



## **Rauner presses on, but will stump speeches pay off?**

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SPRINGFIELD — Parts of Gov. Bruce Rauner's "Illinois Turnaround" agenda drive union leaders nearly mad, but the first-term Republican is showing no hint of letting up on his statewide juggernaut.

In his weekly talks around the state, the first term Republican governor from Winnetka hits on points that always include a call for right-to-work zones, as well as his desire to see local and state government free from project labor agreements and the Prevailing Wage Act.

The governor's unrelenting emphasis on these points has many state government watchers asking, "Why? or at least "Why now?"

For his part, the governor says he simply saying what must be said and his team argues the labor environment and the state's financial condition are hardly disconnected.

"Illinois taxpayers are not getting value for their money and we need to reform the current system that is wasteful and inefficient," his staff said this week in an email in reply to a question from Illinois News Network.

"Project labor agreements and prevailing wage requirements cost taxpayers billions every year. Major reforms are needed to fix the broken system that landed us in this fiscal crisis."

But the governor is running up against some hard numbers, namely in the General Assembly, where Democrats hold overwhelming majorities: 71-47 in the House and 39-20 in the Senate.

Additionally, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, a fourth-term Democrat from Chicago, is battling him on his federal court effort to keep unions from having "fair share" dues withheld from state employee paychecks.

She also issued two opinions last week saying the right-to-work zones and Prevailing Wage Act were, without enabling legislation, off limits to state and local government.

So can the governor just not measure odds?

Considering Rauner's extraordinary success in the business world, "the man can certainly count as well as anyone," said Chris Mooney, director of the Institute of Government and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois.

Mooney cited several possibilities for the governor's apparent push against the numbers, among them: The bigger and seemingly more impossible the task, the more the proponent has to stay on the attack.

"Politicians obviously do, from time to time, go on these sort of quixotic quests," Mooney said, but he added there could be a strategic underpinning to Rauner's methods.

Rauner's unrelenting pace may be one way of starting a conversation some people would rather not have at all and letting them know he's not about to drop it or go away.

But the governor can count and he certainly has some idea of the votes represented by the Democratic caucuses led by Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, and Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, each of who have decades of service in the Capitol.

And Rauner knows he is not making friends with union stalwarts.

After the attorney general's opinion were released, Michael Carrigan, head of the AFL-CIO in Illinois, was widely quoted as saying, "While Gov. Rauner continues his obsessive war on unions and the middle class, he just keeps running into huge roadblocks — like the law."

But some say don't write Rauner's strategy to date as without thought.

David Boaz, executive vice-president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, says he sees Rauner as a businessman and not a career politician.

Boaz said he doesn't think Rauner's using the governor's mansion as a stepping stone to higher office, but instead thinks Rauner believes Illinois has systemic economic problems he can help solve.

"What I see is that he is stumping the state and trying to persuade enough people to support his reforms so that, eventually, legislators will listen," Boaz said.

Rauner may believe "if he makes this a big enough issue, he can get Democrats to meet him halfway."

If Rauner doesn't get a return on his political capital immediately, he is still delivering the message on what he believes a central problem: Illinois' ability (or inability) to compete for jobs, both in the Midwest and nationally, Boaz said.

"I'm sure Rauner is thinking, 'I can't win this just in Springfield, but if I can get enough of a citizenry educated on this issue, I could make some progress.'"

Rauner also may be trying to further open the "Overton Window" when it comes to right-to-work theory in Illinois.

In political theory, the "window" is the range of ideas the public will accept and whether an idea lives or dies has less to do with its attractiveness to politicians than it does with the public's willingness to even consider it.

Anne Scheiber, an analyst at the Mackinac Center, a think tank in Michigan, said Rauner might indeed be pushing into mainstream public conversation what had once been nearly unmentionable in Illinois — right-to-work laws.

“There’s a line between public policy and politics and sometimes you have to move it slowly,” Scheiber said. “As much as Rauner says he wants a lot immediately, he may well know he is moving that line by increments.”

If Rauner is to make progress, he may have to take some heat and hold to his mantra of “I’ll take the arrows.”

Rauner’s been governor for a little more than two months, but opinion polls seem to indicate his head-on confrontation with unions isn’t helping his popularity.

A We Ask America poll in January had Rauner at a 52 percent approval rating. A poll by Chicago-based Ogden & Fry commissioned by the Illinois Observer had his approval rating at 43 percent in February.

Last week, the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute said the governor’s approval rating stood at 36.5 percent in a poll taken Feb. 28 to March 10.

David Yepsen, director of the Simon Institute, said Rauner certainly knows he must play a long-term game.

But, Yepsen added, he thinks Rauner has a short-term goal in mind, too, and he’s willing to take the pain now to possibly succeed later this legislative session.

The Democratically controlled legislature is not going to pass even one piece of legislation with so much as a touch of what the governor or the GOP might want unless Republican legislators put their “yes” votes on the board, Yepsen said.

At some point, Rauner will have to accept compromise and he will need to take the case for that compromise to Republicans and conservatives and show he’s done everything he possibly could for their cause.

“I give the man and his people credit for being smart,” Yepsen said.

How Rauner fares in the near term may depend on whether he can come to a deal with Democrats on the current budget gap (about \$1.6 billion) and what happens with the 2016 budget, which Rauner hopes to balance with \$6.2 billion in spending cuts and reforms.

It remains to be seen how Rauner’s hardline approach with union leaders — and the public’s response — will affect negotiations with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which has a contract due to expire June 30.