

Quinn Scores with His Populist Playbook

Written by Rich Miller
Sunday, 14 July 2013 10:40

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Years ago, Governor Pat Quinn told a friend of mine that Illinois voters were pretty easy to understand. Illinoisans love populism, Quinn explained, so doing populist stuff was the way to win their hearts.

And if a recent Capitol Fax/We Ask America poll is correct, then Quinn has done just that with last week's line-item veto of legislative salaries and benefits. At least, for now.

"Earlier today," 1,217 registered Illinois voters were told the evening of July 10, "Governor Pat Quinn used his veto powers to suspend the salaries of state senators and representatives until they come up with what he thinks is an acceptable solution for the state's pension crisis. The governor said he did so because he was tired of waiting for legislators to fix the problem, although options available are controversial and may be unconstitutional. Some called the action a 'publicity stunt,' while others said they hoped the governor's plan spurred legislators to action."

Sixty-six percent of respondents said they approved of the governor's action. Just 23 percent disapproved, and 11 percent were uncertain. The poll had a margin of error of 2.8 percent, and 28 percent of the automated calls were made to mobile phones.

The results were pretty even, with 66 percent of women and 68 percent of men approving, while 65 percent of Republicans, 64 percent of Democrats, and 69 percent of independents approved.

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Disapproval was in the low to mid 20s for all.

The survey found that 80 percent of suburban Cook County residents, 74 percent of collar-county denizens, and 68 percent of Chicagoans backed the governor's action. The only comparative weakness was among Downstaters, but 52 percent still approved with 34 percent disapproving. I'd take those numbers any day.

Lots of folks were quoted in the media last week comparing Quinn's move to the Rod Blagojevich legislative wars. They're correct to an extent. Blagojevich and Quinn have played from many of the same populist playbooks. The difference is that Quinn really believes in this stuff.

And keep in mind that Blagojevich was elected governor twice. He successfully played that populist card to the hilt. Battles with the General Assembly are popular outside the Statehouse.

So we can probably expect more of this from Quinn. The public just eats it up, and because his personal polling numbers are so bad – and because he's failed at so many things – it's his only clear path to political victory.

But win or lose, this veto will come with a huge legislative price tag. Legislators have, indeed, been dragging their feet on a pension-reform deal for a very long time. But they have their reasons, and they understandably hate being publicly embarrassed like this. Quinn has now made some very serious and long-lasting Statehouse enemies. He probably doesn't care. But governance – and therefore the state – is gonna suffer.

The public strongly backs Quinn on another topic, as well.

One of the biggest issues Quinn harped on earlier this month when he used his amendatory veto powers to rewrite the concealed-carry bill was that "guns and alcohol don't mix." So his veto prohibited all concealed-carrying in any restaurant that serves alcohol.

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“Do you think trained and licensed Illinois citizens should be able to carry concealed, loaded handguns into restaurants that serve alcohol?” respondents were asked in a Capitol Fax/We Ask America poll taken July 10.

Seventy percent said “no.” Just 26 percent said “yes,” and only 4 percent were uncertain.

A whopping 83 percent of Chicagoans were opposed, and 77 percent of suburban Cook County residents and 73 percent of collar-county residents were also opposed. Support was highest among Downstaters, at 38 percent, but 55 percent were still opposed.

The General Assembly did not include the ban on carrying in restaurants in a compromise bill that failed to pass last week. The omission was sharply criticized by the governor.

A lobbyist with a gun-control group confidently predicted last week that if the proposal got to the House and Senate floors, it would pass easily. The poll shows why.

The problem is getting the idea to the floor. Legislative leaders don't want to substantially alter their agreement on the concealed-carry bill before the ink is even dry on the new law. But this appears to be a very powerful issue, and pressure will most certainly build to move something next spring.

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