

Illinois Governor Has Only Himself to Blame for Veto Overrides

Written by Rich Miller

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You've probably heard that Governor Rod Blagojevich is fighting with the Illinois Legislature again. This time, he's claiming the General Assembly is on a "spending orgy" and tossing around taxpayer money like "drunken sailors" who have "run amok. "

We've seen this time and time again. The governor often tries to control the General Assembly's behavior by scolding it in public. A major side benefit, or the core reasoning behind the whole thing, depending where you sit, is that he gets his mug on the TV, which helps boost his poll ratings. Those numbers have fallen lately, so that might be why he's turned up the heat again.

There are those who say he could have stopped the alleged spending orgy by simply talking to legislators and asking them not to override his vetoes. The gov slashed several million dollars in spending after the General Assembly left Springfield last May. But he didn't lift a finger last week to convince them to refrain from overriding his vetoes, and after a handful were overridden with huge, bipartisan majorities, the whole thing just started snowballing out of control.

The gov did find time to hold four press conferences last week. On Sunday, he talked about ethics reform. On Tuesday, he talked again about ethics reform. On Wednesday, it was the death penalty and gay rights. Not until Thursday did he decide to comment on the ever-increasing number of veto overrides that were rapidly piling up in both legislative chambers.

The governor admitted Thursday that he had contacted members to urge them to support a bill that would allow illegal immigrants to obtain driver's licenses. But he said he hadn't spoken to a single member about their overrides of his spending vetoes.

His excuse? There were many. He didn't want to violate protocol by going around the legislative leaders, he said. Of course, that didn't stop him from talking to members about the driver's license bill.

He said he was on an airplane Thursday and didn't have the opportunity to make any calls. The flight to Springfield from Chicago takes about an hour.

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Then he said he didn't talk to them because he felt it wouldn't have done any good. The overrides were flying out with such huge margins that a few phone calls wouldn't have stopped the deluge.

After the press conference, Senate Republican Leader Frank Watson revealed that he had dined with the governor the previous evening and the chief executive didn't mention the budget problem once.

Legislators, as a class, like to spend money. This behavior isn't confined to Illinois, and it's not confined to Democratic-controlled legislatures, either. We ended up with a \$5-billion deficit while the Illinois Senate was in Republican hands.

Part of the problem here is that the governor partially or totally vetoed 115 bills out of the 700 that made it to his desk this year. Each one of those vetoes created at least one angry legislator, and he didn't do much since then to soothe their damaged egos. The numbers simply worked against him last week. Senator George Shadid (D-Peoria) passed five bills last spring, and the governor vetoed three of them. Not good.

Plus, legislators are still stinging from all the abuse they took from Blagojevich last spring, when he publicly upbraided them for trying to pass a gambling bill that his top aides were pushing, and when he repeatedly slammed them for being corrupt and backwards-thinking. Overriding his vetoes simply makes them feel good.

Maybe the governor figured his vetoes should speak for themselves, so he didn't need to talk to any legislators. But when members don't hear from the governor or his staff, they assume that he doesn't really care what they do. They behave this way on most issues. Last spring, for instance, very few legislators were contacted by trucking companies before the legislature voted to increase their license fees and sales taxes. That lack of communication led to one of the biggest political problems of the year.

Public shaming stopped the gambling bill last spring because legislators knew that it was futile to proceed. They could pass whatever they wanted and the governor would veto it, and because no gaming bill has ever passed with a large margin they'd never be able to override him. But now, if they round up enough votes to override his other vetoes, there's nothing he can do to stop them. Shaming them could only make things worse.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at (<http://www.capitolfax.com>).