For the past couple of election campaign cycles, this one included, incumbent state legislators have bragged in their campaign ads about cutting their own pay.

They didn't actually cut their own pay. But they did vote several times to take unpaid furlough days. So it's almost the same.

But lots of challengers have upped the ante this fall. The candidates are refusing to accept a state pension if elected.

Lifetime pensions for part-time legislators became a hot issue when the General Assembly first mulled reducing pension benefits for state workers and teachers. The targeted union members bitterly complained in their own defense that legislators receiving generous pensions for part-time jobs were passing judgment on full-time workers with modest incomes. And some outspoken conservatives have questioned why legislators get pensions at all.

The issue heated up to the point where House Speaker Michael Madigan endorsed legislation in the August special session that would have abolished pensions for newly elected legislators. That bill made the issue even more visible. And it gave the incumbents who voted for it (mostly House Democrats) something else to crow about on the campaign trail: They voted to reduce their own pensions and eliminate them entirely for new members. The issue is now playing out with a vengeance on the campaign trail.

I'd noticed that several candidates had pledged not to take pensions if elected, so I asked the four caucus campaign managers to tell me how many candidates were pledging not to accept a legislative pension.

The House Republicans say 11 of their candidates have so far vowed to forgo a pension, but they say more are on the way. The 11 so far are Pat Fee (of Naperville), Melinda Hult (Belleville), John Lawson (Schaumburg), Neil Anderson (Rock Island), John Cabello (Machesny Park), Glenn Nixon (Bourbonnais), Dan Kordik (Villa Park), Mark Shaw (Lake Forest), Julie Bigham Eggers (Columbia), Jonathan Greenberg (Northbrook), and David McSweeney (Barrington Hills).

The Senate Republicans identified nine candidates who have vowed to not accept a pension. More, they say, are on the way. The nine to date are Mike McElroy (Decatur), Joe Neal (Wadsworth), Arie Friedman (Highland Park), Mike Babcock (Bethalto), Randy Frese (Paloma), Garrett Peck (Plainfield), Jim O'Donnell (Park Ridge), Mark Minor (Ewing), and Bill Albracht (Moline).

The Senate Democrats have two candidates who, so far, have announced that they won't take the pension if elected: Andy Manar (Bunker Hill) and Melinda Bush (Grayslake).

The House Democrats, as is so often the case, weren't entirely forthcoming. "We've had a number of candidates who've said they would eliminate and/or reduce pensions (in one form or another) for lawmakers," wrote the House Democrats' campaign manager in response to an e-mail inquiry.

According to the House Democrats, the members in that rather broad category include Deborah O'Keefe Conroy (Elmhurst), Marty Moylan (Des Plaines), Kathleen Willis (Addison), Sue Scherer (Decatur), Laura Fine (Glenview), Stephanie Kifowit (Aurora), Natalie Manley (Joliet) and Scott Drury (Highwood).

So far, then, 30 candidates are either vowing to not take a legislative pension or to significantly reduce those pensions. And then, of course, every House member who voted for that special-session pension bill can also be counted as at least supporting the end of pension benefits for future legislators.

The House Democrats say it's ironic that so many House Republican candidates are promising to forgo pensions when their caucus voted overwhelmingly against the special-session bill that would've eliminated the new pensions. "If the Republicans decide to get on board, we'd pass the bill eliminating pensions for future lawmakers and we'll make the issue a moot point," said a House Democratic operative last week.

The issue obviously polls well or that many candidates wouldn't be campaigning on it. But it's important to remember that campaigns don't always move policy. People run on issues all the

time that are forgotten just as soon as the next election ends.

What makes this somewhat different, though, is the sheer number of candidates in both parties who are talking about this issue so far, combined with Speaker Madigan's proposal to end pensions for new legislators. Pandora's box may have been opened for good.

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