

NATIONAL REVIEW

The Worst Republican Governor in America

Bruce Rauner's Illinois breakdown

By John J. Miller | December 17, 2017, Issue

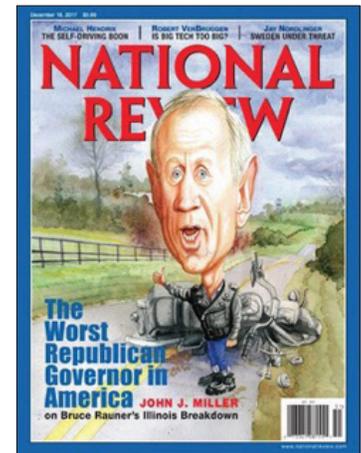
When Governor Bruce Rauner of Illinois announced in October that he would seek reelection in 2018, he released a two-minute campaign video. It shows the Republican wearing blue jeans and a black leather vest as he rides his Harley-Davidson motorcycle from Chicago to Springfield, the state capital. “Four years ago,” he says in a voiceover, “I crisscrossed our state, looked people in the eye, and promised to fight business as usual.”

This boast came about a month after Cardinal Blase Cupich accused him of breaking his word and the *Chicago Sun-Times* put his picture on its front page, below a headline that shouted: “Benedict Rauner.” The governor’s offense was to have signed what may be America’s most radical abortion-funding law after vowing to veto it. The betrayal capped a season of defeats for conservatives, including an income-tax hike, a big bailout of Chicago’s public schools, and turning Illinois into what critics of illegal immigration are calling a “sanctuary state.”

Now Rauner, 60, confronts a problem that few would have predicted as recently as last spring: a possible Republican meltdown in the Land of Lincoln. In next year’s GOP primary, he’ll face a scrappy challenge from a credible conservative opponent. Jeanne Ives is a graduate of West Point, a mom, and a wonky state representative from Wheaton, Ill. “Somebody needs to stand up for Republicans and conservatives,” she says. “We can do a lot better than Bruce Rauner.”

This much is clear: Illinois hardly could do worse. It suffers from one of the weakest economies in the nation, with the slowest personal-income growth, low labor-force participation, and distressing levels of manufacturing-job losses. Its tax burden is among the heaviest in the country. It has the lowest credit rating of any state (just a notch above junk-bond status) and the highest level of unfunded pension liabilities (about \$250 billion, according to Moody’s). Four of its last ten governors have wound up in prison. “Illinois is worth fighting for,” says Rauner in his new campaign ad — but many of its citizens have chosen to flee. The state has lost population every year since 2014.

That was when Rauner won his first election. A successful investor with seven homes, two ranches, and no previous experience in politics, he poured millions of dollars of his own money into his campaign and promised to “shake up Springfield.” He prevailed in a close Republican primary and, later, charged the incumbent Democratic governor, Pat Quinn, with presiding over “one of the worst-run states in America.” On the stump, he pronounced AFSCME — the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees — not as “Aff-smee” but as “Aff-scram-ee.” He also talked about lowering the state income tax and offered a 44-point “turnaround agenda” that included term limits and a wish list of conservative fiscal-policy ideas, such as public-pension reform. Much of it drew from the work of the Illinois Policy Institute, a free-market think tank



Although Rauner supported abortion rights and had donated to Planned Parenthood, he told conservatives that he harbored “no social agenda.” His campaign produced an ad in which his wife, a self-professed “lifelong Democrat,” proclaimed as much. Many pro-lifers appeared willing to take the deal, accepting the status quo on abortion in exchange for a sharp focus on the state’s dire fiscal position. In a good year for Republicans almost everywhere, Rauner unseated Quinn, 50 percent to 46 percent. The only part of the state he didn’t carry was Cook County, the home of Chicago.

A month after Rauner’s inauguration, syndicated columnist George F. Will sensed an opportunity. Illinois, he said, “has initiated this century’s most intriguing political experiment.” Will praised Rauner for taking on public-sector unions and starting “a process that might dismantle a form of governance that afflicts many states and municipalities.” To conservatives fed up with the dominance of Big Labor, Rauner looked like he might be the last, best hope for a troubled state. Perhaps he’d at least help Illinois keep up with its neighbors in the Great Lakes region, where reform-minded GOP governors have enjoyed success in Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. “Back then,” says Ives, “I agreed with a lot of what he said — and I thought he could do it.”

Yet Rauner faced one of the most daunting rivals of any Republican governor: a supermajority of Democrats in the state legislature, led by House speaker Mike Madigan, who took office in 1971 and is perhaps the most powerful state lawmaker in the country. Rauner nevertheless sounded upbeat. “I’ve been involved in a lot of turnarounds,” he told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2015. “A key lesson in a turnaround is go big, go strong, go fast early.”

During his second month on the job, Rauner signed an executive order to stop government unions from collecting dues from nonmembers — a case that the U.S. Supreme Court has taken up, though public employee Mark Janus, who says that contributing to the union violates his free-speech rights, has replaced the governor as plaintiff. Rauner also encouraged localities to pass right-to-work measures. “We’re the economic muscle of the Midwest,” he told the *Journal*, “and we’re sitting here with closed-shop restrictions.” The village of Lincolnshire soon approved a right-to-work ordinance. Unions sued and judges blocked its implementation. The case now sits before a federal appeals court. Other municipalities are watching the outcome closely.

The biggest reforms, however, always were going to require bargaining with Democrats. So Rauner launched a program of aggressive cuts — not to state government, but to his own 44-point agenda. He reduced his goals to just five, including a property-tax freeze, tort reform, and term limits. He also announced that he’d trade a tax increase for substantive gains. “Take everything else off the table,” he said. The result was a two-year budget deadlock. Rauner failed to achieve any of his major objectives, with the possible exception of breaking the Democrats’ supermajority in the statehouse. In the elections of 2016, Republicans picked up a handful of seats — enough, in theory, to sustain one of Rauner’s vetoes.

So the governor strengthened his political position. Yet the standoff in Springfield meant that the state had fallen behind on its bills. Rauner still called for reforms, but as pressure built for a budget, he began to pare back his demands. Soon after the 2016 elections, he said he’d settle for a property-tax freeze and term limits. By February, he signaled even more flexibility: “There is no one single bullet, no one single ‘must have’ for our administration.” Meanwhile, Springfield’s unpaid bills approached \$15 billion. Stories in the media described everything from hospitals that halted expansion projects to chemistry professors who said they couldn’t buy printer ink. “Our state is in real crisis,” said Rauner. Although conservatives grumbled about Rauner’s tactics — why didn’t he put forth his own balanced budget? — they also wanted to stand by a governor they still viewed as an ally. Many Republicans, however, began to grow restive.

On June 20, the governor announced that he’d accept an increase to the state income tax, raising it from 3.75 percent to 4.95 percent. Madigan pounced. Democrats drew up a budget that raised taxes in precisely

this way, offered none of Rauner's proposed reforms, and passed it with the votes of impatient Republicans. Rauner vetoed the bill, but a bipartisan supermajority overrode him. Conservatives were flabbergasted. "The 'Turnaround Agenda' went from 44 reforms to none," says John Tillman, the CEO of the Illinois Policy Institute. "Rauner once talked about reducing the income tax to 3 percent. Instead, he opened the door to the biggest income-tax hike in state history." Meanwhile, pension payments continued to gobble up a quarter of the state's expenses, with no end in sight.

Yet Rauner also gave IPI and its supporters a sense of hope: The governor may have failed to shake up Springfield, but in July he shook up his staff. He hired several IPI veterans, including then-president Kristina Rasmussen as his chief of staff. "We're building the best team in America to turn the government around," Rauner told WHBF, a television station in the Quad Cities.

Rasmussen lasted just 88 days, and the tumult continued. First came a school-funding battle, left unresolved by the new budget. After a flurry of proposals, counterproposals, and veto threats, Rauner struck a deal that pumps money into Chicago's pension fund for teachers. "That was nothing but a bailout," says Ives. In return, Rauner received a potentially important concession: a tax-credit scholarship program for low-income students that could be worth \$100 million. Teachers' unions cheered the bailout, but blasted Rauner for bringing the first school-choice program to the state.

Conservatives didn't have long to celebrate. Just a few days later, Rauner signed a bill that stops police from detaining illegal aliens on the basis of their legal status. Detractors say the new law makes Illinois a "sanctuary state." The governor also approved a bill that automatically registers people to vote when they renew driver's licenses and another that makes it easier to change the sex listed on birth certificates. His most provocative action, however, came on September 28, when Rauner created a new entitlement to abortion.

Earlier in the year, following President Trump's nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court, Democrats had pushed a bill to keep abortion legal in Illinois even if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned. The proposal included a provision to allow state employees and low-income women to receive free abortions for any reason whatsoever. Rauner said he'd veto it, making this pledge on April 14, which happened to be Good Friday. Cardinal Cupich thanked him: "Abortion is a controversial issue in this country, but using public money to provide abortions should not be," he said.

By September, however, Rauner had flip-flopped. "No woman should be forced to make a different decision than another woman would make purely based on her income," he explained as he signed the abortion bill, adding that he has "to be consistent with my values." Pro-lifers expressed shock and disappointment. "He did break his word," said Cardinal Cupich, in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*. "He broke his word to the people, especially to those who have continued to speak on behalf of the vulnerable child in the womb." Conservative lawmakers also objected. "Even the most corrupt Chicago machine politicians think twice before lying to a priest," said state representative Peter Breen.

On Facebook, Tillman, of the Illinois Policy Institute, posted a warning: "Generals cannot lead when they betray their troops." Then he typed a pair of words: "Benedict Rauner" — and on September 30, the *Chicago Sun-Times* turned the nickname into a front-page headline. "IPI doesn't take a position on abortion," says Tillman. "For the institute, and me, the point is that the governor went back on his word." Others argued that taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for abortions when Illinois is already broke. State representative David McSweeney labeled Rauner a "failed governor." His colleague Allen Skillicorn said the abortion law "will ensure that Rauner serves only one term." Several Republican congressmen — Mike Bost, Darin LaHood, Peter Roskam, and John Shimkus — have declined to say they support Rauner's renomination, when asked by reporters.

Now Jeanne Ives intends to stop his reelection. A 53-year-old native of South Dakota who went to West Point and served in the Army, she looks like the kind of pro-life conservative who can beat a pro-choice incumbent in a Republican primary. She's no gadfly: In conversation, Ives resembles a policy nerd as she rattles off obscure facts about the state budget's rotten math. She's the sort of person who ought to be one of Rauner's key partners in Springfield. "I'm giving up a safe seat to do this," she says. "We can have real reform in Illinois, or we can let the courts step in and mandate more taxes — and if that happens, even more people will stick for-sale signs at the ends of their driveways." Her embryonic campaign's internal polling shows that among likely Republican voters, Rauner's approval rating lags Trump's. Moreover, as much as Rauner's new abortion law frustrates them, they're even more annoyed by the sanctuary-state legislation.

Rauner, of course, is no pushover. Nearly \$67 million sits in his campaign account, and he can afford to add more. Ives will raise only a fraction of his funds. Despite this, she's starting to pick up supporters, including Virginia Halas McCaskey, the head of the family that owns the Chicago Bears. GOP voters will select their nominee on March 20. The winner probably will go on to face Democrat J. B. Pritzker, a venture capitalist who is an heir to the Hyatt Hotels fortune. Ives says she's ready: "All I have to do in 2018 is beat a millionaire and then beat a billionaire."

Perhaps Rauner put it best in that reelection video: "Nothin' worthwhile is ever easy." ■

