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**Blagojevich trounces Ryan as Dems win big**

First Democrat to win since '72 bulldozes GOP

By Scott Fornek and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

A Northwest Side lawyer with a last name few Illinois voters could pronounce a year ago was elected governor of Illinois Tuesday, becoming the first Democrat to win the office in 30 years.

Rod Blagojevich beat Republican Jim Ryan 52 percent to 45 percent with 97 percent of the precincts in.

Driving a bulldozer through the Illinois political landscape, Blagojevich led a near sweep of offices that put his party just short of control it has not enjoyed since 1937.

"Tonight ladies and gentlemen, Illinois has voted for change," the Democratic congressman told a jubilant crowd at A. Finkl & Sons, the North Side steel plant where both he and his Serbian immigrant father once worked. "It is not easy to break a 30-year habit. Tonight we have.

"I have seen the anger, and I have felt the disappointment in a government that has been more preoccupied with corruption than public service, but I have also seen all across our great state how this can all change."

An Elvis Presley nut, Blagojevich took to the stage at 10:10 p.m., flashing the thumbs up and told the crowd "I'm all shook up" and "my heart is full tonight, and I have nothing but a hunka, hunka burning love for each and every one of you."

Blagojevich also thanked Ryan for his service to Illinois.

Ryan returned the compliment when he conceded half an hour earlier, asking his supporters to give the Democrat a round of applause.

"This was a tough environment for Republicans, but he ran a tough race and he won," the attorney general told his supporters at the Chicago Hilton and Towers. "But keep your heads up. Keep your chins up because the Republican Party will bounce back."

It was the anticlimactic end to a race that sparked and sputtered but never really caught fire--despite its far-reaching significance.

Democrats also captured control of the state Senate, held the state House and state Supreme Court, and swept four of the state's five other constitutional offices.

It was just short of 1937, when the Democrats had all that plus all top statewide offices. The last Democrat elected governor was Dan Walker, who served one term and lost in 1976. And the party began its long wait in the gubernatorial Green Room.

A three-term congressman and former state representative, Blagojevich initially seemed an unlikely choice to end that streak.

When he first surfaced as a potential gubernatorial candidate a couple of years ago, most of the pundits treated it as a fool's errand. He was best known as the son-in-law of Ald. Dick Mell (33rd), a powerful Northwest Side ward boss. And Blagojevich's Serbian last name was so unpronounceable that one of his staffers was mangling it as she made calls in the early days of his gubernatorial campaign.

(It's bluh GOYA vich).

But Blagojevich dealt himself into the high-stakes poker game by raising millions of dollars early on, putting together a statewide organization with the help of Mell and Blagojevich's Democratic colleagues in the House and racking up a string of endorsements.

After winning a difficult primary, Blagojevich became the frontrunner in the general election--due as much to his own winning cards as to the losing hand that Ryan was holding. Saddled with the same last name as scandal-plagued Gov. George Ryan, the Republican nominee started the race under his party's cloud and could not come out from under it.

While Blagojevich was trying to convince everyone he should be governor, Jim Ryan was trying to convince everyone he was not the governor. While Blagojevich was working his Rolodex raising a record $21 million for his campaign war chest, Ryan was working the phones trying to find someone willing to serve as state chairman of his tattered party.

And Blagojevich was able to bombard the television airwaves over the summer when Ryan was scrambling to persuade donors not to write him off. With the momentum on his side, Blagojevich supplemented his labor union endorsements with support that often goes to Republicans--police officers, firefighters and the Illinois State Medical Society.

The stampede became so strong that Ryan must have wondered if the Ryan family was going to come out and support Blagojevich.

And through much of it, Ryan was unable to lay a glove on Blagojevich. In fact, the major hit on Blagojevich came from his own party chairman during the State Fair.

After Blagojevich criticized House Speaker Michael J. Madigan for slipping a contract to a crony, Madigan raised the spectre of "indiscretions" in Blagojevich's past. The vague, mysterious charge hung in the air for months.

Ryan got his first wind in the closing weeks of the campaign, holding a series of news conferences and airing television commercials portraying Blagojevich as tainted by ties to convicted felons who have supported him politically. And as Ryan briefly found his footing, Blagojevich stumbled.

During a televised debate, Blagojevich injected a fiery 1994 crash that killed six children into his criticism of Ryan's failure to investigate the licenses-for-bribes scandal. And then Blagojevich drew heat for a flier he sent to African-American voters, accusing Republicans of trying to take away their voting rights.

In the end, it didn't matter.

Blagojevich's victory margin was so large, some supporters were already looking toward the next step.

Overlooking the podium in the cavernous warehouse where he gave his victory speech was a huge American flag given to the Finkl family by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942. It once flew over the White House--a place some of Blagojevich's fans believe will be his next stop.

"We believe he will be the president someday," said Pete Nechipor, superintendent of Finkl & Sons. "That's what my owners think."

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