

Will the Madigans Launch a Primary Challenge to Quinn?

Written by Rich Miller

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Back in 2005, I asked House Speaker Michael Madigan why he didn't just run somebody against Governor Rod Blagojevich in the '06 Democratic primary if he was so upset at the way Blagojevich was running things.

"I did that once, and it led to 26 years of uninterrupted Republican rule," Madigan cracked.

In the early 1970s, a very young Representative Madigan was Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley's point man in the House against Daley's arch-nemesis, Democratic Governor Dan Walker. That legislative opposition led directly to Daley's forces beating Walker in the 1976 primary. Their candidate went on to lose to Republican Jim Thompson, and the GOP held onto the governor's job until Blagojevich won the 2002 campaign.

I told you that story to give you an idea how Madigan may be sizing up next year.

Keep in mind that no matter what else you may read, the speaker won't make the final decision about whether his daughter, Attorney General Lisa Madigan, will run for governor. Ms. Madigan has a mind all her own. The elder Madigan will have significant input, but he won't have any sort of veto power. Still, it's worthwhile to look at how both Madigans are thinking right now and what

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options they confront.

Speaker Madigan is a man of unusually strict habits. When he finds something that works, he sticks with it forever, like having an apple every day at exactly noon. And he almost always shuns things that didn't work. The hard lesson Madigan learned about that 1976 primary has stuck with him ever since: Avoid primaries against sitting Democratic governors.

Had Blagojevich survived, a primary against him next year would've been a different matter. The race would've gotten messy and divisive, but Blagojevich's horrific unpopularity made him an easy mark. If the Madigans try to beat Governor Pat Quinn in the 2010 primary, however, all heck could break loose.

Quinn can be slammed for running with Blagojevich twice and even defending Blagojevich after his ethics were questioned. Governor Quinn's new tax-hike proposals are also extremely easy targets.

Quinn has never raised much money, and when he did it was at least partly because of his ties to Blagojevich. He had just \$83,000 in the bank at the start of this year, compared to about \$3.5 million for Ms. Madigan.

Quinn is not the most astute campaigner and doesn't seem prepared at all for the February primary, as evidenced by his repeated failed calls to move the primary date to June or September. His campaign committee filed for a name change from "Taxpayers for Quinn" to "Quinn for Illinois," and then back to "Taxpayers for Quinn" within one 24-hour period last month. "Professional" is not a word anyone would use to describe his campaign style or apparatus.

So he's definitely beatable in the primary, but a Quinn loss to Ms. Madigan could divide the party and cause enough controversy that the Democrats would suffer badly in the fall. If Lisa Madigan does beat Quinn, her father's powerful hold over the Democratic Party will likely become one of the most important November issues. The House speaker and state party chair doesn't want to give up either job, yet he may have little choice but to step down from one or both if he becomes the biggest obstacle to her victory.

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And then there's the question of whether Lisa Madigan really wants to be governor. She wanted nothing more than to prevent a third Blagojevich term, but that primary motivation was removed from office. Madigan has a young family, and she's young herself. She clearly loves being attorney general. There's plenty of time to wait.

The other side of the equation is whether Quinn can fend off the Republicans next November. Tax hikes everywhere, Blagojevich's humiliation, the ill legacy of total Democratic control, and Quinn's shortcomings as a candidate all add uncertainty. If Quinn is judged incapable of holding onto his post, the Democrats may have to go with someone else, despite the inherent dangers.

There are a kabillion factors to consider here, and the Madigan clan is best known for looking at all of the options before making any move, big or small.

On the one hand, we have Dan Walker and the noontime apple. On the other is everything else.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and TheCapitolFaxblog.com