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POLITICAL MEMO

Picking Obama Successor Puts Spotlight on Governor

By [MONICA DAVEY](#)

CHICAGO — The task of filling President-elect [Barack Obama](#)'s seat in the Senate offers Gov. [Rod R. Blagojevich](#) of [Illinois](#) a rare chance to wield influence in Washington.

It also offers Mr. Blagojevich, a Democrat in his second term, the rare chance to focus public attention on something other than his litany of problems — a federal investigation into his administration, his icy standoffs with the Democratic-controlled State Legislature and his dismal approval rating (which, according to a Chicago Tribune survey last month, has sunk to 13 percent, worse even than some approval marks for President Bush).

“Compared to everything else, this is good publicity,” said Kent Redfield, a political scientist at the [University of Illinois](#) at Springfield. “Now it’s a matter of doing something on it that helps him politically. He needs to.”

Since Election Day, Mr. Blagojevich’s decision, assigned to him under Illinois law, has become this state’s political parlor game, one buried in layers deeper than just which Democrat will best guard the seat until the 2010 election.

Among the many political concerns: Should another African-American finish the term of Mr. Obama? Should the replacement be a caretaker with no expectations of re-election, or someone who dreams of staying on? And how might Mr. Blagojevich navigate the choice in such a way that might shore up some specks of support for his own political future?

Under state law, the governor has wide discretion in coming up with a successor. He need only pick someone who is a resident of the state, is at least 30 years old and has been a United States citizen for at least nine years.

The list of those rumored to be under consideration (including some, it seems, who have blatantly offered themselves up to the governor) grows longer each day. Mr. Blagojevich, who is turning to a group of close advisers for guidance, is expected to make a decision around Christmas.

Meanwhile, the calls keep coming.

“It’s unbelievable what this has become; he is hearing it from all sides,” said Lucio Guerrero, Mr. Blagojevich’s spokesman, who described some of the inquiries to the governor as amounting to people essentially dreaming aloud, “Boy, I’d be a good senator.”

Most often, political analysts here mention names like Representative [Jesse L. Jackson Jr.](#), long a Democratic congressman from Chicago’s South Side and the city’s southern suburbs and son of the civil rights activist; Tammy Duckworth, a veteran of the war in Iraq who lost her legs when her helicopter came under fire and who is now director of the state’s [Department of Veterans Affairs](#); [Valerie Jarrett](#), a close adviser to Mr. Obama and longtime ally of Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#) of Chicago (she told The Chicago Tribune on Wednesday that she was not interested in the appointment); and several other members of Congress from in and near Chicago, including Melissa Bean, Danny K. Davis, Luis V. Gutierrez and Jan Schakowsky.

Many of the most-discussed names on the list are loathe to discuss the possibility publicly, instead staying silent or issuing brief, generic statements.

“Now that Senator Obama has won the presidency, I would be honored and humbled to be appointed to succeed him in the [U.S. Senate](#),” Mr. Jackson said in a statement. “But, in the end, the decision rests with Governor Blagojevich, and I’m confident that he’ll make an appointment in the best interest of the state as well as the nation.”

That said, Mr. Jackson’s camp also commissioned and made public a poll that looked at what likely voters in Illinois thought about possible replacements for Mr. Obama. It showed Mr. Jackson, who has one of the most recognized names in Illinois politics, topping the list.

Ms. Duckworth, who was appointed to the veterans’ affairs job by Mr. Blagojevich after she lost a bid for Congress in 2006, said in an interview that she had not spoken to him about the Senate opening.

“If I were to be considered, I’d be deeply honored,” said Ms. Duckworth, who added that she would also be perfectly happy to stay put, “taking care of Illinois veterans.”

Ms. Duckworth, who remains a major in the Illinois National Guard, has also been mentioned as someone who might be offered a role in the Obama administration. She and Mr. Obama have not discussed such a possibility, she said, but she noted that whenever a commander in chief had summoned her, “I have grabbed my boots and headed over.”

While influential Democrats might usually weigh in as the governor makes such a decision, Mr. Obama has suggested that he will stay out of the matter. Mr. Blagojevich is also something of a loner in the political world here, having clashed over the years with Democratic leaders and wrestling with his public image.

Though Mr. Blagojevich came into office portraying himself as a reformer, his administration has come under federal scrutiny; by last month, 13 people had been indicted in a corruption probe into influence peddling. Mr. Blagojevich, who has left open the possibility of running for a third term in 2010, has not been charged with wrongdoing.

Mr. Blagojevich has indicated that he does not intend to appoint himself to the Senate seat, a seemingly far-fetched option, but one some of his severest critics seemed to think was possible. Some analysts still suggest he might consider appointing one of his potential rivals to remove them from a governor’s race — for example, Lisa Madigan, the state attorney general and daughter of Michael J. Madigan, the longtime speaker of the Illinois House; or Daniel W. Hynes, the state comptroller and son of Thomas Hynes, another powerful Illinois Democrat.

Some critics, only half jokingly, suggest that Mr. Blagojevich might want to consider [Patrick J. Fitzgerald](#), the United States attorney here for the past seven years who has overseen investigations into the administrations of Mr. Blagojevich and his predecessor, City Hall, the county jail and former Chicago police officers, among others.

Mr. Guerrero, his spokesman, said Mr. Blagojevich was focused on finding someone who would be a strong advocate for the residents of Illinois on matters like health care and jobs.

“The other stuff I don’t think is weighing on him as much as people make it out to be,” Mr. Guerrero said, chalking up Mr. Blagojevich’s low approval ratings to the bleak economic times. “When your name is on the door, you’re the one people are going to be talking about.”

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