

## **Absentee Voting Bill is A Good Candidate for a Veto**

Brian J. Gaines and James H. Kuklinski

Ever since the arrest and impeachment of former Governor Rod Blagojevich, Illinois politicians have been announcing plans for “reforms,” promising to clean up a political system that they (belatedly) acknowledge is badly flawed. But beware unintended consequences. A bill to make absentee voting much easier, sponsored by Senator Michael Frerichs, has quietly sailed through the legislative process and could very soon become law. This change would greatly increase the opportunities for fraud in elections, and should thus be seen as antithesis of true reform. No one who wants fairer and more transparent elections should root for passage into law of SB2022. In this case, Governor Quinn can best deliver better government with a veto.

Recent decades have seen increasing use of non-traditional, “convenience” voting options across the country. There are many varieties, but all come in two basic forms: (1) no-excuse absentee voting by mail; and (2) early voting by secret ballot, cast at official polling stations. Illinois has so far taken the latter path, with dramatic results. In greater Cook County, for instance, about 30,000 early ballots were cast in the 2006 primary, the first time that the state permitted all voters to cast their ballots in advance of Election Day. By the 2008 general election, that number had swelled to almost 500,000 early votes. Allowing early voting has not sparked a surge of turnout of in Illinois, but it has proven a popular option, thus far without scandal.

There are some logistical challenges to implementing early voting, but it seems to have worked well in its first few trials. The critical difference between early voting and absentee voting is that the latter is not done by secret ballot. The secret ballot became a hallmark of democracy in the United States and other nations in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as a means of reducing the possibilities for vote buying, intimidation of voters, and other interference. Quietly, perhaps even unintentionally, many American states have undone this reform in the interest of increasing turnout. SB2022 is a needless step in the direction of creating more opportunities for fraud.

But who’s to say that increasing the number of ballots circulating outside of the purview of election officials will increase fraud? Well, this is Illinois, after all, where winning elections by any means at any cost is a long tradition. If any state should be wary of looser voting, this is it. It is clear, in any case, that more difficulties and disputes over processing arise with absentee ballots than with early ballots cast in the privacy of official booths. Major discrepancies in how absentee ballots were processed from county to county now feature prominently in the long-running dispute over the 2008 Minnesota Senate election.

SB2022 passed the Senate unanimously, and then, earlier this week, passed the House on a mostly partisan vote (63 Democrats and 6 Republicans voted yea; 43 Republicans and 5 Democrats voted nay). Should Governor Quinn defy the General Assembly, ignoring the House majority and that unanimous Senate vote? Yes. Early

voting is working well in Illinois, and expanded absentee voting is not needed. The goal of allowing no-excuse-required convenient voting options for all voters can be met without sacrificing secrecy. Governor Quinn should head off future scandals and electoral turmoil by withholding his signature.

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