

SNG-totally in charge-11-12-18

Credit or blame now falls totally on Illinois Dems

By Jim Nowlan

As a result of the election Tuesday, Democrats are totally—I mean totally—in charge of Illinois government. Governor-elect J. B. Pritzker won a resounding victory and his party achieved more than 3/5ths majorities in both the House and Senate. And the Illinois Supreme Court continues to have a Democratic majority, as has been the case continuously since 1962.

This offers an unusual opportunity in Illinois for voters to place credit or blame, with some clarity, over the coming four years with one political party.

For most of the past half century, Illinois government has been divided, with Republicans often holding the governorship and Dems one or both chambers of the legislature. Even when Democrats controlled both the executive and legislative branches under Blagojevich and Quinn (2002-2014), these governors were often at odds with their legislative leaders.

In contrast, under parliamentary governments (think Canada and the United Kingdom), government is unified. Those nations do not have separate executives and legislatures; the chief executive (prime minister) is selected from within the party that controls the legislative branch (parliament).

So, it is easier for voters to assess blame or credit in parliamentary systems, as it will be in Illinois over the coming term of governor-elect Pritzker.

Legislatures in the U.S rarely lead. Indeed, Illinois House Speaker Mike Madigan’s power has been almost totally negative. He can block any piece of legislation, but he cannot necessarily pass anything he wants.

Then how should Pritzker lead? I think it is fair to say that expectations for Pritzker are modest at best. He didn’t overwhelm voters in the campaign with his knowledge of how to govern or of a vision for our state. This is probably a plus for Pritzker going forward.

My unsolicited guidance to the incoming governor:

“Do not think about how your actions will affect chances for a second term. Whatever you accomplish will be done in your first year in office. If you start off by equivocating because of how an action might affect voter support in the future, you are doomed to failure.”

Illinois has a careerist political culture. That is, many are in politics for a career and pension benefits. It is human nature for such folks to want to do things *for* voters (spending programs) and not do things *to* people (raise taxes). This has led Illinois into a deep fiscal hole.

Because of this human nature, the state has been running a fiscal deficit (spending more than taking in) of roughly \$2-3 billion a year on average for decades.

To address this fiscal problem, Pritzker has proposed a progressive income tax (higher rates for higher incomes). And while I share the concerns of some of my friends that the top 1 percent is snarfing nearly all new wealth and using much of the money to control elections—and thus democracy—the idea of a progressive income tax at this time in Illinois is terrible.

The Illinois business climate is viewed as worst in the nation by most business leaders, even with all our incredible economic strengths. The message that we are going to worsen that picture by piling more taxes onto entrepreneurs and job creators is destructive.

We can batten down the hatches on spending a bit tighter than we already have, to save some budget money, and tweak some taxes, without raising rates, to close the deficit. And we should build on that by laying out a plan for predictable budgets and taxes into the future, knowledge that business craves for its planning purposes.

Labor unions are expected to have a big say in the Pritzker Administration, because they pulled out all the stops to defeat Gov. Rauner. These leaders will have to be responsible. They should, for example, come to the table to help figure out how to stave off collapse of many municipal police and fire pension funds, as well as those for state employees.

In effect, I am calling for pragmatic steps to send signals that Illinois is, step by step, going to bounce back over time. Pie in the sky, grandiose plans that sound fetching but will fall of their own weight should be avoided at all costs.

The “Loyal Opposition” (Republican Party) should mount its own clear program for how it would solve our fiscal problems. And “cutting waste and corruption,” good as it sounds to voters who don’t understand our budget woes, won’t cut it.

Friends might observe that my suggestions will never be followed. So be it. Either way, voters will be able, more clearly than in the past, to assign credit or blame in coming elections.