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Illinois' unique campaign concludes

BY KEVIN McDERMOTT • kmcdermott@post-dispatch.com > 217-782-4912 | Posted: Sunday, October 31, 2010 12:00 am

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. • Illinois heads for the polls Tuesday to close one of the most unpredictable election seasons ever.

The only certainty is that neither of the top two offices — governor or U.S. Senate — will be won by anyone who has previously won either post. There is no elected incumbent on the ballot.

That unusual twist comes as the result of two national political stories in the last two years that had Illinois at their epicenters: the rise of Barack Obama, and the fall of Rod Blagojevich.

"You could say this is a unique moment in Illinois electoral history because of what has happened in the last two years," said Mike Lawrence, a longtime state politico and former director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University. "We've had a governor impeached and a senator elevated to the White House. The circumstances are very unusual."

Obama's election to the presidency in November 2008, and Blagojevich's arrest a month later, opened up the state's two top positions, starting one of the most hard-fought and, at times, dirty campaign seasons in memory.

The governor's race pits Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn — who ascended to the office 21 months ago to fill the vacancy left by Blagojevich — against Republican state Sen. Bill Brady of Bloomington. Vying for the Senate seat currently held by Democratic Sen. Roland Burris are Democratic state Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias and Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk.

The five other statewide offices (lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, treasurer and comptroller) are also up for election Tuesday, as well as all 19 congressional seats, all 118 state House seats and about a third of the 59 state Senate seats.

Blagojevich was impeached in January 2009, after his arrest and indictment on corruption charges. He was replaced by Quinn, who was then lieutenant governor but was better known for his decades as a populist organizer who railed against many in state government.

Initially welcomed by both parties as a reformer, Quinn created controversy by calling for an income tax increase to address the huge budget deficit he'd inherited. Then he faced criticism when he was unable to get it approved by a Legislature controlled by his own party. He narrowly overcame a Democratic primary challenge in February from state Comptroller Dan Hynes to win the party nomination for a full term.

Meanwhile, the perceived wounding of the Democrats' chances because of the Blagojevich scandal led to a free-for-all in the GOP gubernatorial primary, with a crowded field of Republicans on the February ballot.

The nomination ultimately went to Brady, a longtime legislator and outspoken social conservative in a generally moderate state who wasn't even on most politicos' top-three lists going into the primary. But with the upstate vote badly split among several strong candidates, and Brady left virtually unchallenged in his downstate base, he picked up about 20 percent of vote — enough to beat runner-up and fellow state Sen. Kirk Dillard of Hinsdale by 406 votes.

"It's a very unusual (governor's) race because you have two candidates who weren't supposed to be there," said Kent Redfield, political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Quinn is running on his accomplishments, including passage of new ethics rules in the wake of Blagojevich; the partial restructuring of the state's employee pension system, which is expected to lessen (though not eliminate) a massive long-term shortfall there; and the approval of a state infrastructure rebuilding plan that will generate construction jobs statewide.

Brady is running on a vow to not raise personal taxes, to cut some business taxes, and to institute other business-friendly policies that he says will jump-start the state's economy. He has stressed financial and economic issues, while playing down his conservative views on abortion and other social issues.

The discourse has gotten personal and bitter at times.

"He's not willing to face up to the tough decisions a governor must make," Brady said of Quinn on Thursday, as the two sat side by side in a television studio in a Chicago for what was probably their final direct debate. "Gov. Quinn has not been able to rein in state spending. ... Illinois is spending out of control."

Quinn responded: "Our problems did not begin the day I lifted my hand off the Bible when I got sworn in. Sen. Brady was in Springfield for 17 years, he voted on 17 budgets." Quinn noted that he had already cut \$3 billion from the state budget. "We're in a tough situation, and you have to have a governor who gets us through it, and I have," he said.

Neither candidate has specified how he would pull Illinois out of budget deficit that could reach an unprecedented \$15 billion in the next fiscal year, which is equal to well over half the state's general revenue fund.

Quinn seeks to raise the state's 3 percent income tax rate to 4 percent to fund schools, but hasn't specified how he would keep the rest of government afloat. Brady has vowed a 10 percent across-the-board spending cut, but hasn't specified beyond that how he would address the deficit.

In the final weeks of campaigning, Quinn has traversed the state announcing new infrastructure and community projects, most funded by the capital plan that he pushed through the Legislature after taking office — a key component in his argument that he is laying groundwork for jobs and economic recovery in the state.

A week ago he was stumping around Southern Illinois — the latest of several stops in what polls indicate is Brady territory — touting some \$40 million in infrastructure work for schools in Carterville, Pinckneyville and Cairo. Last week, he was in Joliet to award \$32 million for a new public transit center.

"Investment in passenger rail supports our state's continued economic recovery by creating jobs and stimulating development," Quinn said in an accompanying statement that hits his campaign themes.

Brady, too, has spent time lately in enemy territory — Chicago — wooing female voters who, in Illinois as elsewhere, are more likely than men to be swing voters. He met with the Federation of Women Contractors in Chicago last week, and called their industry the "heart blood" of the state's economy. Brady has also aired ads lately on African-American radio stations in Chicago, indicating a willingness to go after traditionally Democratic votes.

But his staples have still been downstate rallies with big-name conservatives such as former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee in Marion and, a week ago, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich in Collinsville. Brady used that event to counter Quinn's jobs theme by touting data that "35 states in this nation have created more jobs in the last two months."

Quinn's running mate is Sheila Simon, a law professor at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and daughter of the late Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill. Brady's running mate is Jason Plummer of Edwardsville, whose family owns the RP Lumber chain. Lieutenant governor candidates in Illinois run separately from governor candidates in the primaries, but the two are presented as a team in the general election.

Also on the ballot for governor Tuesday are independent Scott Lee Cohen, Lex Green of the Libertarian Party and Rich Whitney of the Green Party.

Obama's election to the presidency opened a Senate vacancy that, by law, is filled by the governor's appointee. But before the governor at the time, Blagojevich, could fill that vacancy, he was arrested on corruption charges, in December 2008.

As the state's political system prepared to impeach Blagojevich, he stirred national controversy by making the Senate appointment anyway. His appointee, former Illinois Attorney General Roland Burris, was almost immediately caught up in allegations of an insider deal with Blagojevich to win the appointment.

Burris currently holds the seat but, enmeshed in controversy, he isn't seeking a full term on Tuesday. The major-party nominees who emerged from the February primaries were Giannoulas, an Obama friend and protégé from a wealthy Chicago banking family and state treasurer; and Kirk, a congressman from the Chicago area with a reputation as a moderate.

With both candidates generally in line with their national parties' views on major issues, the race between them has focused largely on character issues. Kirk has attacked Giannoulas for his family bank's business dealings with mob figures while

Giannoulas worked there; Giannoulas has attacked Kirk for allegedly inflating his military service record.

Also on the ballot for senator are Green Party candidate LeAlan Jones and Libertarian Mike Labno.

Every statewide office and both chambers of the Legislature are currently controlled by Democrats. The Democratic majority in the Senate is virtually guaranteed to remain intact, as not all the seats are up for election, but Republicans are widely expected to make inroads.

In the House, there is the mathematical possibility of a Republican takeover, though it's generally considered unlikely. "I would be surprised, but I wouldn't be shocked," said Redfield.