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Democrats fractured as they approach Illinois primary

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — Less than 14 months ago, Illinois Democrats were looking at a smooth road toward retaining total power in the next election.

They held every statewide office. Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich was controversial, but at least the party didn't have an ex-governor sitting in a federal prison as the Republicans did. Illinoisan Barack Obama was soon to be sworn in as president, and whatever Democrat was appointed to take over Obama's U.S. Senate seat would have almost two years to build an incumbency before the November 2010 elections.

Then federal agents arrested Blagojevich at his Chicago home on Dec. 9, 2008, on corruption charges, and the party's landscape was suddenly a lot bumpier.

Blagojevich's removal from office elevated Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn, a longtime political activist viewed by fellow Democrats as an abrasive outsider. Meanwhile, Blagojevich's bombshell appointment on his way out of office of U.S. Sen. Roland Burris became so controversial that Burris had to abandon any plans to run for election.

Now, instead of entrenched incumbents in the state's two top offices, the Illinois Democratic Party goes into the campaign season with an unelected governor and an open Senate seat. The situation has spawned the rare spectacle of a sprawling primary fight within the ruling party.

"Rod Blagojevich isn't all of it by any stretch, but he's certainly some of it," Chris Mooney, political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said of the Democrats' lost cohesion. "In that two-month circus (after Blagojevich's arrest) ... there were a lot of problems he caused and continues to cause."

Quinn, 61, maintains that his stewardship of the state in the tumultuous past year justifies his nomination Tuesday to run in the November general election.

He has ushered through an ambitious reform agenda and has proposed solving the state's huge budget deficit with a 50-percent state income tax hike that he clearly hopes will be viewed as politically courageous.

"I assumed this office under the most difficult of circumstances," Quinn reminded the Legislature and rest of Illinois during his Jan. 13 State of the State address. He boasted of a "year of reform" on his watch.

Quinn's opponent, state Comptroller Dan Hynes, maintains otherwise. Hynes' aggressive campaign has been waged partly on incremental policy differences between the two men. Quinn wants an across-the-board state income tax hike; Hynes wants to hike taxes only on people making \$200,000 or more.

But Hynes, 41, also has hammered at a more encompassing theme: That Quinn's administration has been scattershot and lacking focus at a time when Illinois crucially needs it to address the budget crisis. "In the one year Pat Quinn's been in office, we seem to be going backward," Hynes said in a Jan. 19 debate with Quinn.

The race has become bitter, and close. Hynes has hit Quinn over the administration's controversial early-release program of state prisoners last month. Quinn has accused Hynes of putting his campaign ahead of the good of the state, and recently opined: "He smiles in your face and stabs you in the back." Recent polls have found Quinn's former double-digit lead over Hynes evaporating into a dead heat.

In the party's five-way primary for the U.S. Senate, state Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias, 33, has been the front-runner in polls for the seat previously held by Obama. Giannoulias, who is from a Chicago banking family, is running on his record of managing the state's assets during the past four years. Giannoulias' strongest opponents include Cheryle Jackson, 44, former president of the Chicago Urban League, who is stressing economic issues while playing down her past role as Blagojevich's press secretary; and David Hoffman, 42, Chicago's former inspector general, who has focused on reform issues in the campaign. The Democratic Senate ballot is rounded out by Burr Ridge physician Robert Marshall, 66, and Chicago attorney Jacob Meister, 44.

In other contests, the historically maligned post of lieutenant governor has been bolstered by Quinn's reminder of where it can lead, drawing six Democratic

candidates. They are state Rep. Arthur Turner of Chicago; state Sen. Terry Link of Waukegan; state Sen. Rickey Hendon of Chicago; businessman Scott Lee Cohen of Chicago; electrician Thomas Michael Castillo of Elmhurst; and state Rep. Mike Boland of Moline.

The vacancy that Hynes leaves at the comptroller's office has drawn three Democratic candidates: State Rep. David Miller of Lynwood; former deputy state Treasurer Raja Krishnamoorthi of Hoffman Estates; and attorney Clinton Krislov of Wilmette.

Vying to replace Giannoulis in the treasurer's office are former state Rep. Robin Kelly of Matteson; and businessman Justin Oberman of Chicago.

Two incumbent Democrats, Attorney General Lisa Madigan and Secretary of State Jesse White, are running unopposed for renomination.

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