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Fringe candidates give voters a choice

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BY JOE BIESK

Pat Quinn or Bill Brady. Democrat or Republican.

Illinois voters looking for another option in this November's governor's race - say a candidate from a political party that hasn't had a governor federally indicted in the past decade - have some choices.

Call them political misfits, outsiders perhaps, but third-party candidates with last names such as Cohen, Green, Walls, White and Whitney are hoping a combination of voter outrage and a political implosion in Springfield could make this the year in Illinois when pigs fly.

Politically speaking, of course.

"I think that you're going to see a lot of surprises this November. I really do," Independent gubernatorial candidate Scott Lee Cohen said.

Probably not. But that's not to say the other candidates seeking Illinois government's top job aren't going to try - as remote as the odds may be - to make themselves political players.

Sort of.

Aside from Gov. Quinn and state Sen. Brady, only Green Party candidate Rich Whitney has a definite spot on the Nov. 2 ballot. Seven other gubernatorial hopefuls are facing electoral challenges that could bounce them from the race.

The motley crew of candidates is not as polished or rehearsed as Brady or Quinn. But they take what they consider to be serious stands on issues facing the state.

Legalize marijuana. Eliminate state-funded scholarships in exchange for low-interest student loans. Sell naming rights to state buildings. Think: the Microsoft James R. Thompson Center.

Candidates such as Cohen and Constitution Party candidate Michael White acknowledge they don't have all the answers. But, they say, they know how to find people who do. Whitney, who came in third in the 2006 election with more than 361,000 votes, wants a state-run bank.

In Illinois.

Whitney, of Carbondale, said neither Democrats nor Republicans can solve Illinois' problems.

"They have nothing to offer the voters of the state of Illinois. We do," Whitney said. "We are well poised to make a big breakthrough in 2010."

Running as a third-party candidate has its share of hurdles. Aside from being underfunded and left out of most debates, it's hard to get press coverage let alone get on the ballot, said White, of Lindenhurst.

"I knew those things would happen, and I decided that it was more important to run," said White, who is facing a ballot challenge.

Invitations to speak at political events are not a given enjoyed by Quinn or Brady, said Lex Green, a Libertarian Party candidate from Bloomington. But Green, who supports legalizing pot to help reduce gun violence, thinks voters may be more open-minded to alternative candidates this year.

"People are just disgusted, and they do have a choice. So we just have to get the message to them that yes you can come back to the polls, we'll give you a choice," Green said.

Cohen infamously won the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor in the February primary election but dropped out after damaging details emerged about his past. He thinks the timing is ripe for political outsiders.

"Now is the right time for a non-incumbent, a non-career politician - whether it's Democrat, Republican, third-party or independent. People are tired of these incumbents, these career politicians," he said.

That's not likely, said Kent Redfield, a political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Cohen's name recognition stemming from the lieutenant governor's debacle may translate into some votes if he stays on the ballot, Redfield said. And while Whitney may do better at the polls than he did four years ago, he'll at best only get enough votes to influence who wins between Brady and Quinn, he said.

Most people who vote for third-party candidates are protesting the mainstream candidates more than anything else, Redfield said.

"Usually most of the people voting for third-party candidates aren't doing it because they like the candidates or their policies," he said. "It's just a way of saying 'None of the above.' "

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