

## It's up to Mike



Michael Madigan | Bloomberg News photo

His rivals are gone, his coffers flush, his power at a peak.

But the land he rules is in trouble, and leading it out may require him to take the kind of political risks he has spent decades avoiding.

That's the conundrum for Michael Madigan, the most powerful person in Illinois government — whose career, like his state, is at a critical point.

The 24-year speaker of the Illinois House — the longest-tenured legislative leader in all 50 states — is near unassailable. A youngish 67, he's outlasted not only bitter rival Rod Blagojevich but every other senior state leader. He's used his twin posts as speaker and chairman of the Illinois Democratic Party to build an unmatched fundraising machine, elect lawmakers, housebreak governors, promote the career of his daughter and dominate the legislative agenda. Respected and feared, he is the king of Springfield.

But his realm is a mess — so big a mess that the speaker's own daughter, Attorney General Lisa Madigan, is passing up a long-expected race for governor in 2010. On Mr. Madigan's watch, Illinois has stumbled to the brink of bankruptcy — unfunded liability in the state's employee pension funds alone was a stunning \$73.4 billion on Dec. 31, according to the Civic Federation — its politics have become a national joke and its economy has lost the ability to produce jobs. With such deep troubles, is a speaker whose only clear agenda is to maintain his own power the right person to fix Illinois?

Mr. Madigan's spokesman says the speaker will play his usual role: assembling a majority strong enough to face down powerful "special interests" like Commonwealth Edison Co. on electric rates and governors like Mr. Blagojevich on bad ideas like a gross-receipts tax.

Indeed, as those examples illustrate, Mr. Madigan, who declines to comment for this story, on occasion has served as a check on others. But cautiously saying no every so often isn't much of a legacy, especially in a state facing fiscal disaster without dramatic change.

Like ethical change. In dealing with post-Blagojevich cries to reform state politics, Mr. Madigan seized control of the issue but ended up producing a package that bitterly disappointed reformers because it mostly affected the executive branch, not legislators.

"It's all about protecting (Mr. Madigan's) majority, his power," says former federal prosecutor Pat Collins, who headed a reform commission that expected much more. "On things that affected his power base, the reform was slight at best."

Others don't go that far but agree that Mr. Madigan now is on the spot.

"Single-handedly directing if not controlling state policy is a double-edged sword," says state Rep. John Fritchey, a North Sider who has shown flashes of independence in Mr. Madigan's House. "When someone gets that much power, they get the lion's share of the credit and the lion's share of the blame when things go wrong."

The basis of Mr. Madigan's power is his dominance over the Springfield agenda. If he doesn't want a bill to pass, it won't.

"He has absolute control of every piece of legislation down there," says former GOP Gov. Jim Thompson. "He's willing to protect (his) members on hard votes, and he's willing to spend money to elect them."

## **POWER, CASH**

Lawmakers elected with Mr. Madigan's money know he also can use it against them if they defy him.

"In Illinois, everything goes from the House up, not top down," says Gary LaPaille, who served as the speaker's chief of staff and as state party chair until he and Mr. Madigan had a falling out in 1998.

That power, in turn, pulls in the cash that helps Mr. Madigan retain the power. This decade, the four political committees he controls have drawn in excess of \$74 million, more than even the famously well-funded Mr. Blagojevich in the same period.

There is no evidence that Mr. Madigan has engaged in the sort of raw pay-to-play, quid-pro-quo politics that brought down Mr. Blagojevich. Perhaps the closest he's come to drawing scrutiny is his strong political support for Cook County tax appeals Commissioner Joseph Berrios, with whom Mr. Madigan deals regularly in his side job as a property tax lawyer.

Insiders say Mr. Madigan is too smart and disciplined to get in trouble — so disciplined that, after a youthful bout of chubbiness, he now famously lunches daily on an apple, carefully sliced into the same number of pieces with the same knife and on the same plate. Besides, Mr. Madigan gets so

much money from so many sources that he can afford to disappoint a contributor, at least occasionally.

"He's capable of making decisions which go against the people who have contributed to him," says retired journalist and professor Mike Lawrence of Southern Illinois University, who watched Springfield for 40 years. One example: Mr. Madigan in 2005 pushed through caps on medical malpractice despite objections from trial lawyers, a big source of his cash, because he feared the issue would cost him seats in Southern Illinois.

"But the thing to remember," Mr. Lawrence adds, "is that everybody gives to him." That includes the lawyers, who, facing other tort reform bills pending in the House, have resumed giving.

Like the lawyers, just about all of Mr. Madigan's big donors have Springfield agenda items.

For instance, the Illinois Hospital Assn. gave committees controlled by Mr. Madigan \$90,000 last year. IHA Senior Vice-president Howard Peters denies that the gift was linked to Mr. Madigan's extending the life of the Illinois Health Facilities Planning Board, which critics say holds down medical competition. But Mr. Peters cheerfully concedes that on other issues, like setting Medicaid reimbursement rates, "we think the speaker and his caucus are right on."

Or the Illinois Retail Merchants Assn., which worries about the sales tax and minimum wage. Last year, the group donated to 54 of the 70 members of Mr. Madigan's Democratic caucus. "We need folks in the General Assembly who will listen," shrugs President Dave Vite.

With that money, Mr. Madigan can seek to elect Democrats in even the most Republican areas. In the last election cycle, he pumped \$100,000 or more into at least 10 races in GOP-friendly suburban or Downstate districts, winning four.



Amid the crisis, Mr. Madigan will play his usual role: assembling a majority strong enough to face down powerful "special interests," his spokesman says. Bloomberg News photo

## **'POLITICAL STRATEGIST'**

Then there's the case of Chicago lawyer John Schmidt, the third-highest official in the U.S. Justice Department during the Clinton era, who had the misfortune to run for Illinois attorney general in 2002, when then-state Sen. Lisa Madigan moved for the post. Illinois politicians donated \$1.2 million to Ms. Madigan and only \$776.68 to Mr. Schmidt.

"There was a great reluctance to offend Mike," Mr. Schmidt recalls.

If Mr. Madigan is like many other pols in wanting to keep his power and help his family, what's rare is how little he uses his power elsewhere. Mr. Lawrence recalls once asking Mr. Madigan if he was passionate about any issue or cause. "His answer was that he was more about being a political strategist."

Former Republican Gov. Jim Edgar and other Springfield vets like former Senate President Philip Rock, a Democrat, say Mr. Madigan does have a bit of an ideology, not untypical of what you might expect from an Irish Catholic from the Southwest Side: mildly conservative, both on fiscal and social issues. "At times, he was my only ally (among the four legislative leaders) in trying to hold the line on the budget," Mr. Edgar says.

But any conservative bent has come and gone, depending on the politics of the time. Never was this ideological flexibility more evident than during his recent battles with Mr. Blagojevich and former Senate President Emil Jones.

Mr. Madigan sided with conservatives when he blocked Mr. Blagojevich's attempt to levy an \$8-billion gross-receipts tax on Illinois businesses. But he veered the other way when he allowed the state to pile up debt to finance more spending, failed to insist on adequate funding for a pension-payment plan that originally passed with his support and backed another multibillion-dollar pension-borrowing scheme that passed this spring.

And it wasn't until after Mr. Blagojevich left office that the speaker lifted the brick he put on a capital spending plan that business leaders say is crucial to jump-start an Illinois economy that has lagged national growth rates for decades.

Now, the financial damage of the Blagojevich years has become apparent, with the state's budget at least \$6 billion in the red. But Mr. Madigan so far is mostly watching, not acting, even as rating agencies move the state's debt toward sub-investment grade.

## **SPREADING RISK**

Mr. Madigan has put off any vote on a tax increase until at least next year. He's made it clear he wants GOP buy-in to limit the political risk — perhaps fearing a repeat of 2004, when he lost his speakership in that year's Gingrich tide.

But it's uncertain whether he'll back changes Republicans want, like reducing pension benefits for state workers. Unions are his second-largest source of campaign cash, worth more than \$4 million this decade, according to the Illinois Coalition for Political Reform.

As for spending cuts, his M.O. has been to appropriate less money than state agencies need and let the governor do the politically hazardous work of slicing their budgets.

Former state Budget Director Steve Schnorf says he suspects such maneuvers are aimed at resetting overall state spending at a lower level so a tax increase can't be fully used for new spending. (Mr. Madigan's spokesman says the speaker is in favor of a tax hike, when there is adequate political support.) But Mr. Schnorf says he doesn't know for sure what Mr. Madigan wants — other than to return to the way it used to be. "Rod changed things," he says.

Meanwhile, reform panel chief Mr. Collins and his allies mourn the ethics measures they didn't get this spring, and may never get. Among them were tight limits on Mr. Madigan's ability to parcel out campaign cash to his members and public financing of judicial races. Another: holding primary elections at a voter-friendly time, rather than the first week of February. Or wiretap power for state's attorneys probing corruption.

Some Madigan allies say privately that the state is better off with a speaker who reins in members who might otherwise go astray. In Illinois, it has been governors and Chicago aldermen who have tended to get in legal trouble — not Mr. Madigan's minions.

Mr. Collins sees it differently. However meritorious the ideas his panel proposed this spring, "things that the speaker were for got through, and things that he did not (support) did not," he says.

So is Mr. Madigan the right person for the job now?

Illinois Manufacturers' Assn. President Greg Baise, who once compared Mr. Madigan's leadership to Josef Stalin's handling of the Politburo, says, "Mike Madigan's top priority is and always has been maintaining 60 votes in the House." To expect anything else is "to live in a fantasy land."

Mike McClain, a lobbyist and former House majority leader who often dines with the speaker when the General Assembly is in session, says Illinoisans ought to remember what the speaker brings to the table: "strength and experience; someone who has his hand on the tiller and the backbone to say no."

Mr. Madigan indeed has the ability to clean up the mess, says a longtime associate who asks not to be named. The question, that person explains, is whether he has the political will to do more than hang on to his power.

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