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How to run for office

By Jim Nowlan

You may have been asked recently to sign a petition to put a candidate on the ballot in 2020. It's that season and, though a truism, if good people don't run for office, democracy doesn't work.

You ought to try running. Here's how.

First, my bona fides: In the 1960-70s, I ran for office four times, three times for the state legislature and once for state office. I came away with a .500 batting average, losing my bid for lite guv by a hair. Not bad, when you consider A. Lincoln also had the same average in his several bids for office.

Later I managed the campaigns for the US Senate (Charles Percy, 1978, successful) and a presidential aspirant (John B. Anderson, 1980, unsuccessful, but interesting). So, I know just enough about running to be dangerous.

A brilliant strategist, Mr. Lincoln said the job of running was simple: Canvass your territory, that is, travel and get to know your district; identify your voters, and get them to the polls.

The game hasn't changed a whit, though the technology has, obviously.

There are four resources in every campaign: people, skill, money and time. Every candidate has at least some of one or more of those resources. For example, I used to advise aspiring candidates to build their holiday card lists. At one time mine ran to 1,200 addresses, yet I was a piker compared to US Senator Paul Simon, who had tens of thousands on his list. Today, the

guidance would be to build your friends on Facebook. Your friends become volunteers, funders and word-spreaders—your “organization.”

Don’t expect any help from your local political party organization, which is likely on life support.

You and your friends also have skills, maybe at running a small business, which is basically what a campaign is about—setting up a small business that lasts about one year. You write a campaign plan, much like a business plan.

In the plan, you establish vote-total goal and where those votes are located; how to reach them; how much it will cost, and how to raise the requisite amount. Depending upon the office you seek, your plan might simply be in your head, or in a thick three-ring binder. But there has to be a plan.

Political consultant Steve Shearer of Peoria observes that 90 percent of the candidates who spend more money than their opponents win. So, money is important, though obviously not controlling in all cases.

In each of my three legislative campaigns, I spent about \$4,000 (the equivalent of \$40,000 in today’s dollars), nearly all of it raised among friends. I had fun fundraisers, and it wasn’t a big burden. In contrast, a former student of mine recently spent \$1 million dollars in a losing race for the Illinois House, though most of the money came from party leaders and interest groups.

In my day, there were no campaign finance and reporting rules. Now such are a pain, yet manageable. The Illinois State Board of Elections website offers a complete Candidate’s Guide, which walks you through the filing requirements.

The key to success, from Lincoln's day to the present, is effective strategy (the plan), not tactics (specific tasks).

Appreciating that all I know may be passé, I turned to friend Steve Shearer. Steve is one very smart political campaign consultant. He has won many races (and lost a few) for local, state legislative and federal offices.

Steve says winning is about strategy, message and image. Strategy is based on such factors as analysis of recent voting returns, the issues that move voters in your constituency, both candidates' (including the opponent) strengths and weaknesses. From that comes the plan to achieve your vote-total goal.

The big take-away from my recent coffee with Steve is that the cost of campaigning is coming down, as reaching voters shifts from television ads to less expensive social media. Further, the new media can target different messages to specific demographics, respectively, say left-handed baton twirlers (well, maybe not quite that targeted).

Steve says campaign messages should start a conversation with voters, based on a believable quality of the candidate, e.g. "Judge Joe Smith has always given a fair shake," and not broad hortatory such as "honest, patriotic and caring."

If you don't run for office—school board to US Senate—who will?