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## Commentary: Illinois voters should blame themselves

- Story Highlights
- Kent Redfield: Blagojevich promised an end to corruption and "business as usual"
- He says governor wanted to use Illinois as a platform for national office
- Redfield: It takes tougher laws and more voter involvement to stop corruption
- He says Illinois needs to change its culture, its beliefs about nature of politics

By Kent Redfield  
Special to CNN

*Editor's Note: Kent Redfield is director of the Sunshine Project, a research project focused on the role of money in Illinois politics and on political ethics in the state. He is a professor emeritus of political studies at the University of Illinois -- Springfield. Before joining the faculty, he worked for four years as a member of the research/appropriations staff for the then-speaker of the Illinois General Assembly, who was a Democrat.*

**SPRINGFIELD, Illinois (CNN)** -- In the glow of his election victory in fall 2002, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich stood on the stage at the victory celebration held in the steel mill where his father had worked and promised "reform and renewal," and an "end to business as usual."

He told a public weary of the scandal surrounding former Gov. George Ryan that they had voted for change and that he intended to bring that change.

Instead, Blagojevich is likely to go down in history as a ringing example of the corrupting influence of money in politics and the failure of Illinois voters to demand change.

Three years earlier he had been an obscure Chicago congressman concerned about losing his seat through redistricting. He formed a state political committee and began raising money. Much of his early money came from businesses in his old congressional district, particularly in the Chicago ward controlled by his father-in-law, Alderman Richard Mell.

Because of his huge war chest, Blagojevich was the only candidate in the Democratic primary who campaigned statewide. After his primary victory, he continued to raise money at a staggering rate, \$26 million in all. In the general election, [Blagojevich](#) constantly hammered on the need to end Republican corruption and restore the state's honor.

From the beginning of his first term, it appeared that Blagojevich wanted to be more than just the governor of [Illinois](#). He hired a former Bill Clinton adviser to write his inaugural address and shape his public message. By promising not to raise taxes and to provide universal access to health care, he hoped to catch the eye of those beyond Illinois as a different kind of Democrat.

His dream was to be on a stage in November 2008, playing the role that turned out to be that of Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

It wound up that he did go national in 2008, but not in the way he had hoped.

Blagojevich's rhetoric and his leadership style caused problems in the state Capitol in Springfield immediately. He always presented conflicts over policy as morality plays. No matter what the issue, it was always "Sir Rodney the Good" vs. the forces of evil.

He loved to pull political surprises and demonstrated disdain for legislators. After winning a second term, he proposed a massive gross receipts tax on businesses as a way of dealing with the overwhelming deficit in the state budget without raising taxes on "the working people."

The idea had never been mentioned in the campaign or discussed with the legislative leaders before the speech. Ultimately, the proposal went nowhere.

In 2005, federal subpoenas began arriving at state agencies and the governor's office, looking into hiring practices and state contracts. Over the past three years, the governor has spent more than \$2 million from his campaign fund on legal fees.

What saved Blagojevich politically in 2006 was his extraordinary ability to raise money. He raised \$29 million, while his Republican opponent, State Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka, raised less than \$11 million. Blagojevich won a bare majority of the vote in a three-way race.

By spring 2008, most Illinois citizens had concluded the governor was doing a terrible job. His approval rating was at 12 percent.

Still, most people assumed we were stuck with him for two more years. The tapes described in the federal criminal complaint last week confirmed what many in Illinois had suspected for a long time. The real Rod Blagojevich has been running the state like a Chicago ward boss, according to the complaint.

In the end, he brought himself down by ignoring the reality of a federal investigation aimed directly at him. If he is convicted of a crime, we will be rid of him not because we exercised collective wisdom at the ballot box, but because he turned out to be an even more incompetent crook than he was a governor.

Gov. Blagojevich is the fifth of the last eight elected Illinois governors to be charged with a felony. If Blagojevich is convicted, we will have the unique distinction of having two former governors in jail at the same time. Why is this happening again? [iReport.com: Do you trust your elected leaders?](#)

Illinois has extremely weak campaign finance and [ethics](#) laws, with no limits on the amount of campaign contributions. The law that takes effect in January prohibiting contributions by people who already hold large (\$50,000 or more) state contracts to the public officials who are responsible for awarding such contracts is a small first step.

But greater changes are needed. Limiting all contributions to \$1,000 would make "pay to play" in the granting of state contracts or the selling of a U.S. Senate seat much less profitable or tempting.

Making corruption more difficult only takes you so far. People are more likely to obey the law if they believe it is wrong to break the law -- in addition to the chance they might get caught. We need to change the political culture in Illinois -- the attitudes and beliefs we share about the nature of politics. Too many Illinois citizens and politicians believe that politics is solely about power, winning and personal gain.

The charges filed against the governor only reinforce the idea that politics is and always will be a dirty business. But culture does change. The prominent role that racism has played in our national culture is slowly and begrudgingly giving way to new attitudes and beliefs and a new reality. Illinois' culture of political corruption does not have to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

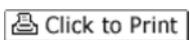
Two years ago, most Illinois citizens suspected what they now know about Rod Blagojevich. But on Election Day, fewer than 37 percent of the eligible voters in Illinois went to the polls and a majority of them elected him to another four-year term. In order to fix Illinois politics, we need to start by taking a long look at ourselves in the mirror.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Kent Redfield.*

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