

Sending a message on Feb. 2

This election allows voters to start purging Blagojevich's rank influence on our state.

Chicago Journal
01/20/2010

DICK SIMPSON

The primary scheduled for Feb. 2 is the first election in Illinois since federal prosecutors indicted Rod Blagojevich.

With few apparently casting their ballots in early voting, the smart money is betting that the incompetent incumbents will slip into yet another term in office.

But sitting this election out isn't an option if we want to start changing the makeup of state and county government and send a signal to the powers-that-be that we are fed up with corruption, poor governance and weak leadership.

February's election is about two things: economics and ethics. The state has a budget deficit estimated at \$13 billion. It can't pay its bills. Its bonds are just above junk status. County government, meanwhile, has taken a half-step back from the highest sales tax in the nation but faces difficult challenges running its systems better.

In terms of ethics, this election allows voters to start purging Blagojevich's rank influence on our state. But the indicted governor isn't the sole problem. Over the last 30 years, some 1,500 politicians have been convicted of public corruption in Illinois. I have previously calculated the annual "corruption tax" to Chicago and Cook County taxpayers at \$500 million. We have earned the title of most corrupt city, county and state in the country, beating, unfortunately, such contenders as Louisiana, New Jersey and Miami.

So will the cold and voter apathy win this election or will we start to take back our government one race at a time? Here's my take on who deserves your vote on Feb. 2.

For governor, pick Pat Quinn over Dan Hynes in the Democratic Party primary. Quinn is the "Mr. Clean" of Illinois politics. He is fair, honest, and ethical. Many of the proposals of his Ethics Commission still need enactment and he is committed to finish the job. His income tax proposal is the only one that can begin to restore state finances.

Hynes's proposal, which increases taxes on only those earning over \$250,000 a year and requires a state constitutional amendment, is a joke.

On the Republican side, Jim Ryan is the strongest candidate even though State Sen. Kirk Dillard would make a better governor.

For U.S. Senator, David Hoffman, Chicago's outstanding former inspector general, is the best choice. State Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias is better known statewide and has a ton of money, which may allow him to win. But questionable loans his family's bank made and the

“Bright Star” program, which cost thousands of college students and their families tuition funds, raise red flags.

On the Republican side, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk is the smartest and most polished candidate. He deserves to win that primary.

For president of the Cook County Board, back Ald. Toni Preckwinkle. She has a distinguished career as a reform alderman and a platform that would end Stroger’s sales tax increase and curb waste and corruption. She is certainly better than the weak incumbent, Todd Stroger.

For the Cook County assessor’s race, electing former Ald. Ray Figueroa, a reformer, over lobbyist and Cook County Democratic Party boss Joe Berrios or machine hack Robert Shaw is critical for every home owner and business owner. Our property tax assessments and taxes are on the line.

If either Berrios or Shaw are elected, we will return to the bad old days of Parky Cullerton, when property taxes were decided by clout rather than honest property values.

Among the Cook County commissioner races, these are among the most important contested races:

In the 7th District, independent reformer Jesus Garcia deserves to be elected over Joseph Moreno, who voted for and defended the sales tax increase and is backed by the patronage army of the Hispanic Democratic Organization.

Garcia’s election, along with Rudy Lozano Jr.’s challenge of State Rep. Dan Burke, may determine the future of Latino politics. And as goes Latino politics — reform or machine-oriented — so goes the future of Chicago politics.

In the 12th District, the more liberal-minded State Rep. John Fritchey should be elected over Rostenkowski ally, former Ald. Ted Matlak.

In the suburban 16th District, my former student, Republican incumbent Tony Peraica, deserves support over Brian Sloan in order to continue his efforts of eliminating waste, lowering the sales tax and promoting ethics in county government.

For commissioner of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, the most important candidate to elect is Todd Connor, who has the endorsement of reform and environmental groups throughout the metropolitan region.

The February ballot is long. The weather may be frightful. Lives are busy. But our future depends on our trek to the polls on Feb. 2.

Dick Simpson, the former alderman of the 44th Ward, teaches political science at the University of Illinois-Chicago.