

Two Races Show the Perils of Independence

Written by Rich Miller

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Ever since I published a poll last month showing indicted former state Representative Derrick Smith (D-Chicago) leading third-party candidate Lance Tyson in the 10th Illinois House District race by a mind-boggling 47 percent to 9 percent, there's been a lot of grumbling about how Chicago voters ought to know better. Smith was arrested and indicted, after all. It was all over the news. People should know that, for crying out loud.

At the time the poll was taken, however, Tyson hadn't spent much if any money on his campaign. He isn't a known quantity in the district. And he's not a Democrat – at least, he's not a Democrat on the ballot. Likely voters were given the choice between Smith and Tyson and told their party affiliations. Smith won the Democratic primary; Tyson belongs to the newly created 10th District Unity Party.

Convincing voters to take a look at third-party or independent candidates is never easy. Go back to 1986, when some members of Lyndon LaRouche's cultish organization won some statewide Democratic primary races here. Democrat Adlai Stevenson's running mate was beaten by one of those candidates, and Stevenson had to form a third party to run for governor.

Stevenson, who had run four years before and nearly defeated Republican Jim Thompson, got just 40 percent of the vote as a member of his new Solidarity Party. This in a year when Democrat Neil Hartigan won the attorney general's race with 62 percent and Democrat Alan Dixon won the U.S. Senate race with 65 percent. But Stevenson's Solidarity Party candidate for secretary of state received just 17 percent against the LaRouche Democrat's 15 percent.

Voters are hard-wired to look at party affiliation. If you say "Democrat" or "Republican" to a voter, he or she knows pretty much what you're talking about. If you say "10th District Unity Party" to a voter, you'll likely get a blank stare and plenty of suspicion, especially if that candidate is completely unknown.

And the same goes for independents. Just ask Forrest Claypool, who was a well-known Cook County politician and ran as an independent for county assessor two years ago. Claypool spent a pile of money yet received just 32 percent of the vote against Democrat Joe Berrios.

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So it should've been little surprise when polling last month showed that independent candidate Dee Beaubien was getting only 26 percent against Republican David McSweeney in the 52nd District state House battle. Beaubien has a pretty well-known name because her late husband served in the Illinois House. And, unlike Lance Tyson, she had spent a considerable amount of money by then. But that "independent" label was hurting her, even in an area where voters pride themselves on their independence.

Beaubien recently put \$100,000 of her own money into her campaign, and once a self-funder breaks that mark, all state contribution caps are off. McSweeney countered with \$70,000 of his own cash, plus Jack Roeser's Otto Engineering put \$100,000 into the contest. It's now a free-for-all. Well, not free, exactly. It's gonna be a financial bloodbath if the House Democrats stay in the race, if the pro-choice Personal PAC goes all-in against the pro-life McSweeney, and if Beaubien keeps her checkbook open.

Lance Tyson, on the other hand, is still struggling to raise money. He's reported receiving or loaning himself just \$33,000 since September 28.

Both Beaubien and Tyson really have two foes on the ballot: their flesh-and-blood opponents and the legions of voters who can't get past party labels. Beaubien is better-positioned financially to challenge both problems, but she's being matched at least dollar-for-dollar by McSweeney. Tyson will have the media behind him and presumably some ground troops. But both candidates are running uphill. The bottom line is that it's hugely difficult to undo decades of voter behavior.

That doesn't mean it's impossible. State Senator James Meeks ran as an independent against a sitting Democratic incumbent and won his 2002 campaign. Meeks was extremely well-known in the district because his church has tens of thousands of members. He also spent more than \$400,000 to win the race and got big help from some major unions and area politicians.

It can happen. Independents and third-party candidates can win. But it's awfully rare.

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