

Lack of African-American Support Dooms Gay-Marriage Bill

Written by Rich Miller
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There's more than enough blame to go around regarding the failure of the gay-marriage bill during the final days of the General Assembly's spring session, which ended May 31.

Governor Pat Quinn knew that African-American House members were reluctant to support the bill, mainly because of pressure from their churches. So, why did he pick a nasty fight with the Black Caucus over Medicaid? Quinn was offering projects to Republican legislators to entice them to flip, but he couldn't find a few million Medicaid dollars to help poor people get wheelchairs and preventive dental care? That late-session fight over Medicaid spending was counterproductive. Instead of using the disagreement to his advantage, Quinn dug in his heels and so did the Black Caucus, which also initially refused to support a gay-rights measure several years ago after being cut out of a gaming-expansion bill.

Senate President John Cullerton said he didn't regret passing the gay-marriage bill out of his chamber in mid-February, before the House votes were lined up. Back then, the House roll call was reportedly in the 40s. (Sixty votes are needed to pass.) Usually, proponents try to wire these things so they pass both chambers quickly. Cullerton said he feared opponents would begin gearing up and believed the bill needed to be passed as quickly as possible. But passing that bill without first making sure the House was ready to deal with it energized opponents and gave them time to organize.

Proponents say the House roll call moved into the 50s by March. But instead of working it hard

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at that point, House Speaker Michael Madigan appeared to put off a vote. Madigan did the same with several other bills this spring, including a fracking proposal. The idea was to wait on stuff that looked like it could pass easily and get the truly hard stuff done first, such as the budget, pension reform, and concealed carry. Those bills absolutely had to be passed, so giving out goodies to his various factions early in the game would, the theory went, reduce the willingness of proponent legislators to work on the tough stuff. But the opposition geared up and, by the time Madigan revisited the issue in late May, the roll call was already sliding backward. By May 29, when a majority of the Black Caucus decided it wanted to wait until November to vote on the bill, the roll call reportedly fell to just 52 “yes” votes. It couldn’t be salvaged. Madigan’s strategy failed.

The proponents themselves need to reexamine their entire, failed strategy. They pushed for an early Senate vote, then didn’t adequately respond to the growing opposition from black churches.

The response playbook was written almost a quarter-century ago. During the 1990 gubernatorial race, Republican Jim Edgar targeted black church leaders, believing he could hold down the black Democratic vote that way. It worked. Big companies such as ComEd and Illinois Bell saw how effective Edgar was and began using black churches to make their legislative cases. Their Statehouse influence took off like a rocket.

ComEd and Illinois Bell also began hiring black lobbyists at about the same time. There weren’t many back then, so hiring those folks gave them a huge advantage with African-American legislators. The gay-marriage proponents had just one black lobbyist on their payroll, and he’s affiliated with the Senate. They didn’t bother to hire any House-affiliated black lobbyists until the afternoon of May 30, when it was way too late. An inexcusable blunder.

Some proponents have slammed the bill’s House sponsor for not calling a floor vote. But that’s simply ludicrous. Big bills such as this tend to fail badly if they don’t zoom up to 60 on the tally board. The final total would’ve almost surely been in the low 40s, meaning it would’ve died in its tracks. It also could’ve exposed a few “hidden” votes in favor of the bill. Either that, or those secret proponents would’ve had to vote against the bill, making it that much harder to turn them around the next time.

As mentioned above, the House Black Caucus wants to wait until November for a vote, but November is near the end of House candidate filing season. A November vote means many

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already-nervous legislators might guarantee themselves primary opposition. So if it doesn't pass this summer in a special session, it'll probably have to wait until after the 2014 primary.

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