

Illinois' lawmakers paralysis on budget driven by dysfunction, election

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SPRINGFIELD

When lawmakers sped out of Springfield this weekend without a budget, it provided yet another high-profile symbol of a dysfunctional state government paralyzed by election-year politics.

[Democrats](#) who control the Capitol had to call a time-out, unable to hold together long enough to pass even a spending plan that would put off the most painful decisions until next year.

And bickering between Democrats and [Republicans](#) got so intense they couldn't even agree on how to adjourn the Senate for the day.

Bipartisanship left the building, and now the clock is ticking toward the end of the month. The prospects of a further financial meltdown threaten to leave tens of thousands of teachers laid off and social services unable to help Illinois' most vulnerable residents.

As May 31 looms — the real legislative deadline to avoid overtime — the latest squabble centers around some Democratic lawmakers who are unhappy with the budget package from election-seeking Democratic [Gov. Pat Quinn](#).

"It was another gimmicky bill that was hastily put together and designed to get us out of [Springfield](#) and give the governor unprecedented powers to spend (money) as he saw fit with little input from Democratic legislators," complained Rep. Marlow Colvin, D-[Chicago](#), former chairman of the House Black Caucus, echoing the unhappiness of other minority members.

Another bloc of Democratic lawmakers, progressives, also complained that Quinn's emphasis on maintaining adequate funding for education masked the need to improve human services funding, even though ensuring proper dollars for schools arguably plays better to independent and moderate suburban voters.

In a statement, Quinn's office said the governor will continue working with legislative leaders to craft a budget that is "fair, responsible and preserves education funding." Quinn is "looking forward to a positive result."

But the budget plan pitched by the two Chicago Democrats who lead the General Assembly, Senate President John Cullerton and [House Speaker Michael Madigan](#), resulted in widespread questions about how responsible it was. The two proposed to all

but eliminate the requirement for an automatic \$3.8 billion payment into the state's public pension systems.

Failure to make that payment would result in billions of dollars in lost investment earnings to what is already the most chronically underfunded in the nation. Democrats crafted the pension holiday idea after Republicans balked at a second straight year of borrowing money to cover the costs.

The plan also would have given Quinn emergency powers to raid about \$1 billion from bank accounts created for specially earmarked purposes with a requirement to repay it in 18 months. And it would have given him the freedom to juggle money from departments under his control.

Republican Sen. Bill Brady of Bloomington, Quinn's governor challenger, was more than satisfied to watch the Democratic implosion. Brady's proposal for across-the-board cuts of 10 percent in the state budget has not been fleshed out, though as a state lawmaker, he could have submitted his own alternative spending plan.

"The Democrats have control — there's no question — of this legislature. But we're not going to let them get off easy again," said Brady, who blasted Quinn's "failed leadership" and "incompetence."

Madigan, who also is the state Democratic chairman, used a political stunt to taunt Republicans seeking more budget cuts. He proposed slashing \$4 billion from the budget to fund pensions. In what may be a first, the powerful House speaker got 99 "no" votes and only 15 "yes" votes.

Democratic leaders set no date for a return to the Capitol except a promise to finish budget work by month's end.

"There's no outcome to this budget that's going to make anybody happy. What we need is a sufficient number of people willing to make a tough decision along one line or the other. As long as certain members simply say no to every option, we'll be here," said Rep. John Fritchey, a Northwest Side Democrat who is looking to begin his campaign for the [Cook County Board](#).

"Common sense would dictate that there's nothing that's going to occur in the next week or two that doesn't exist today, other than maybe some members accepting the reality of the situation we're in," he said.