

# Illinois Becomes Haven For Democrats On The Run

by THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



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Indiana House Minority Leader, Pat Bauer, D-South Bend, speaks to reports while in a motel room Thursday, Feb. 24, 2011, in Urbana, Ill. Bauer and fellow Indiana Democrats fled Indiana to block contentious labor and education proposals, a strategy employed first last week in Wisconsin, where a legislative stalemate continues.



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FILE - In this Feb. 18, 2011 file photo, Wisconsin Democratic state Sen. Jon Erpenbach answers a question during an interview with the Associated Press at a downtown Chicago hotel Erpenbach and fellow Democratic senators fled

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Illinois, known for its wayward politicians and back-door political dealings, is in the odd position of having become the Switzerland on the Prairie as lawmakers fleeing votes in Wisconsin and Indiana take refuge in its borders.

If Illinois didn't invent political dysfunction, it's made a career of perfecting it. Former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, accused of trying to sell a vacant U.S. Senate seat; imprisoned former Gov. George Ryan, convicted of turning his government offices into little more than divisions of his fundraising machine; and the patronage hiring and backroom dealings of the once-mighty Chicago political machine are just a few entries on the state's resume.

And now with bands of Democratic legislators streaming over Illinois' borders to avoid votes on anti-union bills and other measures supported by Republicans, some residents wonder why they had to bring their problems here. Others say it might do the state's political image a rare bit of good.

"It makes us look, for once, a little less crazy than our neighbors politically," said Chris Mooney a political science professor with the University of Illinois-Springfield and the Institute for Government and Public Affairs. "We seem like more normal politics, and that's not always the case."

But Sue Wrede, a tea party member, worries that Illinois is being dragged into someone else's political mess.

"I think our state is scandal-ridden enough," Wrede said Thursday as she demonstrated outside the hotel in the southern Illinois town of

Wisconsin Thursday to block a vote on a sweeping anti-union bill backed by Republicans and GOP Gov. Scott Walker. The Democrats who fled could stay in hiding for days or even weeks.

FILE - In this Feb. 18, 2011 file photo, Wisconsin Democratic state Sen. Jon Erpenbach is seen outside a downtown Chicago hotel. Erpenbach and fellow Democratic senators fled Wisconsin Thursday to block a vote on a sweeping anti-union bill backed by Republicans and GOP Gov. Scott Walker. The Democrats who fled could stay in hiding for days or even weeks.

Republican governor a quorum for a vote on his plan to kill collective bargaining rights for government workers. About 30 Democratic member of Indiana's House followed this week to avoid votes on a raft of Republican-backed legislation.

Illinois' reputation for corruption isn't lost on other states.

"When Illinois pols stay in Indiana, it's at the federal prison. When Indiana pols stay in Illinois, it's at Comfort Suites," Indianapolis Star political columnist Matthew Tulley wrote on Twitter as Indiana's Democrats moved into the budget hotel chain's Urbana location.

Not much is known about the day-to-day lives of Wisconsin's legislators — they're in hiding and being pursued by state troopers, after all.

But you might mistake the Comfort Suites lobby in Urbana and the adjacent conference room — where lawmakers meet and occasionally cheer mysteriously from behind closed doors — for an Indiana embassy. A blue and gold state flag hangs from a fireplace mantel. Legislators, some dressed in red Indiana University and Ball State sweatshirts, laugh about sewer districts and garbage dumps.

Some Hoosier lawmakers have found Illinois accommodating.

"We found that Illinois has excellent malls," Rep. Win Moses said, explaining that light packing didn't necessarily mean his stay would be short. "You have excellent dry cleaning, too. And there's a minimart right across the street."

That kind of talk drew a wagging finger from Indiana Republican Party Chairman Eric Holcomb. "Taxpayers will not stand for Indiana House Democrats getting paid to shop in Illinois when they should be at work in Indiana," he said in an e-mail Thursday.

There is thick irony in lawmakers from Wisconsin in particular finding a haven in Illinois. Friendly isn't a word many Wisconsin residents use to describe their neighbors to the south.

Neenah, Wis., public relations man Tom Lyons used to market scenic and rugged Door County along northern Lake Michigan to Illinois tourists. They visit and "build condos and drive up real estate prices and have to be taught how to recycle; their whole idea of the outdoors is a great ashtray."

Anything else?

Urbana where Democrats are staying. "It's embarrassing."

The state Republican Party, for its part, is urging donors to send money, lest Illinois — where Democrats control the governor's office and both legislative houses — become a "Safe Haven for Tax & Spend Democrats."

Wisconsin's 14 Democratic senators have been in hiding in Illinois since last week, denying their

"They are notorious poor tippers," added Lyons, who grew up in Joliet, Ill.

Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, for his part, extended a welcome to the lawmakers.

"Illinois is always open," the Democrat told reporters in Chicago. "We believe in hospitality and tourism and being friendly."

Mooney, the political scientist, said Quinn has a reputation as a political "bomb thrower" but doesn't seem to want to wade into the political disputes his fellow Democrats from neighboring states are having with Republicans.

And for good reason, Mooney said.

"It's just a freak show, basically," he said of the political theater being staged in the state. "For once, Illinois is not in the center ring."

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Associated Press reporter Carrie Antfinger contributed to this report from Milwaukee.