoundrels,” said Mr. Mikva, who appeared on Friday with the Illinois attorney general in calling upon the State Supreme Court to declare Mr. Blagojevich unfit to govern.

“We bragged about Hinky Dink Mike Kenna and Bathhouse John Coughlin,” he said, referring to the bosses who ruled the First Ward in Chicago from the late 19th century until World War II with a mix of extortion, favors and ballot-box stuffing.

“We’ve gotten over that,” Mr. Mikva said, “but we’ve never put in the defense mechanisms in terms of ethics laws and limited contributions.”

There are no limits on political contributions in Illinois. The law that is to take effect in January bans contributions only from those with state contracts larger than \$50,000, and it was passed only under pressure (including from Mr. Obama, who called his former mentor in the State Senate, [Emil Jones Jr.](#), to encourage its passage.) Unlike the federal system, corporations can give directly to politicians.

“There is a bottomless thirst for cash, for campaign contributions, for personal enrichment,” Ms. Canary said. “There is no speed limit.”

Professor Redfield said, “The laws reflect the culture, and the culture is shaped by the lack of laws.”

Long after machine politics died elsewhere — Prendergast in Kansas City, Tammany Hall in New York — Mayor Richard J. Daley’s machine ruled Chicago. Mr. Powell was a product of the downstate machine, Mr. Ryan of the Kankakee County machine.

Under Mr. Daley’s son, Richard M., the current mayor, Chicago’s machine has simply adapted, many say, so that the building blocks of the power structure are interest groups, corporations and unions rather than the neighborhoods.

In parts of downstate, the collapse of the coal industry has left the state as the biggest source of jobs, in prisons, mental institutions and universities. That has bred corruption in places like East St. Louis, where several officials and precinct workers were convicted of vote fraud in 2005.

“Most Illinoisans put a higher priority on getting their streets shoveled than they do on scandal-free public servants,” Mr. Lawrence said.

Instances of revolt are rare.

In the late 1970s, Mr. Lawrence said, after the Legislature and the governor slipped in a pay increase in a lame-duck session, outraged voters sent envelopes full of tea bags and even human feces. Then in 1980, they voted to reduce the size of the House by a third, to 118 from 177.

Mr. Mikva, who with Mr. Simon fought in vain to get the Legislature to pass limits on political contributions 50 years ago, recalled going to Mr. Blagojevich to suggest that he include such limits in a reform package. But while Mr. Blagojevich agreed to establish inspectors general

and a new ethics board, Mr. Mikva said, he resisted ending pay-to-play.

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