

GOP Might Finally Break “My Turn” Cycle

Written by Rich Miller

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It's no secret that Republican-primary voters in Illinois have been almost rigidly hierarchical when it comes to choosing gubernatorial candidates. They pretty much always choose the candidate who can best demonstrate that it's his or her “turn.”

In 1990, after eight years as secretary of state, Jim Edgar was the clear choice. Indeed, he barely had opposition. The same went for two-term Secretary of State George Ryan eight years later. In 2002, it was clearly Attorney General Jim Ryan's turn, and he bested two other high-profile candidates in the primary. In 2006, Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka beat three lesser-known opponents to win her primary race, although it wasn't as easy.

Things weren't as clear in 2010. Wealthy Republican contributor and former state-party chair Andy McKenna spent a fortune early on and led in most polling until near the end, when primary voters began to sour on him. They quickly turned to Senator Kirk Dillard, a former Jim Edgar chief of staff, but then almost as quickly turned against him when McKenna unleashed ads blasting Dillard for appearing in a TV ad for Barack Obama. Senator Bill Brady, a strong conservative who ran an underfunded but somewhat credible campaign four years earlier, ended up beating Dillard by fewer than 200 votes.

And that brings us to 2014, where three of the four candidates are relying mainly on the “my turn” logic to prevail. Brady's main pitch to voters, other than his recycled 2010 rhetoric, is that he learned valuable lessons in his 2010 loss to Pat Quinn and is now the most viable choice. Dillard's pitch is that he was a proven manager under Jim Edgar and would've won in 2010 had he not lost to Brady in the primary and so he's the best choice. Treasurer Dan Rutherford's almost singular *raison d'être* is that he is the only candidate in the race who has ever won

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statewide.

McKenna was the second rich guy in a row to attempt to break the “my turn” cycle. Wealthy GOP contributor Ron Gidwitz ran four years earlier and lost badly. You can draw a direct line from Gidwitz to self-described “outsider” Bruce Rauner, who is running a well-thought-out, well-funded, and highly sophisticated primary campaign in an attempt to reset the “my turn” system, which essentially flowed from the mighty statewide organization built by former Governor Jim Thompson (who is now backing Dillard).

If the primary were left to its own devices, Rauner might very well walk away with this thing. None of the other candidates has any real money, and none is making much of a persuasive case for his respective campaign.

But organized labor is moving ever closer to jumping into this primary battle, sources say. The idea, as I’ve told you before, is to spend a few million bucks attacking Rauner in the primary rather than being forced to spend tens of millions to fend him off in the fall. His close ties to Mayor Rahm Emanuel, for instance, have been shown by polling to be a killer political issue with GOP-primary voters.

Rauner’s anti-union rhetoric and his unexpectedly (to many) strong campaign have convinced unions that they need to step up soon. Plus, some public-employee unions are so hostile to Governor Quinn because of pension reform that they don’t want to give the incumbent any money or help in the fall. So this is all about knocking off Public Enemy Number One as early as possible.

Rauner has spent \$300,000 a week on TV ads since the beginning of November, mainly to begin the process of inoculating himself against the expected labor-union advertising blitz. He’s pushed his poll numbers up and has continued to freeze out his GOP rivals.

It’s abundantly clear that none of the other Republican candidates has the money to attack Rauner. Two of the three barely have enough cash to sustain their own day-to-day operations. And Rutherford only has enough for about a month of TV ads, if that. The only way that any sort of negative message about Rauner can be effectively advertised is if somebody else takes him on.

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While Rauner leads in two recent polls, he’s still an almost completely unknown quantity to voters. His numbers are, in other words, wide but not deep. Shocking voters with some revelations about his background could very well knock him out. But his campaign has seen this union attack coming for a long time, and it undoubtedly has at least some counter-measures planned. He won’t go away quietly.

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