

Unknown Legislator Could Craft Credible Statewide Campaign

Written by Rich Miller

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State Senator Kwame Raoul (D-Chicago) was apparently taken aback a few weeks ago when his standard public comments about not ruling out a race for governor were taken as a dramatic sign that he might very well run.

The public reaction should've been predictable. The most recent Capitol Fax/We Ask America poll, taken in mid-July, had Governor Pat Quinn getting just 38 percent of the Democratic-primary vote. That's pretty awful for an incumbent. Bill Daley, who made his exploratory candidacy official last week, was at 33 percent.

That leaves a lot of wide-open space for a new challenger. There is a very definable path for Raoul to do well here. And while he might not win, he'd likely set himself up for a future statewide race – possibly the 2016 U.S. Senate primary – if he runs a credible campaign. There really just isn't much of a downside, so let's look at his path.

Race. African Americans make up a huge segment of the Democratic-primary vote, so Raoul, who is black, should do quite well as long as he's seen as a credible candidate. Quinn is counting on winning the black vote to defeat Daley, pretty much the same way he defeated Dan Hynes in 2010. Without that all-important constituency locked up, Quinn would be in very big trouble, indeed.

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Quinn is not overwhelmingly popular with black voters. Just 47 percent back Quinn against Daley, according to the July poll, and Quinn's job-approval rating in a June poll among black Democrats was a mere 28 percent, while 40 percent disapproved.

Geography. Rumors abound that Quinn and Daley are looking at the possibility of choosing urban, minority running mates. Raoul, however, would be free to choose a white Downstater or suburbanite, possibly giving him the only geographically "balanced" ticket on the Democratic side.

To say that Quinn is unpopular Downstate would be the understatement of the year. And Daley isn't trusted by Downstaters. In the recent Democratic primary head-to-head poll I commissioned, "undecided" led among Downstaters with 36 percent.

Money. Raoul raised \$400,000 in the second quarter for an aborted attorney-general bid. While his fundraising total trails the other two Democratic candidates, Raoul has far more money in the bank right now than state Senator Kirk Dillard, who is touted as a serious Republican gubernatorial contender.

Public-employee unions are desperate to back a candidate in the primary, but they don't yet have anyone they can trust. Quinn and Daley both want pension reforms that they oppose, for instance. So it's possible they could wind up in his corner, which means big bucks.

Also, if Raoul convinces black voters that he's a credible candidate, history shows he doesn't really need to raise as much money as his opponents. Barack Obama, who was vastly outspent in the 2004 U.S. Senate primary, is just one example of this.

Infrastructure. A late start in any statewide race is not a good thing, because Illinois is so large and diverse and complicated, and you don't just pop up and run for something without having any infrastructure in place. But Raoul already started putting together a statewide race, so the beginnings of an infrastructure are there.

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He could also very well have the strong support of Senate President John Cullerton, who has all but privately declared war on Quinn since the governor's veto of state legislative salaries. Cullerton's formidable organization could help Raoul set up a statewide organization. Most of Cullerton's members, who are also Raoul's fellow legislators, could be expected to pitch in as well.

If the unions jump in on his side, that would also be a big infrastructure help. Cook County African-American Democrats are one of the most well-organized and politically aware ethnic groups in the state, which could give Raoul a built-in infrastructure advantage.

The downsides. Raoul has never won a contested race, and experience at taking and throwing hard punches is crucial in a high-level contest such as this one. While known to and respected by much of the media and the political establishment, he likely has close to zero name recognition among the voting populace. If he runs and ends up tossing the victory to Daley, he'll likely upset several powerful black politicians. And since he hasn't been on the radar screen, nobody knows what an opposition report might find.

He'll need plenty of fire in his belly just to survive the day-to-day ordeal, but it's not there yet. If he finds that fire, I think he might be able to pull this off.

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