

Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

CORRECTION:

Story has been corrected

This story was corrected at 5:10 p.m., Dec. 8, to say that gubernatorial candidates seeking clean elections funds must collect 3,250 qualifying contributions of \$5 or more, and \$40,000 in seed money contributions of up to \$100 from individuals.

Hard times don't deter candidates for governor

Analysis: The chance to usher in Maine's recovery could make the reputation of the state's next governor.

By MATT WICKENHEISER, Staff Writer December 6, 2009

A month after an intense referendum election, Maine's collective political attention has mostly shaken off Question 1, Tabor II, the excise tax proposal and all the rest.

Up next: the race to the Blaine House.

Much has been made of the 21-person field – eight Democrats, one Green Independent, six Republicans and six unenrolled candidates have taken out candidacy papers with the state's Ethics Commission to run for governor.

And while political grudges can span decades, political memory can be fleeting. Twenty-one isn't all that impressive in a gubernatorial race, really, if you look at the past few elections.

In 2002, the last time the seat was open, 15 candidates took out papers for the race, including then-Rep. John Baldacci.

In 2006, when Baldacci was running as an incumbent governor, 21 candidates took out papers, according to Ethics Commission records.

Those numbers quickly dwindle, of course.

The field's already narrowed slightly. There used to be 22 candidates; author Patrick Quinlan has dropped out.

Declaring yourself a candidate is fairly effortless: Name a treasurer and file a one-page, two-sided paper form with the Ethics Commission, listing basic personal information.

If you're not running as a Clean Elections candidate, which means seeking state funds to help finance your campaign, it's even easier – you can be your own treasurer.

But thresholds start appearing – little tests that begin to winnow out aspirants. Candidates on Jan. 1 can start collecting signatures to get on the ballot.

Party candidates must collect at least 2,000 signatures from members of their own party by March 15. Unenrolled candidates need at least 4,000 signatures from registered voters by June 1.

Seven of the candidates registered thus far have officially "declared their intent" to run as Clean Election candidates. There are a few more hoops for those candidates.

To get access to Clean Election funds, they need at least 3,250 qualifying contributions of \$5 or more from registered Maine voters. Those contributions go to the state's Clean Election Fund.

This year, they also need to collect \$40,000 in seed money contributions of \$100 or more from individuals. That money, they keep for their own campaigns.

Seed money can be raised anytime; qualifying funds can be raised from Oct. 15 of this year until April 1, 2010. The \$40,000 also has to be raised by April 1.

Financing is a key threshold for any viable candidate, whether traditional or through the Clean Election system.

According to Ethics Commission filings, each of the gubernatorial candidates in the 2006 general election spent roughly \$1 million. Baldacci and GOP challenger Chandler Woodcock each spent \$1.3 million. Green Independent candidate Pat LaMarche spent \$1.1 million, and unenrolled challenger Barbara Merrill spent \$900,600.

Even getting to the primaries was costly. Republican hopefuls David Emery and Peter Mills spent \$192,000 and \$250,000, respectively, leading up to the primaries in 2006.

LONG AND VARIED RESUMES

Ah yes, the primaries – where the voters will do their own winnowing of the field on June 8.

To vote in the primary, you need to be enrolled as a Democrat, a Republican or a Green Independent. Unenrolled voters can enroll in a party up to and including the day of the primary.

Unenrolled candidates aren't on the primary ballots; if they get enough signatures in by the June 1 deadline, they'll automatically be on the Nov. 2 general election ballot.

So after June 8, there will be one candidate each for the Democrat, Green and Republican parties – and likely a smattering of unenrolled hopefuls.

The field already ranges from political newcomers to well-known politicians with decades of experience.

Experienced politicians include Libby Mitchell, John Richardson and Steve Rowe, for instance, on the Democratic side, and Peter Mills on the Republican side. Lynne Williams in the Green Independent Party is no stranger to politics; neither is Eliot Cutler, who's running as an independent.

Others have political experience, but at a more local level: Peter Truman, for example, Paul LePage, Donna Dion or Dawn Hill.

There are business leaders with no political experience but private-sector bona fides. These include Matt Jacobson, Les Otten and Bruce Poliquin on the Republican side, and Rosa Scarcelli on the Democratic side.

There are some with clear political angles, others with less-defined stories.

And there are a lot of names that just aren't as familiar as others: Alex Hammer, Samme Bailey, Beverly Cooper-Pete, Augustus Edgerton, Eriq Manson, Martin Vachon and John Whitcomb, for example.

And while the field is sizable, it could still grow.

ECONOMY EXPECTED TO TOP AGENDA

Patrick McGowan, Maine's conservation commissioner, said he's still considering getting in as a Democrat. Steve Abbott, U.S. Sen. Susan Collins' chief of staff, is considering a run as a Republican and said that he'd make an announcement one way or the other early next year.

"It's such a crazy-big field right now," said Brian Duff, a political scientist at the University of New England.

Different candidate narratives appeal to different voters, noted Marv Druker, a political scientist at the University of Southern Maine's Lewiston campus.

"It may be, that given how dire the financial straits of the state are, that people who aren't more traditional candidates, or in the political life, may look more attractive to voters than otherwise," suggested Druker. "But still, when people go to vote, they need to know who these people are."

Candidates in other states sometimes try to put a negative slant on rivals who have long served in state politics, said Duff. While he didn't think that worked well in Maine, he did note that the entrepreneurial narrative may be attractive in this race.

"Successful business stories are compelling to voters in tough economic times – there's just no doubt," said Duff. "But they're going to have to make the case that they're successful business stories."

If that happened in 2010, it wouldn't be the first time a political newcomer with business chops took the Blaine House.

Independent Angus King won his first term as governor with no political experience. He was a successful entrepreneur who also hosted a talk show on Maine public television, and he wound up serving two terms as Maine's chief executive.

Before King, in 1974, independent James Longley was a successful insurance salesman who beat out experienced politicians to serve one term as governor.

But candidates who are businesspeople should be wary of an underlying current that may make voters suspicious of that sort of narrative, said Duff. Unchecked profit motives "had a huge part of the current economic crisis," he suggested. So, too, did a lack of government oversight.

Candidates have had ample opportunity over the past half-year to start putting their names in front of voters.

Some candidates made political hay with the referendum election. There were no real surprises: Some Republicans publicly supported the TABOR question, while some Democrats supported same-sex marriage.

Essentially, they were playing to their party base, said Druker.

"It's trying to make a connection with already existing groups who have some experience in turning people out to vote," said Druker.

Plus, it makes sense to reach out to those voters, since people who vote in an off-year referendum election are more likely to vote in the primaries, he suggested.

It looks like the economy will be an overarching issue in this race, as Maine (not to mention the region, country and world) is suffering from a harsh downturn. There's a general tendency to look askance at the candidates for governor, with the question of "who would want to be governor in these tough times?"

UNE's Duff notes that the economy is cyclical. While times are tough right now, the economy will turn again.

"To preside over a recovery could be a really interesting opportunity, whether you're talking about your personal ambition or the chance to really have an effect on the future of the state," said Duff. "The future is bright enough for Maine that it might actually be a really good time to get in.

"Somebody's going to get this job, and somebody could look really good six years from now."

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