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# Illinois lieutenant governor: They're ready to lead

By *The Associated Press*

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CHICAGO – The next lieutenant governor of Illinois, a place that recently got a lesson in how quickly the "light gov" can be thrust into leadership, most likely will be a government novice who owes the job partly to family connections.

The Democratic nominee is a one-term city council member chiefly known as the daughter of a U.S. senator. The Republican is a 28-year-old who has never held office and won the nomination with the help of his family fortune.

Illinois' last lieutenant governor, Pat Quinn, found himself in charge after Rod Blagojevich was indicted for political corruption and booted from office. This year, voters will decide whether to change the state Constitution so they can recall undesirable governors before their terms are up.

Both Carbondale Democrat Sheila Simon and Edwardsville Republican Jason Plummer insist they're ready to step in and lead the state, including managing the biggest budget crisis in Illinois history.

Plummer beat out five other Republican candidates in the primary, spending more than \$1 million of his and his family's money in the process. He's a vice president in the family business, RP Lumber.

Simon, 49, is the daughter of late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon, who once served in the state's lieutenant governor post. Sheila Simon was selected by party leaders, not voters, after the original nominee dropped out over allegations of domestic violence and steroid use.

The next governor faces huge challenges: Not only the historic budget deficit, but slow job growth, troubled schools, aging roads and bridges. Chicago will have a new mayor. Legislators will be battling over political districts and budget cuts.

Even experienced politicians might find it daunting. Is someone with little or no experience up to the job?

"It's a fair question," Plummer said. "If, God forbid, something were to happen to a Gov. (Bill) Brady, I'm absolutely ready to step in and continue with the promises and commitments we've made in this campaign."

Plummer said his experience in hiring and managing people at the family lumber business has prepared him to run Illinois, the country's fifth-largest economy. Business is "a background where you have to perform or you don't make it," he said.

Simon also insists her experience, both personal and professional, has prepared her for the highest office in the state. She's a wife and mother, a former prosecutor and a former member of the Carbondale city council. She served on a state ethics panel after Blagojevich was ousted and has taught law at Southern Illinois University for 10 years.

"I have background in government after being on the city council for four years," she said. "There's nothing like the state budget and nothing like the city of Chicago, but the processes are the same."

Simon, whose oldest daughter isn't much younger than Plummer, said age and experience do make a difference.

"I think of myself at 28 and ... back then, I thought that I really knew a lot," Simon said. "I'm old enough now to know that I have limits."

Former Lt. Gov. Bob Kustra, who served under Gov. Jim Edgar, agreed with the idea that, while governmental experience is helpful, a background in leadership and managing people can also make a good candidate.

"I think people can run for public office today who bring a very competent set of skills and experience from other walks of life, whether it be business, education or health care," said Kustra, who's now president of Boise State University.

While he said his 10 years in the Illinois General Assembly helped him in the lieutenant governor's office, he "wouldn't dismiss a candidate who brings a different set of experience to the table."

But running a multibillion-dollar enterprise like the state of Illinois requires certain skills that are best honed in government, said Mike Lawrence, former director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University.

"Ideally you would want people with more experience in that position, but that's not the case this year," Lawrence said. "We could hope that whoever gets elected in November will grow in the office and would not be required to step in until she or he had more experience."

Quinn was the first lieutenant governor to become governor in more than 40 years. Other than stepping in if the governor can no longer serve – or, like Blagojevich, is kicked out – the lieutenant governor has few responsibilities.

The office oversees the Illinois Main Street program and chairs the Illinois River Coordinating Council, the Governor's Rural Affairs Council and the Illinois delegation of the Great Lakes Commission.

The state constitution doesn't provide for filling a vacancy in the lieutenant governor's office, which is why no one has replaced Quinn. Some critics call for eliminating the post and letting another official, like the attorney general, take over if there's a vacancy in the governor's office.

"The governor is an exceptionally important position in the United States these days," said Chris Mooney, political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "Far less damage can be done by a senator or a congressman than by a governor."

Neither Plummer nor Simon has offered specifics on how to balance the state's budget, the most pressing issue looming for the incoming administration. Both spoke generally about the importance of job creation and providing opportunities for small businesses but didn't give concrete examples of how they'd accomplish those goals.

Simon hopes to become the governor's point person on education and to focus on the state's response to domestic violence. Plummer is chairman of the Brady campaign's border community task force, and he's been traveling around the edges of the state to hear from business owners and farmers who compete with Illinois' neighbors.

Plummer and Simon aren't the only candidates for lieutenant governor. None of the others have any more experience.

Baxter Swilley, a 35-year-old community organizer, is running alongside independent gubernatorial candidate Scott Lee Cohen, who was originally the Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor but withdrew.

Don Crawford, the Green Party candidate, is a 54-year-old high school teacher who's lived in the same southern Illinois town for most of his life.

Libertarian candidate Ed Rutledge is a 38-year-old Chicagoan with a background in finance.

"I'm not a professional politician, I'm a professional number cruncher," Rutledge said.

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