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Blagojevich trial will spotlight worst elements of state's political culture

Democrats fear fallout from testimony; GOP sees chance to rebuild power

By Rick Pearson, Tribune reporter

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Former Gov. Rod Blagojevich's federal corruption trial will feature prosecutors feeding voters a steady reminder of the worst elements of Illinois' political culture — allegations that money, insider influence and personal interest drive public policy in this state.

From charges of trying to shake down a children's hospital for campaign cash to trying to peddle President Barack Obama's vacant Senate seat for profit, the case will once again put Illinois politics on trial.

For Democrats, the trial represents a long-feared day of reckoning after 18 months of a Blagojevich-fueled circus. The challenge is to weather months of testimony involving pay-to-play charges as the party tries to maintain its control of state government, led by Gov. Pat Quinn, who replaced Blagojevich as governor after twice serving as his running mate.

"It's not a plus. It's not a plus," acknowledged House Speaker Michael Madigan, the veteran Southwest Side lawmaker who is chairman of the Illinois Democratic Party.

For Republicans, it's the down-and-out party's best chance in a decade to convince voters they deserve another shot at running Illinois. The GOP is trying to regain relevancy that evaporated after a federal corruption investigation that ended with the imprisonment of former Republican Gov. George Ryan.

Watch for Republicans to run TV ads that link Blagojevich and any damaging trial testimony to their Democratic opponents. It's the same approach that Blagojevich used in winning two statewide elections, tarring both his opponents with the taint of the Ryan scandal. And some GOP campaigns already are exploring the possibility.

Democrats know they will be forced to play defense, and some will try to point out ties between Blagojevich and longtime Republicans to contend that corruption was not unique to one political party.

"I don't think it's going to be good for Democrats," said Christopher Mooney, a political science



professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "Quinn inoculated himself pretty well from Blagojevich. But Blagojevich, himself, wrote the book on this. He's taught us how to take a person not associated in any way with taint and link them at the hip."

Amid the attempts at political opportunism, the Blagojevich trial also threatens to drag into the spotlight prominent national Democrats, from former Chicago congressman and current White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and his top deputy, Illinois' senior senator, Dick Durbin.

The Blagojevich defense team contends those leaders can show that the former governor's conversations about the Senate seat were political horse trading and not a crime. Though Emanuel, Reid and Durbin are not accused of any wrongdoing, any association with Blagojevich carries its own political baggage. If nothing else, the trial will resurrect the controversy over Democratic leaders' ineffective efforts to prevent Blagojevich's choice, Sen. Roland Burris, from being seated.

"It's just an embarrassment that the state has to go through this. It's certainly something that will be politically good for us, but it's not good for the state," said Pat Brady, the state's Republican chairman. "I don't want Rahm Emanuel and other people from the White House coming to testify. It doesn't help the country."

Yet Republicans are working to use the trial to resuscitate a political organization that was eviscerated by voters following Ryan's tenure.

Just days before the trial was set to begin, the state GOP compiled an assemblage of photos of current political candidates buddying up to the disgraced former Democratic governor. There's Quinn, a former running mate, standing with Blagojevich at a political rally; Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias, the Democratic U.S. Senate nominee, posing with Blagojevich in tuxedos at an event; and other photos with Blagojevich and Attorney General Lisa Madigan and her father, Michael Madigan.

"The Blagojevich Trial. Starting June 3rd. Check Your Local Listings for Details," the state GOP noted in an e-mail to supporters that included the photos.

A strategist with one Republican statewide campaign said they expect the trial will provide "opportunities" to tag the current crop of Democratic candidates with problems that go back to the Blagojevich administration, from the state's mountain of unpaid bills to Blagojevich hires still on the public payroll.

"It may not be a focal point of the trial, but it does shine a spotlight on the problems of the Democratic Party and the excesses of one-party rule with Blagojevich at the top of it," said the GOP strategist, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the campaigns.

During the February primary for governor, challenger Dan Hynes looked to take advantage of Quinn's former status as a Blagojevich running mate to raise questions in the minds of voters. But Hynes' campaign discovered, and a Tribune poll showed, that Democratic primary voters did not view Quinn negatively over his ties to the former governor.

Though such linkage didn't have any traction for Democratic voters, it is independent voters who decide statewide elections in Illinois, and they will be the target for Republican attempts to tie Blagojevich to Democratic opponents.

A Democratic consultant to one statewide campaign noted that Democrats running at the top of the

ticket were not particularly close to Blagojevich but said it would be difficult to explain that to voters.

"The biggest wild card is Rod, himself," said the consultant, who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to discuss strategy. "Will he try to take others down with him?"

As is often the case in Illinois' political environment, there is a bipartisan flavor to the Blagojevich scandal.

Blagojevich had dealings with prominent Republican Bob Kjellander, a former member of the GOP National Committee. Prosecutors say he also cultivated a relationship with Stuart Levine, a major fundraiser for Blagojevich and for Republicans who pleaded guilty to trying to use his position on state boards to extract kickbacks from contractors. [Antoin "Tony" Rezko](#), a top Blagojevich fundraiser and adviser who also was convicted of corruption in 2008, was a donor to GOP candidates as well.

To that extent, the trial may serve to remind voters that they share some responsibility for electing him twice.

"Blagojevich is just a public buffoon, but he's all of ours," the Democratic consultant said. "He's not just an issue for Illinois Democrats. Everyone shares ownership."

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