

Gap Narrowing in Illinois' Gubernatorial Race

Written by Rich Miller

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With the primary election just around the corner, just about everybody I know has asked me who I think will win the various races.

I try to avoid making win/loss predictions, and this campaign season is a prime example for why everybody should just sit back and wait to see what the voters do.

For instance, a month or so ago, Comptroller Dan Hynes looked to most longtime political observers - including me - like he was toast. Stick a fork in him. Sayonara, dude. Pretty much everybody had given up on him.

Hynes had spent millions of dollars and hadn't closed the gap between himself and Governor Quinn. His message at the time - that Quinn's tax increase proposals were bad for the middle class - just wasn't working. He trailed Quinn in every poll by anywhere from 20 to 30 percentage points.

Then, of course, Quinn's administration was hit with a scandal that has not stopped reverberating. His Department of Corrections director secretly let loose hundreds of violent prison inmates before their scheduled release dates in order to save a few bucks. Quinn first said he knew about it, then said he didn't know about it, then blamed it all on his director, whom the governor has since adamantly and repeatedly refused to fire.

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Because Quinn wouldn't fire the guy, Quinn effectively took ownership of the scandal for himself. If he had fired the director, Quinn could've blamed everything on an underling and moved forward with some media-friendly prison reforms. But since Quinn refused to budge, Quinn was the one who got the blame - because blame always moves upwards if no actions are taken. And when some of those early released prisoners committed violent crimes after they were given their get-out-of-jail-free cards, that blame became intense.

Until that point, I don't think most voters viewed Quinn as a standard incumbent. He basically fell into the job when Rod Blagojevich was arrested, impeached, and removed from office. So, I think, people were more than willing to cut Quinn as much slack as possible. That's a big reason why Hynes' early attacks didn't work. Quinn wasn't viewed as culpable for the state's many problems (he inherited the budget deficit disaster from Blagojevich and George Ryan, after all), and people gave him points for trying, even if they disagreed with him (like when he proposed that big tax hike).

But the combined bumbles of the early release plan and Quinn's refusal to hold anyone truly accountable has, in my mind, convinced folks that he is now an incumbent just like every other incumbent. And that's a dangerous place to be in a year shaping up as toxic for incumbents.

So, it's no surprise at all that Quinn's own polling showed last week that he was leading Hynes by just a few points and was fading fast. Suddenly, Hynes is a contender.

Hynes began running a new TV ad late last week that featured the late Chicago Mayor Harold Washington explaining on video why he fired Quinn from a top job in the 1980s. The video is certainly dramatic, but it's also right on topic. Washington basically says in the video that Quinn was an incompetent showboater. It's almost as if Washington is speaking this week, not 20-odd years ago.

It's not easy to defeat a sitting governor in a party primary. The governor controls so many of the party's strings, so much of the money and can command so much media attention for every little thing he does that it's tough for an opponent to compete. Add in the super-early February 2 primary date this year - which has shortened the campaign season by six or seven weeks - and it's just about impossible.

So, while I will follow my tradition and not make a prediction about who will win this race, I will say this: The Hynes campaign has done just about everything right since the first of the year and Quinn has done just about everything wrong since mid-December. If Hynes doesn't win, it was never in the cards.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter, and TheCapitolFaxBlog.com