

## Illinois Legislature Avoids Revolt – Barely

Written by Rich Miller  
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State legislators are rebelling just about everywhere. You've heard about the Texas Democrats who fled to Oklahoma to kill a Republican redistricting bill. In Arizona, the Republican Senate rejected the Democratic governor's budget, then put together its own plan. But the Repubs can't pass it because one of their members sided with the governor and then left on a 30-day Australian honeymoon. Even if she votes for the budget, the governor has vowed a veto.

In New York, the legislature rejected Governor George Pataki's budget, passed its own spending plan, then overrode all of Pataki's 119 vetoes.

Maryland's new governor vetoed a corporate-tax hike after the legislature killed his property-tax increase. At last check, the two sides remain bitterly deadlocked.

Missouri's governor has vetoed most of the budget and is demanding legislators return for a special session. Legislative leaders snapped that the governor was wasting his time.

Nebraska's governor is expected to veto just about all of the budget, but defiant legislators have rounded up enough votes to override him.

Last week, the Illinois General Assembly came extremely close to joining the national rebellions.

Governor Rod Blagojevich has repeatedly slammed the legislature this year for its corrupt, hidebound ways while patting himself on the back for fighting to change the "insider" culture.

To legislators, the governor's ceaseless attacks are cheap shots transparently designed to increase his own poll numbers at their expense. After all, the governor wasn't doing much to really change the system. His own inner circle is packed with lobbyists, pollsters, and fundraisers. He cut that notorious backroom deal to support an anti-consumer corporate welfare bill for SBC, while publicly insisting he was neutral.

But, there he was on TV, triumphantly claiming to all who would listen during one press conference after another about how he was a force for *change*. He'd brag about how he loved

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to get out among “the people,” even though the only “people” he ever sees are Chicago reporters.

The straw that finally broke the camel’s back came last Tuesday, when the governor announced he would veto any gambling-expansion bill.

For months, the governor’s top advisor, politically connected roofing contractor Chris Kelly, has been working behind the scenes to help put together a gaming bill.

The governor, himself, seemed to encourage gaming expansion, allowing people to assume he proposed a 70-percent tax on some riverboats to maneuver the legislature into coming up with its own plan.

But things got out of hand. Legislators began crafting proposals to add three new casinos, put more gaming positions at every riverboat, allow racetracks to install slot machines, and even put video-poker machines in taverns.

The combined bills would have generated \$2.5 billion, and legislators began furiously devising ways to spend the new cash. A fever gripped the Statehouse, and everyone from human-service organizations to road-construction unions started believing that the considerable pain in the governor’s original budget would be eliminated.

But then Blagojevich abruptly nixed everything during a speech in Chicago, calling the General Assembly “irresponsible” for proposing to use gaming revenues to balance the budget. Legislators were stunned. How could he allow the process to move this far and then cut everything off without a moment’s notice?

Revolt was in the air. Most legislators are convinced that the governor’s budget relies on revenues that can’t possibly work and were proposed for politically symbolic value. So, they threatened to let him have his way and then make him take all the blame when it eventually crashes. Others vowed to pass a gaming bill without his approval. A few threatened to retaliate by killing Mayor Daley’s O’Hare Airport expansion bill.

Cooler heads prevailed. House Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate President Emil Jones quickly put together a spending package and started working with the gov on ways to pay for it. Reports that the Senate Democrats were subpoenaed by federal prosecutors underscored Blagojevich’s arguments against the Springfield culture and injected a bit of humility into the atmosphere.

And Blagojevich’s few remaining friends in the legislature say they’ve convinced him to lay off the insults for a while and spend his first full week in Springfield. Blago even reportedly agreed to hang out on the House and Senate floors for a day and use his considerable people skills to smooth over some of the ruffled feathers.

For now, anyway, it looks like Illinois might buck the national trend and end its legislative session on a relatively peaceful note.

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