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GOP sees opportunity to turn tables on Democrats

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By KATHLEEN FOODY - Lee News Service Writer | Posted: Sunday, January 31, 2010 3:00 am | No Comments Posted

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SPRINGFIELD — For the second time in eight years, a set of handcuffs may lead to political opportunity in Illinois.

Democrats retook the governor's seat in 2002 after more than 25 years of Republican control, partly due to a scandal surrounding former Gov. George Ryan, which later sent him to prison.

Now, Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich's December 2008 arrest and subsequent ouster from office may give Republicans an opportunity to turn the tables again. The primary is Tuesday.

Six candidates are vying to fill the top of the party's ticket in a state that has generally rejected the national Republican Party's hard-line positions. The GOP nominee will face the winner of a contentious Democratic primary battle between Gov. Pat Quinn, the former lieutenant governor who succeeded Blagojevich to the top post, and Comptroller Dan Hynes.

Debates between the contenders have put the state GOP's internal conflict between conservatives and moderates on full display, especially regarding tax policy as Illinois struggles with a historic \$12 billion budget deficit.

Bloomington state Sen. Bill Brady, 49; Hinsdale businessman Adam Andrzejewski, 40; Chicago political pundit Dan Proft, 37; and former Illinois GOP Chairman Andy McKenna, 53, of Chicago, have signed no-tax pledges during the campaign. Hinsdale state Sen. Kirk Dillard, 54, and former Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan, 63, of Elmhurst, have promised not to raise taxes but called a pledge gimmicky and said a governor should have all available options.

The eventual nominee will have the benefit of Blagojevich's upcoming trial and the state's dismal financial situation under Democratic control on the campaign trail. Still, the former director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, Mike Lawrence, said retaking the governor's office will be an uphill climb for Illinois Republicans.

"Republicans have a strong chance of recapturing the governorship, but they could blow it," said Lawrence, who was press secretary for former Republican Gov. Jim Edgar. "There's no doubt the (George) Ryan scandal was a huge factor in the Democrats winning the governorship in 2002, but they also had state demographics in their favor."

All six candidates have vowed to scan the state budget line by line and freeze or reduce spending. Some have suggested specific cuts, but more often they speak generically of "wasteful" spending.

Andrzejewski advocates cuts to municipalities. McKenna has targeted "pet projects" and consolidating state agencies. Proft supports spending caps and reforming education funding, and Brady has touted his anti-tax record in the legislature.

Ryan has said deep cuts will be necessary and supports reforming the state's pension system. Dillard has said Medicaid fraud eats up \$1 billion in state spending.

Candidates' personal ethics also have commanded attention.

Brady has criticized McKenna for including himself in an internal GOP poll of gubernatorial candidates. The state party has not punished its former chairman.

McKenna had a narrow lead in most recent independent polls. Opponents have criticized him for trying to buy the race using a barrage of TV ads.

Ryan and Dillard, the other candidates toward the top of recent polls, also have been in Brady's cross hairs: Ryan for his political and personal connection to fundraiser Stuart Levine, who pleaded guilty to federal corruption charges, and Dillard for appearing in a campaign commercial for then-presidential candidate Barack Obama.

Ryan has said he had no idea his law school classmate was involved in pay-to-play deals and drugs. Dillard has said the Obama ad was not an endorsement.

The Republican Senate primary has been far less contentious. Front-runner Mark Kirk, 50, a Chicago-area congressman, has held a wide fundraising and polling lead throughout the contest. His challengers polled in the single digits this month: retired district judge Don Lowery, 62, of Golconda; Chicago activist Andy Martin, 70; researcher Kathleen Thomas, 61, of Springfield; school consultant John Arrington, 49, of Harvey; and Hinsdale real estate developer Patrick Hughes, 40.

Kirk wavered from his usually moderate policy positions early in the race without any detriment to his primary campaign.

"Whatever the real Kirk is, I have no idea," University of Illinois at Springfield political scientist Kent Redfield said. "But the way he'll have to present himself to win (in November) is a moderate problem-solver."

The race for lieutenant governor has attracted six candidates: Springfield attorney Don Tracy, Edwardsville businessman Jason Plummer, chaplain Randy White of Hamilton, Carbondale mayor and Macon native Brad Cole, state Sen. Matt Murphy of Palatine and Orland Park School Board President Dennis Cook.

Former Illinois Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka of Riverside, Orland Park Trustee Jim Dodge and television personality William Kelly of Chicago are running for comptroller.

Running unopposed in the primary are state Sen. Dan Rutherford of Chenoa for treasurer, Northbrook attorney Steve Kim for attorney general and Illinois Human Rights Commission member Robert Enriquez of Aurora for secretary of state.

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