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Pawnbroker Campaigns for Redemption

After Tearful Exit Under Pressure From Illinois Democrats, Cohen's New Bid Could Spoil Party's Chances in Governor's Race

By DOUGLAS BELKIN

CHICAGO—The last time Illinois voters got a good look at Scott Lee Cohen he was sitting in a bar, choking back tears. But if he has his way, Democratic leaders might be crying come November.

Mr. Cohen withdrew as the Democratic nominee for lieutenant governor in a weepy February press conference at a local tavern. Party leaders had pressured him to quit following news reports of his messy divorce and 2005 arrest on charges of assaulting a former girlfriend, who had separately pleaded guilty to a prostitution charge.

Now Mr. Cohen is running again, this time for governor as an independent. The millionaire pawnbroker who has never held public office is given little chance of winning, but analysts say his deep pockets make him a potential spoiler of Democrats' hopes.



John Gress for The Wall Street Journal

Scott Lee Cohen, who is running for Illinois governor as an independent, campaigns at a parade Saturday in Chicago.

Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn, one of those who pressured Mr. Cohen to step aside, is in a tough race with Republican Bill Brady. Mr. Brady led by double digits in a recent poll, but analysts expect the race in this predominantly Democratic state to tighten. They say Mr. Cohen could tip the election to Mr. Brady if he siphons even a small portion of support from Gov. Quinn.

"Am I angry at how I was treated by the party? Yeah, I was," Mr. Cohen said recently. "Am I running because of some sort of vendetta? No."

Part of Mr. Cohen's strategy is to appeal to African-Americans, who generally vote overwhelmingly for Democrats.

"If he starts making inroads among blacks...that's just a nightmare" for Gov. Quinn, said Kent Redfield, a political scientist at the University of Illinois, Springfield.

Analysts also cite the potential for a backlash against status-quo politics in Illinois following the trial of Rod Blagojevich, the state's second straight former governor to face corruption charges—one from each party.

According to recent polls, one in five Illinois voters either backs a candidate other than those from the two major parties or is unsure whom to support. Such surveys have not included Mr. Cohen, who gathered over 130,000 signatures to get on the gubernatorial ballot.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Brady said "no matter who is on the ballot, Bill Brady will talk about the issues of importance to the citizens of Illinois."

A spokeswoman for Mr. Quinn declined to comment. Last month Mr. Quinn said Mr. Cohen's character "leaves a lot to be desired."

Mr. Cohen put \$2 million of his own money into his campaign for lieutenant governor and is self-funding his race for governor. He said he was running because he had the ability to bring businesses back to Illinois, and the state needed outsiders like him to shake things up.

Paul Green, director of the Roosevelt University School of Policy Studies in Chicago, said Mr. Cohen was "an unguided political missile." But with both major party candidates "running such weak campaigns, if he spends the money he could make a splash," Mr. Green said.

During a recent campaign stop in Chicago, Mr. Cohen bought breakfast for 30 African-American ministers and told them Democrats had taken their support for granted. Mr. Cohen supports proposals to bring more Wal-Mart Stores Inc. outlets and manufacturing jobs to black neighborhoods. "Give me a chance," he told the ministers.

Pastor Andre Smith of First Bethel Church said he was impressed. "I believe everybody should get a second chance," he said.

Mr. Cohen, 44 years old, dropped out of high school at 18 to run the family pawn shop after his father suffered a heart attack. Mr. Cohen later opened two more stores and began buying and selling commercial properties.

The episode that derailed Mr. Cohen's candidacy for lieutenant governor stems from 2005, when he was going through a divorce and, he admits, using steroids for body-building. He began dating a 24-year old masseuse, Amanda Eneman, who later moved into his apartment on Chicago's Gold Coast near Lake Michigan.

Mr. Cohen was arrested later that year on domestic-battery charges when Ms. Eneman accused him of pushing her against a wall and holding a knife to her throat. Mr. Cohen denied the allegations and the charges were dropped when Ms. Eneman failed to show up for a court date, police said. Around that time, she separately pleaded guilty to a prostitution charge, according to court records.

Ms. Eneman couldn't be reached for comment, but earlier this year she issued a statement through her attorney saying she didn't believe Mr. Cohen was "fit to hold any public office."

Earlier

[Democrat Exits Illinois Lt. Governor Race](#)
(02/07/10)

[Illinois Democrats Pressure Nominee](#)
(02/06/10)

steroids were partly to blame for his behavior.

After Mr. Cohen beat four state lawmakers to win the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor in February, the details of his arrest, as well as separate domestic-abuse allegations contained in his divorce papers, dominated news coverage. He went on local television with his ex-wife to tell his side of the story. His ex-wife suggested the

"I thought I would explain everything and it would go away," he said.

Instead, Democratic leaders continued to pressure him to resign.

Mr. Cohen said that within a week after his withdrawal from the race, he realized he had made mistake. On May 3, he announced his independent bid for governor.

"I am not perfect, but I am honest," Mr. Cohen told reporters at the time. "Illinois needs honesty more than perfection."

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