

An Honest Look at Illinois Politics

Written by Rich Miller
Sunday, 17 July 2011 08:03

Stand for Children national director Jonah Edelman spoke a little too freely at an Aspen Institute event this month.

Edelman openly bragged about how his group had outfoxed the teacher unions and the Illinois media, and had taken advantage of an opening with House Speaker Michael Madigan to pass his sweeping education-reform proposal, which is now state law. His remarks created a huge stir, and Edelman has since apologized for his candor, but most of what he said about Illinois politics was quite fascinating and definitely worth a look.

Edelman told the Aspen Institute's conference participants that wealthy investor Bruce Rauner had approached him about expanding his group's school-reform efforts to Illinois. Rauner has long been a major supporter of Republican candidates, and many believed early on that his involvement with Edelman meant that Stand for Children would lean heavily toward the the House Republicans and against Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan.

But Edelman said he noticed a political opening that Rauner didn't. The teacher unions were so upset by the passage of a pension-reform bill that they were refusing to contribute to House Democrats who had voted for the reform, even though the legislators had long supported the unions.

Edelman said he then looked at the landscape and determined that no matter what happened in individual races, "Madigan would still be Speaker." So, he said, the "raw politics" dictated that "we should tilt toward him."

"The press never picked up on it," Edelman said about how his group had endorsed twice as many Democratic candidates as Republicans. Those endorsements were a strong indication to Madigan, however, that they were clearly favoring him.

"Luckily, it never got covered that way," Edelman explained. "That wouldn't work well in Illinois. Madigan's not particularly well liked."

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I extensively covered Stand for Children's jump into Illinois politics, but few others did. The group flew almost totally under the media's radar for months, even after it made the largest legislative campaign contribution in Illinois history by a political action committee. It's still a mystery to me why the group was able to operate so free from scrutiny.

Edelman said he met with Madigan after the election to review his group's reform proposals. Madigan said he was supportive.

"The next day," Edelman claimed, Madigan "created an education-reform committee, and his political director called to ask for our suggestions of who should be on it."

Edelman also raised \$3 million for his political action committee between the election and the end of the year, just before campaign contributions were officially capped by a new state law. "That's more money than any of the unions had in their political action committees," Edelman noted – a fact that was also mostly ignored by the media.

Stand's Edelman claimed he had managed to "shift the balance of power" in a "very short amount of time," and said there was a "palpable sense of concern if not shock" among union leaders that with Madigan's new alliance, he and his group now had a "clear political capability to potentially jam this proposal down their throats the same way pension reform was jammed down their throats six months earlier."

Because the deck appeared so stacked against them, Edelman claimed the unions were "thrilled to come to the table and discuss things that nine months earlier they would have not been willing to discuss," such as making it easier to fire teachers or lengthen school days.

And because teacher-union leaders here have heaped praise on the new law, "it makes it hard for folks leading unions in other states to say that these types of reforms are terrible," Edelman said. (He has since apologized to the teacher unions.)

"Our approach," Edleman said, "is to build as much political clout in the most unassuming, diplomatic way."

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He wasn't exactly "diplomatic" in Aspen, but Edelman most certainly provided us with some major insights into how his group won, even though some of it just wasn't accurate.

For instance, officials at the Illinois Federation of Teachers say they foresaw Madigan coming at them early last year. That's a big reason why they didn't contribute to his members' campaigns, they said. To them, Madigan got lucky – yet again – when Edelman showed up with his big checkbook.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.