So did Democratic legislators accomplish anything on the state budget crisis Wednesday other than protect their paychecks?

Probably not.

Instead, by whipping a gimmick- and debt-based budget through both legislative houses lickety-split, Democrats appear to be petty and self-serving, thus adding to their already poor public standing. And they may have weakened Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown’s hand and bolstered Republicans in the budget game.

The precise consequences are unclear because this is uncharted political territory. It's the first time in decades that the budget could be passed by a simple-majority vote, thanks to voters’ passage of Proposition 25 last year, rather than the long-standing two-thirds margin.

The ballot measure was backed by Democrats and their allies in public employee unions to remove Republican leverage on the budget. And to make it more attractive to voters, the proponents included a provision that legislators would lose their salaries and tax-free expense payments – about $400 per day per lawmaker in all – if they failed to pass a budget by June 15, the oft-ignored constitutional deadline.

Democrats exercised their new authority over the budget by passing one version in March and then another last week, but both assumed that billions of dollars in temporary income, sales and car taxes, first enacted two years ago and now expiring, would be extended.

Republicans have balked at placing taxes before voters to fulfill Brown’s campaign promise – although a few are willing to do it if Democrats accept pension and budget reforms.

Democrats ginned up their third version of the budget this week to meet the June 15 deadline. It involves some backdoor debt, some spending cuts, some rosy revenue projections from existing taxes, and some new revenue of dubious legality.
The package sailed through both houses on party-line votes after the usual exchanges of stale partisan rhetoric, but chances are that we'll see a fourth budget, and perhaps a fifth or sixth, before this year's edition of budget follies concludes.

This version appears to violate Brown's other pledge to balance the budget without gimmicks.

Brown still wants a deal with Republicans, and Wednesday's actions could box him in and force him to meet their demands.

While voting for the latest budget version – and denying that it was being moved to protect their paychecks – Democrats virtually begged Brown and Republicans to make a deal and prevent what they passed from actually taking effect.

"Maybe it can still get done," Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg said as he opened debate.

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