

Voter dilemma haunts Illinois Christian conservatives

By Jim Nowlan

Christian conservative voters in Illinois must be haunted by their dilemma: Hold their noses and vote for incumbent governor Bruce Rauner in November, or stay at home and let even-more-distasteful (to them) challenger J. B. Pritzker win.

Based on an informal poll of my insider political friends, these Christian conservatives will not only have to vote for Rauner, but do so “enthusiastically,” that is, in big numbers, or his bid for re-election is almost assuredly doomed.

To review: A little known challenger to Rauner in the March GOP primary captured almost half (48.5 percent) of the vote in that race.

State Rep. Jeanne Ives (R-Wheaton) rallied Christian conservatives to her/their cause over Rauner’s signature on an abortion bill that provides taxpayer funding for abortion.

His signature came after publicly promising to them and even to the Catholic cardinal of Chicago that he would veto the bill.

Fascinated by campaign prognosticating, I went to my dozen insider buddies and asked them if Rauner could win re-election. These grizzled current and retired elected officials and lobbyists from both parties conclude that Rauner has a very, very slim chance of winning.

Contrary to conventional wisdom that Illinois is a Blue (Democratic) state, Republicans have been successful in winning a number of statewide offices in recent elections, e.g. Judy Baar Topinka for comptroller, twice; Mark Kirk (US Senate), Dan Rutherford (Treasurer), and Rauner himself.

But the insiders say the governor has not accomplished anything much, thus offending many suburban Republicans, in addition to the irate Christian conservatives. Further, opponent Pritzker is new to politics and thus has none of the political baggage of former governor Pat Quinn, which played a big part in Rauner’s narrow victory four years ago.

The Christian conservative vote represented, I believe, most of the voters who turned out against Rauner in March.

I estimate on the back of my envelope that this intense anti-abortion group will represent about 20 percent of the overall vote in November. Obviously, turnout among this group is critical to Rauner.

Rauner needs Jeanne Ives and her conservatives much more than they need him. That is the reason state GOP chair Tim Schneider, a Rauner loyalist, recently made nice with Ives backer Mark Shaw, chair of the important Lake County GOP. Shaw had been mounting an effort to topple Schneider.

Because of a last-minute, bury-the-hatchet accord, Schneider and Shaw will be co-chairs of the state party.

Had Schneider not offered the peace pipe to Shaw, such would have poured salt into the wounds of the large Ives faction of the party. This still does not, of course, assure that the Ives faction will turn out in big numbers for Rauner in November.

Does it matter much who is elected governor?

Rauner entered office in 2015 with swagger in 2015, bragging that he was going to take out Democratic state party leader Mike Madigan, at three-plus decades the longest serving House speaker in the nation.

Rauner did spend millions of his own money to blacken the name of Madigan statewide, yet the speaker is still speaker, as well as chair of the Illinois Democratic Party.

From my perch, it appears Rauner has, in three-plus years as governor, learned surprisingly little about Illinois politics and government. A second term would probably see a continuation of a rather feckless, ineffective governorship.

Pritzker is very liberal and wants a progressive income tax, that is, higher rates for higher incomes. This would require a state constitutional amendment.

I have strong doubts such a measure could, first, pass the legislature with a 3/5ths vote and then gain approval of 3/5ths of Illinois voters. However, the debate alone will keep the red flag flying high to entrepreneurs that Illinois is “closed for business.”

(Most businesses have corporate forms that pass all income through to the owners, where the income is taxed as individual, rather than corporate, income. So these folks care more about individual than corporate rates.)

Both candidates are pro-choice on abortion, so Christian conservatives face a Hobson’s choice. They can stick with a governor who lied to them on an issue of great importance to them—and do so with enough energy to achieve a big turnout of their kind—or forfeit the election to an even worse (in their eyes) alternative.

In a non-presidential election year, when it is hard to arouse voters to the polls, my insider friends and I think it unlikely Christian conservatives will carry the day for Bruce Rauner.