

Quinn, Stroger in usual spot as incumbents facing primary challenges

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Democratic incumbents in unusual spot

Quinn and Stroger trying to fight off slew of challengers and charges

By Rick Pearson Tribune reporter

Gov. Pat Quinn and Cook County Board President Todd Stroger find themselves in the rare spot of being incumbents battling to hang onto their jobs when voters decide in Tuesday's primary whether opponents' charges of incompetence are valid.

At the top of the ballot, Democratic and Republican voters will pick U.S. Senate candidates, setting the stage for an expensive, nationally-watched contest for the seat once held by President Barack Obama.

Attack ads dominate the three highest-profile races. Whether the monthlong barrage works may provide an indicator of the public's appetite — or distaste — for politics following a year in which ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich was impeached and Obama's first-year agenda has been marred by the recession and intense partisanship that belied his campaign promise of change.

With several contests in the tossup category, about the only thing more uncertain than the outcomes is whether the number on the thermometer Tuesday will exceed the voter turnout percentage for the first non-presidential February primary elections in Illinois. That factor puts the premium on better-organized candidates who have put together a get-out-the-vote ground game.

Traditionally, only die-hard partisans — about 28 percent of voters — cast ballots in mid-term primary elections. In 2006, only about a quarter of the state's registered voters turned out when Republicans had a heated battle for governor — and that primary was in March. Candidates expect that despite a rise in registered voters to 7.5 million, turnout will be even less than four years ago.

A total of 79,850 people voted early in Chicago and suburban Cook, election officials said. That's about double the total when early voting launched in the March 2006 primary. But it's down significantly from the more than 132,000 early ballots cast in the February 2008 primary, when favorite-son Obama was on the ballot.

The early election has led to a compressed, post-holiday month of campaigning. TV commercials among the candidates for governor have resembled mini-debates — one candidate attacks a rival, only to see the fire returned 30 seconds later when the next ad airs.

Mailboxes have been stuffed with political fliers and answering machines have been filling with automated telephone pitches.

"Do these candidates really think the average voter is going to be swayed by a stupid phone call?" said Gayle Siegert, an Elburn real estate agent who has been getting about a half-dozen phone calls a day — from Democrats and Republicans — to her unlisted home office phone.

"It is the junk mail (of telephone calls)," said Siegert, who said she jots down the name of the offending campaign and vows not to vote for the candidate. "In the course of life, this is a mere irritant. ... But it's something that's annoying and we find it offensive and rude."

To be sure, the candidates' rhetoric often has been blunt — not in describing what they'd do if elected, but in assailing their rivals' qualifications.

Quinn, who took office a year ago after the disgraced Blagojevich was ousted, has seen what was once an insurmountable lead vaporized. Comptroller Dan Hynes has not let up in his withering criticism of the unelected governor's competence in stumbling over an early inmate release program and an income-tax hike plan.

Hynes worked to pound home that theme in an ad showing the late Mayor Harold Washington saying he made a mistake hiring Quinn as his city revenue director. For a week, Quinn has contended Hynes' use of Washington is an attempt to create racial divisions. Quinn said the comptroller should be "ashamed" for the ad when Hynes' father sought at one time to run against Washington, the city's first African-American mayor.

On the Republican side, the six-way governor's race also has displayed stinging attacks but little clarity in terms of a front-runner.

The contest between state Sens. Bill Brady of Bloomington and Kirk Dillard of Hinsdale, former Attorney General Jim Ryan, former state GOP chairman Andy McKenna, Hinsdale transparency advocate Adam Andrzejewski and Chicago political consultant Dan Proft has been an attempt to label those with political and governmental experience as insiders and those who are outsiders as inexperienced.

In Cook, the Democratic board president primary represents a referendum on Stroger's first term following controversies over patronage hiring and his successful push for a hike in the county sales tax.

With polls showing deep voter dissatisfaction with Stroger, Democrats Circuit Clerk Dorothy Brown, Ald. Toni Preckwinkle, 4th, and Terrence O'Brien, president of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, each have pledged to do away with the remainder of the sales tax increase.

There also are the primaries for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by tarnished Blagojevich appointee Sen. Roland Burris. Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias has been the front-runner, but finds himself in a fluid contest with former Chicago inspector general David Hoffman and former Chicago Urban League president Cheryl Jackson.

Among Republicans, five-term North Shore U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk has held a commanding lead over several challengers who have failed to get into the double digits, percentage-wise, though there are still a sizable number of undecided voters.

Regardless, it may be difficult for any candidate to count on TV ads this weekend to put them over the top.

"There are candidates for a variety of offices on TV (and) plenty of commercials," said Christopher Mooney, a political science professor at University of Illinois-Springfield. "I've never seen this much clutter."

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