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Who Ruined Illinois?

Everyone knows the state is a mess. It wasn't always that way.

However bad you think government might be," Bruce Rauner tells an audience, "it's worse." Rauner, a Republican governor seeking reelection, has plenty of reasons to portray his state as fundamentally broken. It's a way to explain why he hasn't been able to make the big changes in Illinois he promised when he ran four years ago. But it's also a great line for a knowing audience, and the crowd of call center workers in Moline, on the Mississippi River, laughs appreciatively.

Illinois voters have endured a lot from their state government. It hasn't been just one recession or one administration that's done the damage, either. It's been nearly a generation of political upheaval and dysfunction at the state Capitol. "Springfield has not been working for them, and I think voters, residents of Illinois are frustrated and angry. They should be," Rauner tells me after his Moline event. "Always unbalanced budgets. Not paying pensions. Not growing the economy and creating good-paying jobs. Massive corruption, cronyism and patronage. And four of my nine predecessors have gone to prison. It's a broken system."

Nearly everyone agrees with Rauner that the system is broken, but there's no consensus about why the system is failing. Pick your favorite culprit — legislators, unions, pensions — and you may have a case. But the one thing that current and former elected officials, academics and Springfield insiders cite most is perhaps the most painfully obvious: "Illinois government did work," says former Gov. Jim Edgar, a Republican who presided over what now looks to be the state's heyday in the 1990s. "But then we had bad luck with a couple of governors."

Illinois governors are powerful. They have many executive tools at their disposal that their counterparts in other states don't possess. As chief executives, they have the biggest say on the state's financial situation and the biggest platform to tend to the state's economy. But over the last two decades, public confidence, financial stability and economic growth in Illinois have all suffered.

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