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Primary goal: Get voters to the polls

By Rick Pearson, Chicago Tribune

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constitutional offices, as well as state legislative, county board and judicial posts.

Since voter turnout is traditionally light in nonpresidential primary elections, the benefits of a strong street organization with get-out-the-vote skills can pay dividends -- particularly with a forecast of snow possible in the Chicago area.

Most of the statewide candidates sought to beat the snowfall Monday with multi-stop, fly-around rallies at airports across the state to demonstrate a last show of support. Many also greeted Chicago-area mass-transit commuters at busy Metra and "L" stops, expressing a sense of optimism that belied the attack ads that dominated the final days on the campaign trail.

"Primaries are horrible. I hate primaries," said Marie Ryan, wife of Republican governor candidate Jim Ryan, during a stop in Springfield. Citing the intraparty battling that pits neighbor against neighbor, she said, "I'd rather have a general election any day of the week."

The accelerated campaign season was the result of a law passed by the Democratic legislature that moved the primary election to February from March in an effort to help Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

Turnout in the 2008 primary was a high 41 percent, as it featured a favorite-son candidate on the Democratic primary ballot. But expectations are significantly lower for Tuesday, with many of the state's 7.5 million registered voters likely to avoid the polls -- at least some because casting a primary ballot requires declaring a partisan preference.

Though many campaigns began last summer, it has only been in the last two weeks that the public has been regularly bombarded by TV ads and automated telephone calls. Some estimates place the total TV spending by candidates in January at \$11 million to \$12 million in the expensive Chicago market.

But those figures are likely to grow by more than five times for the fall campaigns, fueled by the open Senate contest for the seat Obama once held, the White House's desire to keep the seat in Democratic hands and Republicans nationally looking to turn the contest into a referendum on the president's policies, the economy and disgraced former Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

Democrats Alexi Giannoulias, the state treasurer, and David Hoffman, the former Chicago inspector general, have waged a constant battle over who best would represent the party for the Senate on the November ballot. Cheryle Jackson, a former Chicago Urban League president and former Blagojevich spokeswoman, has largely stayed out of the fray.

Blagojevich's scandal-filled tenure and ouster are expected to be issues in the fall races. He faces a corruption trial in the middle of the election season that includes charges he tried to sell Obama's former Senate seat for personal gain. Democrats were further embarrassed when Blagojevich defied them and selected Roland Burris to fill the Senate vacancy -- setting off a scramble to find a viable candidate for 2010.

On the Republican side in the Senate race, five-term U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a social moderate, took a decided turn to the right in his first statewide campaign, attempting to counter a host of challengers trying to be the conservative alternative.

With Republicans looking to Illinois to replicate Sen.-elect Scott Brown's victory of the late Democratic Ted Kennedy's Senate seat, the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision allowing corporations and unions to spend more money on political races could exponentially increase TV ads heading into the fall Senate campaign.

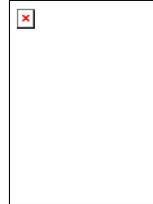
The contested tossup primary races for governor among Democrats and Republicans could also lead to national attention -- and money -- in the fall. If Democrats continue to control the legislature and the governor's office, they could draw new legislative districts for Congress and the General Assembly that could further marginalize Republicans.

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"The governor's race is going to be a tough race and clearly there's a lot at stake with redistricting," said Christopher Mooney, a political science professor at University of Illinois at Springfield. "The national GOP might bring money into the governor's race, though they almost never do. Democrats have a natural advantage, but Republicans have Blagojevich to run on. Both sides have strong themes they can run on."

Seeking the Republican nomination for governor are Ryan, the unsuccessful 2002 GOP nominee against Blagojevich and a former two-term attorney general; state Sens. Kirk Dillard of Hinsdale and Bill Brady of Bloomington; former state GOP chairman Andy McKenna; transparency advocate Adam Andrzejewski; and political consultant Dan Proft. McKenna, Dillard and Ryan have achieved some pre-election separation from Brady, the lone downstate candidate in the race, while Proft and Andrzejewski have sought to appeal to disaffected GOP conservatives.

In Cook County, Democratic voters will decide the fate of first-term incumbent Todd Stroger amid controversies surrounding patronage hiring and his support for a county sales tax increase. In DuPage County, voters also will be selecting nominees to replace Republican Bob Schillerstrom as chairman of the County Board. Schillerstrom abruptly ended a run for governor last week.

One new wrinkle for primary voters this year is a requirement that scanned paper ballots be returned if no choice is made for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, comptroller or treasurer. Voters who "undervote" on their ballot have the option to tell the election judge to override the rejection if they don't want to cast a vote in any of those races, or they have the option of casting a vote in any race they missed.

Ray Long contributed to this report.

--Rick Pearson

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