The recall amendment

Law and Public Issues

By Ann M. Lousin

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My readers can read the amendment, explanation and arguments as well as I can. But I ask all of you to remember three Illinois governors as you make up your minds.

The first of the three governors was John Peter Altgeld, who was governor from 1893 to 1897. Soon after taking office, Altgeld pardoned three of the defendants convicted in the Haymarket Riots of 1886 because he believed their trial was unfair. He was vilified all over Illinois and consigned to political oblivion. Today he is honored as "the eagle forgotten." Surely Altgeld would have been recalled if that option had been available.

The second governor was Henry Horner, who was governor from 1933 to 1940. In the depths of the Depression, he could find no new source of state revenue except a variation on the sales tax. In private, the politicians agreed it was necessary, but in public many decried it. Citizens hated it. Some referred to the 2 percent sales tax as "two cents for the Jew in Springfield." Surely some legislators and voters would have signed a petition to recall Horner, forcing him to spend scarce energy and campaign resources to defend himself.

The third governor was one many of us remember: Richard B. Ogilvie, who was governor from 1969 to 1973. From his first weeks in office, he strove to get a state income tax passed. He and Mayor Richard J. Daley created a powerful bipartisan coalition to do so. Much of the opposition came from the Republican-dominated suburbs, whose residents helped to ensure Ogilvie’s loss to Dan Walker in 1972.

If the proposed recall provision had been available, I am certain that hundreds of thousands of angry taxpayers would have signed petitions to recall Ogilvie.

In February 1971, I began work for the legislature. I knew no legislator who seriously wanted to repeal the state income tax, which was already pumping money into the public schools. However, some legislators might have supported a petition drive to recall Ogilvie, who was unpopular in many areas.

Of course, the argument for the proposed recall amendment concentrates upon the sordid governorship of Blagojevich. The people, it is argued, should have had the right to stop his antics and corruption. But they had that chance in 2006. Instead the seemingly re-elected him. They left it to the legislature to make the decision to impeach, convict, and remove him.