

Leaders Cede Power, but Legislators Don't Grab It

Written by Rich Miller

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It's easy to blame the legislative leaders at the Illinois statehouse for accumulating so much power. I've done it a lot, myself. Dozens of reforms have been proposed to curtail their influence. The leaders raise the vast majority of all legislative campaign cash, so some reformers want to cap the amount of money they can contribute to candidates.

Others say we should limit their terms. House Speaker Michael Madigan has run his caucus for 22 years (18 of those as speaker). House Republican Leader Lee Daniels has had the helm of his caucus for 20 years.

Some say we should bar them from naming committee chairs and minority spokespersons and allow the members to elect the committee leaders. As it stands now, the leaders control every aspect of the committee system, from the bills they get, to the staff they're assigned, to membership itself.

There are those who say we should go back to the old system in which each legislative district had three House members – no more than two from a single party. That way, a third of Chicago's House members were Republicans, and a third of DuPage County's were Democrats. Those members might not be as easily controlled.

Some of those reform ideas might work, some might not. But don't expect any of them to pass.

Why not? Well, some members would probably be afraid to vote for any of those proposals. Legislators are like just about every other working stiff. They want to be successful at what they do, and they might believe that the leaders would put a brick wall in front of their career paths if they complained too much.

Several others were recruited to run for the legislature by their leaders. So, they have a natural loyalty to the top dogs for yanking them out of obscurity.

But fear and loyalty don't fully explain why the leaders stay where they are.

The truth is that legislators lead a pretty good life. It's no picnic, mind you. They have to deal with cynical constituents and the occasional nasty opponent. But, overall, it's not a bad way to live.

The leaders supply them staff who write their legislation, run their campaigns, answer their phone calls, handle the complaints, and generally do whatever needs to be done.

If they want tickets to a ballgame or another big event, all they have to do is ask their leader. If they have a problem with a state agency, the leader handles it. If a local group gives them any headaches, they set up a meeting with the leader. If a friend, family member, or constituent needs a job, they ask the leader for a referral. If they have a tough re-election race, the leader gives them as much money as they need.

The leaders are the ones who do most of the work, and members seem to like it that way.

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This year, House members in both parties proclaimed that they wanted more input into the state budget. Over the past decade, the four legislative leaders have gradually taken over every aspect of what was once a fairly democratic and open process.

Back in January, a bipartisan coalition of House members rose up in revolt and killed a proposal that would have allowed Governor George Ryan to slash 5 percent of the budget in consultation with the leaders.

The House speaker got the message and scheduled regular budget briefings to discuss the massive cuts. But the meetings were poorly attended.

So, the leaders went back to the tried-and-true way of back-room negotiations. But this year's deficit is so big, and the solutions so onerous, that they couldn't come to an agreement that their members would support. It was decided that the members would be allowed to debate the budget bill and offer their own amendments – just like in the old days.

They got one day of debate, and members drafted tons of individual amendments. But when the time came to actually vote on their ideas, Speaker Madigan cut a private deal with House GOP Leader Daniels. A cynic might say that Madigan knew that if he showed the members how complicated the budget was, they'd let him do the hard work and stop complaining.

The bottom line is it's always easier to let someone else do the heavy lifting. A handful of dedicated legislators still do a lot of work, but most are content to vote on whatever crosses their desks and then asking their leaders to fix their problems. The worst part is, I don't see any way out of this mess.

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