

Illinois lawmakers took their debates to Twitter

By Ashley Rueff
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SPRINGFIELD -- In the waning hours of the legislature's spring session last month, Democrats and Republicans battled over a major income tax-increase proposal on a new front.

Taking to the Senate Democratic Twitter page, a staffer posted the positives about the proposed 67 percent hike in the income tax rate as Senate President John Cullerton of Chicago presented it on the floor. The bill "will double the property tax credit (from 5% to 10%) and will make it fully refundable for seniors," one post read.

On the other side, the Republicans fired up their page and broadcasted criticism of the Democratic tax plan. "Sen. Matt Murphy: Cuts can be made to prevent a tax hike."

The few folks following the General Assembly's online video and the dueling Twitter feeds got the equivalent of a live broadcast, complete with commentary, partisan as it was.

It also marked the first time lawmakers used Twitter, the latest social networking craze, to give minute-by-minute updates about what went down -- or didn't go down -- during the session's whirlwind final week. At a time when government transparency is a hot topic, many of the nearly 30 lawmakers using Twitter say it made sense to use the communication tool that limits each message to 140 characters.

The audience remains small -- House Republicans had the largest number of followers at nearly 1,600, with some individual lawmakers attracting about 300 readers. And it largely remains within an inside-the-Capitol crowd. But both sides of the aisle see an upside to turning on the informational spigot.

Rep. John Fritchey (D-Chicago) said he had constituents urging him via Twitter to vote against an income-tax increase while the House was debating it.

"It's a clear showing of your desire to have better communication and be more proactive in reaching out to constituents," Fritchey said. "Twitter gives us the ability to have essentially an unstructured town hall meeting."

Sen. Dan Rutherford (R-Chenoa), who clocks the most tweets out of all lawmakers, said he uses Twitter more as a broadcasting tool to get information out than for two-way communication. He finds members of the media and those known as political junkies most often subscribe to his posts.

The best place to watch the action was from TweetIllinois.org, built by the conservative Illinois Policy Institute that makes it easier for people to track what their lawmakers are saying on Twitter.

Kristina Rasmussen, executive vice president of the organization, said Illinois is the first state with such a site. The group modeled it after a congressional version.

Three of the four House and Senate groups have Twitter feeds they regularly update. The lone holdout? the House Democrats. Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) is known for keeping tight control over information and that apparently extends to the Web.

Madigan spokesman Steve Brown said he has seen "misinformation" posted on Twitter from those commenting on the political process.

"I'm not sure that it's a tool that proves to be helpful in the end, because you have to spend time explaining the mistakes," Brown said. "I haven't seen where it would warrant the use of us paying a staff person to do it."

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