



Democrats catch break with trial's early end

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CHICAGO — Jurors were out of sight on their first full day deciding the fate of former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich. But the scene at the federal courthouse could have been far uglier for Democrats if his corruption trial had played out as expected with the party gearing up for tough elections.

In the end, there was no sharp-tongued Rahm Emanuel on the stand, squaring off with Blagojevich attorney Sam Adam Jr. over the White House chief of staff's talks with a Blagojevich adviser about who to appoint to President Barack Obama's old Senate seat.

There was no Alexi Giannoulias, the Democratic candidate for Obama's old seat, being asked about how he introduced a union official to a close Obama adviser that Blagojevich considered for the Senate.

And there was no testimony from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who Blagojevich's lawyers also originally subpoenaed to testify about the appointment.

Blagojevich's lawyers rested their case last week without calling a single witness, not even Blagojevich himself. That not only spared Democrats any potentially embarrassing testimony but could help wrap up the trial well in advance of Labor Day, the traditional kickoff of the fall campaign.

"They dodged a bullet because it would have been weeks of dragging in these high-level people and talking about the schemes and all that," Illinois Republican Party chairman Pat Brady said.

Blagojevich's defense attorneys had plastered Washington and Illinois with subpoenas. Besides Emanuel, Reid and Giannoulias, the current Illinois treasurer, the ex-governor's lawyers also initially wanted Obama adviser Valerie Jarrett to appear, as well as U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin. They even wanted to subpoena Obama, but weren't allowed to by a judge.

The fact that none of them ended up appearing doesn't mean Republicans will let voters forget that Blagojevich — who was twice elected governor — is a Democrat as they try to pry loose the party's grip on the senate seat and Illinois state government in the fall campaign. But how much impact it will have at the polls remains to be seen.

Other issues, like Illinois' \$13 billion deficit, help mitigate the damage of the Blagojevich trial, said DePaul University political science professor Michael Mezey.

"It's going to be yesterday's news by the time election season starts Labor Day," Mezey said.

And because of Blagojevich's antics, which range from appearing on reality TV to singing an Elvis song at a street fair, some argue that he is no longer defined first and foremost as a Democrat.

"I think there is often a line that you cross when you go from being associated with a party to being just your own off-kilter personality," said Democratic consultant Chris Lehane. "And wherever that line is, I think he crossed it a long time ago."

But Chris Mooney, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said that won't keep Republicans from hammering away.

"You can be crazy and a Democrat," Mooney said.

Gov. Pat Quinn, Blagojevich's former lieutenant governor, is seeking a full term of his own in November after replacing his disgraced running mate when he was removed from office by lawmakers in January 2009. The two men had been on the outs for years but Republicans have still linked them.

For the White House, testimony by top aides would have been an unwanted distraction, even though none of Obama's allies were accused of wrongdoing, said Lehane.

"You obviously would not want a situation where the chief of staff at the White House or a senior adviser to the president has to raise their hand and take an oath and then testify in a criminal proceeding that at the end of the day is about whether people engage in illegal forms of politics," Lehane said.

No one knows what the big-name Democrats might have said at trial, but there's plenty of speculation.

Emanuel, who reportedly was captured on FBI wiretaps, had been authorized by Obama to pass along to Blagojevich's office the names of potential Senate replacements, according to a report from former White House counsel Greg Craig. Craig conducted an internal inquiry for Obama shortly after the election about contacts between the presidential transition team and Blagojevich.

During the trial, prosecution witnesses said Blagojevich had considered appointing Jarrett to the seat if he could get a Cabinet post from Obama.

Giannoulias has said he introduced Jarrett to Tom Balanoff, an official with the Service Employees International Union. Prosecutors have said Blagojevich sent word through Balanoff that he would appoint Jarrett to the Senate if Obama would give him a top-level job. Durbin has said he talked to Blagojevich about possible Senate replacements.

Blagojevich has vehemently denied doing anything improper while deciding who would be awarded the Senate seat after Obama was elected president. Prosecutors argued he was angling for money or a job because he and his wife were financially strapped.

Blagojevich eventually appointed Democrat Roland Burris, although Burris isn't seeking a full term. Giannoulias, Republican

Congressman Mark Kirk and the Green Party's LeAlan Jones are vying for the seat in November.

Jurors resume deliberations today

CHICAGO— Jurors at former Gov. Rod Blagojevich's corruption trial have ended their first full day of deliberations.

They're expected back this morning to pick up where they left off.

On Thursday, jurors asked Judge James Zagel for a transcript of one of the closing arguments in the case. But the judge denied the request, saying closing arguments are not evidence.

Little is known about the six men and six women deciding the fate of Blagojevich and his brother — co-defendant Robert Blagojevich — because Zagel is withholding their names until after the verdict.