

Polling Shows a Path for Democratic Challenge to Quinn

Written by Rich Miller

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“We’ve got to activate the taxpayers of Illinois,” Governor Pat Quinn told reporters after his legislative special session failed to move any sort of pension reform forward. He promised to lead a “grassroots” effort to push legislators to pass a reform bill.

But will the voters actually listen to him? A recent poll conducted for Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle found that 54 percent of the county’s likely voters disapprove of Quinn’s handling of the public-employee-pension issue. Just 29 percent approved.

Keep in mind: This is Cook County we’re talking about. It leans strongly Democratic. Quinn’s job-approval numbers are radically upside-down throughout the state, but 54 percent of Cook County voters still disapprove of how he’s doing his job in office. So if he’s getting this sort of pension-issue disapproval in Cook, of all places, it’s most likely a whole lot worse elsewhere.

The numbers were a tiny bit better for Quinn among Chicago voters, with 32 percent approving of his handling of the pension issue and 52 percent disapproving. Among the county’s suburban voters, however, only 24 percent approved while 57 percent disapproved. Among African-American voters, 35 percent approved and 54 percent disapproved. Among white voters, just 25 percent approved and 55 percent disapproved.

Also, this poll of 600 likely voters was taken August 1 through 6, which was before the special-session debacle. Quinn did not emerge from that pension session looking competent in the least. It was his special session. He called it. He ran the show. And he got nothing for his troubles except defeat.

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And Quinn's statements about attempting to activate the grassroots merely play into the notion, pushed by Republicans, that the House vote to eliminate future General Assembly pensions and reform current pensions was nothing more than a political act. It's clear that the governor, at least, will be attempting to inject himself into campaigns to convince voters that Republicans who voted against the bill were acting in self-interest.

You might be wondering why Preckwinkle's campaign shared those negative poll numbers about her own party's governor. After all, Preckwinkle told *Crain's Chicago Business* in July that she planned to run for re-election and wouldn't challenge Quinn in a Democratic primary.

But her thinking appears to be evolving. While the county-board president still hopes that Quinn will get his act together, her campaign says, she's not ruling out a primary bid. The polling shows the way forward.

Preckwinkle's poll shows that her job-approval ratings are stronger than even President Barack Obama's. She has an incredibly strong net 52 percent job-approval rating (67 percent approval versus just 15 percent disapproval) in Cook, versus Obama's 45 percent net (72 percent approval versus 27 percent disapproval) and Mayor Rahm Emanuel's 43 percent net (69 percent approval versus 26 percent disapproval).

Also, 84 percent said a very convincing reason to support Preckwinkle is that she is "an effective leader who says what she does and does what she says. When running for board president, she said she would repeal [her predecessor's sales-tax increase]. In her first six months of office, she did just that, saving taxpayers \$440 million a year."

The idea, reportedly, is to position Preckwinkle the same way against the state income tax. If she runs, she'll vow to let it repeal itself in 2015, just as she vowed to repeal the county sales-tax hike. Her hesitancy reportedly involves the thinking of people such as House Speaker Michael Madigan. If he strongly opposes repeal, then she may drop the whole primary idea.

Quinn won the 2010 Democratic primary over Dan Hynes with incredibly strong support in black precincts. Preckwinkle, an African American, would definitely erode that backing. Quinn has

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never polled well with women, and a Preckwinkle candidacy would make that situation even worse.

If Preckwinkle starts appearing a lot Downstate and in the collars, we'll probably have our answer. Her latest appearance, in Champaign-Urbana, didn't go all that well. She said there should be a special place in hell reserved for President Ronald Reagan for his war against drugs. She had to quickly back off. Preckwinkle is discovering that there is a whole lot of Illinois outside Cook County, and not everybody thinks like she does.

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