



Cohen controversy renews debate over value of the job

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The controversy surrounding Scott Lee Cohen's nomination and subsequent withdrawal from the race for Illinois lieutenant governor has renewed the debate over whether the position is needed at all.

The job has few official duties other than to wait for the governor to die or resign, and critics say that vague job description is reason enough to eliminate it. Moreover, they question the merits of a system that can affix a political newcomer - like Cohen or, for that matter, GOP nominee Jason Plummer - to a candidate for governor whether he or she likes it or not.

Kent Redfield, a political analyst and retired professor at University of Illinois at Springfield, said changing the way the nominee is selected is the ideal way to prevent a Cohen-like scenario from unfolding again. Under current law, lieutenant governor nominees are selected independently of the candidate for governor, yet they run on a joint ticket in the general election.

Running as a team in the primary election, Redfield said, would prevent it from being "just luck if the two know each other and get along."

"We ought to probably fix it statutorily," Redfield said. "We can't make it worse, and it might make it better."

Paul Green, director of Roosevelt University's School of Policy Studies, agreed the way the lieutenant governor nominees are chosen should be revamped or the position should simply be abolished. The lieutenant governor, Green added, does nothing but sit in the "on-deck circle of power just waiting to get his or her chance at bat."

State Sen. Matt Murphy, a Palatine Republican who ran unsuccessfully for his party's nomination for the post, said during the campaign that he'd be open to eliminating the position as a way to rein in the cost and size of state government. During a debate with other GOP lieutenant governor hopefuls, Murphy said he "would be open to this being the last term of lieutenant governor because, frankly, we're going to have to make some tough calls."

Eliminating the position, though, is not as easy as changing how it is filled. The job is established by the Illinois Constitution, so it could not be eliminated without a constitutional amendment. The selection process, however, is set out in the state's Election Code, and that can be changed by the legislature.

Calling it "a superfluous, do-nothing office," state Rep. Bill Mitchell, a Republican from Decatur, sponsored a constitutional amendment last year that would abolish the post. Although he said he admires Plummer as his party's nominee for lieutenant governor, Mitchell said he wouldn't hesitate to tell him the office isn't necessary.

"Illinois gets along just fine without this office," Mitchell said. "This chaos in the Democratic Party just points out that this office, in my opinion, we can do without. We need to start streamlining government. This would be a great place to start."

But he will have more than Plummer to convince of that point. His proposal was sent to the Rules Committee, where it remains with no immediate prospects for a vote.

The lieutenant governor, paid \$135,669 a year, commands an office budget of roughly \$2.5 million dollars with 29 staff members. Abolishing the office would make only a small dent in the state's massive \$13 billion budget deficit, but Mitchell insists each cut adds up.

Forty-five states have lieutenant governors, according to the National Lieutenant Governors Association, an interest group that advocates the importance of the office throughout the country. States without the position name either their secretary of state or senate president as first in line of succession.

The association contends that having a lieutenant governor is necessary because the post presents a clearly understood line of succession much like the president and vice president on the national stage.

"It seems to work quite well. It's what people are most familiar with," said Julia Hurst, the group's executive director.

The lieutenant governor

Those who support it say: The position presents a clearly understood line of succession behind the governor

Those who oppose it say: The job has no clearly defined duties and can't be justified in hard economic times. Other constitutional officers could be identified as the governor's replacement.

Salary: \$135,669 a year

Budget: \$2.5 million, including a staff of 29

How to abolish: The position is created in the Illinois constitution and cannot be eliminated without a constitutional amendment. Legislation introduced last summer to create such an amendment is stalled in the House Rules Committee.

How to change: The system for identifying a lieutenant governor candidate is governed by the state's Election Code, so that process could be changed by the legislature.

Elsewhere: Forty-five states have a lieutenant governor. Eighteen elect the governor and lieutenant governor separately, five of them from opposite parties. The rest, including Illinois, elect them as a team.

Source: Daily Herald reporting, National Lieutenant Governors Association