

# Blagojevich Arrest Fits Tradition in Illinois, Land of the Plea

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**CHICAGO, IL** (December 9, 2008) - Rod Blagojevich today followed in the footsteps of his predecessors: He became the fourth of the past seven governors elected in Illinois to be arrested. Residents blame the sad tradition on a culture of patronage.

“Government in Illinois isn’t about political ideology or helping people,” said Christopher Mooney, who teaches political science at the University of Illinois-Springfield. “It’s about which idiot brother-in-law are you going to get a job on a road crew because he helped you get into office.”

The governor, a Democrat, was charged with trying to sell Barack Obama’s vacated Senate seat, according to a criminal complaint filed by prosecutors. Three previous governors were jailed for receiving bribes: Otto Kerner, governor from 1961 to 1968; [Dan Walker](#), who held the job from 1973 to 1977; and George Ryan, who served from 1999 to 2003.

Blagojevich, 51, and his chief of staff, John Harris, 46, threatened to withhold state assistance to now-bankrupt Tribune Co. in connection with the sale of the Wrigley Field ballpark, according to federal prosecutors. No pleas were entered and neither defendant made any statements during the hearing.

The men also allegedly sought to force the firing of members on the Chicago Tribune’s editorial board who were critical of the governor. Tribune Co. owns the newspaper and the Chicago Cubs baseball team, which plays at Wrigley.

State politicians being carted off to jail reflects a local indifference to wrongdoing that needs to be changed, said Dick Simpson, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a former city alderman.

“We have a culture of machine politics and it lends itself to corruption,” said Simpson. “We are the capital of corruption in the U.S.”

## History of Corruption

Political corruption has a bipartisan history in the state. Kerner, a Democrat convicted in 1973, was jailed after the manager of two horse-racing tracks admitted to bribing the then-governor; charges were filed after Kerner left office. Walker, a Democrat convicted in 1987, a decade after leaving office, served less than two years of a seven-year sentence for receiving improper loans.

Ryan, a Republican charged with accepting trips and gifts in exchange for political favors, was sentenced to more than six years in 2006.

[Robert Soric](#), who led Democratic Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#)’s Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, and three other men were found guilty by a Chicago federal court jury in 2006 for illegal hiring. Daley, first elected in 1989 and the son of the city’s longest-serving mayor, wasn’t accused of wrongdoing.

“They must have a cell reserved somewhere for aldermen and governors,” said [Tommy FitzGibbon](#), executive vice president at MB Financial Bank in Chicago, who wants Blagojevich to resign. “It’s an embarrassment.”

‘What an Idiot’

The region’s reputation was in the national spotlight during this year’s presidential election. Republican presidential nominee [John McCain](#) ran political ads claiming that Democratic rival [Barack Obama](#) is part of a “corrupt Chicago political machine.”

The Blagojevich arrest has brought more notoriety to the region. Clients in Germany and Ireland were aware of the arrest and brought it up in morning telephone calls with Caimin Flannery, a partner in Caimin Flannery & Associates in Naperville, Illinois, about 35 miles west of Chicago. The international business-development firm advises companies on mergers of \$10 million to “several hundred” million dollars.

“Most people I’ve talked to today feel: ‘What an idiot,’” said Flannery, who was born in Ireland and speaks nine languages. “It’s just the greed factor.”

‘A New Low’

The governor was charged with conspiring to obtain campaign contributions in exchange for official actions, including the replacement of Obama. Court-approved wiretaps intercepted Blagojevich last month conspiring to sell the Senate seat, said U.S. Attorney [Patrick Fitzgerald](#). At various times, Blagojevich sought in return a cabinet post, an ambassadorship or a seat on a corporate board for his wife, Fitzgerald said.

“This is a sad day for government and it’s a very sad day for Illinois government,” Fitzgerald said. “Governor Blagojevich has taken us to a new low.”

**“The governor’s office has become the heart of a corruption culture in the fifth-largest U.S. state”, said Tamara Holder, a Chicago defense attorney.**

**“It’s definitely ingrained,” Holder said.**

Blagojevich, in his second term, has been buffeted by scandals in the state government and budget shortfalls. A Chicago Tribune poll in October put his approval rating at 13 percent, the lowest ever recorded by the newspaper’s surveys.

No one among more than a dozen residents interviewed said they were caught off-guard by the arrests.

“You’ve been getting report after report of something negative going on,” said [Hector Galvan](#), a trading consultant for RJO Futures, the private client division of R.J. O’Brien & Associates LLC in Chicago.

While Blagojevich is the latest Illinois governor in court, Galvan said the state has also produced admirable politicians.

“The President-elect is from here,” Galvan said. “You can’t let a few spoil it for everyone else.”