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**Squeaker: With thin lead, Quinn declares victory, but Brady won't concede**

By Dave McKinney and Art Golab

Staff reporters

It doesn't get much closer.

But with a lead of less than 11,000 votes, Gov. Quinn declared victory early Wednesday.

"The people have won, and I believe we have won," the governor told supporters shortly before 1 a.m.

"We know there are more votes to be counted, but we are 10,933 ahead," he said to applause and screams of joy. "And I'd rather be ahead than 10,933 behind. So it looks like another landslide victory is headed our way."

But Republican Bill Brady refused to throw in the towel. Before Quinn declared victory, the state senator told his supporters he was calling it a night because the race was too close to call.

"I have a penchant for close elections; it seems to be something that always ends up on the right side," Brady told supporters, harkening back to his 193-vote victory in the February primary -- a race that took 31 days to decide.

"With over 3.5 million votes cast, this isn't going to be decided tonight," Brady said.

With 97 percent of the precincts counted, Quinn and Bill Brady were separated by three-tenths of a percentage point -- roughly 11,100 votes out of 3.57 million cast.

The closest governor's race since 1982 capped a night in which Quinn saw a sizable lead in early returns all but evaporate.

Adding to the drama in the race to become Illinois' 42nd governor, President Obama took to the airwaves to make a last-minute appeal to extend the Democrats' eight-year hold on the Executive Mansion.

Quinn was one of the Democrats' few bright spots in a near-Republican sweep of the state's top political prizes. Sen. Dick Durbin gave Obama credit for Quinn's apparent victory.

Brady, a state senator from Bloomington, aimed to build on the wave of red that swept the country and Illinois on Tuesday by seizing on Quinn's support of an unpopular tax increase and his ties to convicted ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

In a true cliff-hanger, Quinn had 46.51 percent and Brady had 46.20 percent with 97 percent of precincts reporting.

Hours before the polls closed, Quinn leaned on Obama to help get the vote out, particularly among African-American voters. Putting his own prestige on the line, Obama dialed up WVON-AM to sing Quinn's praises.

"I know Pat Quinn," the president told radio host Cliff Kelley. "He will make good decisions about the budget. If you have someone like Bill Brady in there, he will be making some decisions that have a negative impact on health care, education."

The heightened attention from the White House came as Brady continued to hold a slim lead in polls heading into Tuesday's vote. The senator sought to widen that lead by hammering Quinn over the state's worsening economy, his ties to Blagojevich and the proposed tax hike.

Quinn managed to stay competitive even though one poll showed that only one in three Illinoisans approved of the job he has done since taking over after Blagojevich was driven from office in 2009.

Quinn has attacked Brady for allegedly voting three times on legislation that impacted his business, not paying federal income taxes for two years and voting against Illinois' increase in the minimum wage.

The spread in Tuesday's election was the closest in a gubernatorial race since 1982, when former Gov. Jim Thompson beat Democrat Adlai Stevenson by 5,074 votes out of 3.67 million cast.

With 98 percent of the vote counted in Chicago, Quinn led Brady by a 75-18 percent margin. Quinn's lead was far less dominant in suburban Cook County, where the governor had a 53-40 percent lead over Brady with 96 percent of precincts reporting.

But Brady was surging in his home turf Downstate, where turnout was expected to be as high as 65 percent, and in the collar counties.

In Lake County, for example, Brady had a 50-42 percent lead over Quinn with all precincts counted. In DuPage County, Brady's margins were wider, with him holding a 54-39 percent lead over Quinn with 99 percent of precincts reporting.

Brady, a real estate developer, ran on a pledge of fiscal conservatism, vowing not to increase taxes and to impose budget cuts that would amount to 10 cents on the dollar, though he never clearly articulated what those cuts would be during the campaign.

Brady also hammered the governor for failed leadership. The 17-year lawmaker condemned the Quinn administration's early release of violent prison inmates, his inability to keep the state's budget deficit from worsening on his watch, and Quinn's decision to boost salaries for top aides despite a budget deficit that could approach $15 billion.

Brady's political flank was exposed through his conservative social views, which Quinn portrayed as being out of the mainstream, including Brady's opposition to abortions even for rape and incest victims, his opposition to gay rights and a belief that public school districts shouldn't be blocked from teaching creationism if they want.

Brady's apparent defeat was a tough pill for Republicans to swallow.

He would have been the first Republican to occupy the Executive Mansion since a federal corruption investigation forced George Ryan into political retirement in 2003.

Ryan's collapse, which left the state GOP in tatters for the next two election cycles, concluded a 26-year grip on the governorship by Republicans.

A Republican victory would also have carried important symbolic value, signaling to the party faithful that their exile from power was over and that the GOP would have a seat at the table when legislative boundaries are redrawn next year -- a process that could determine which party controls the General Assembly for the next decade.

A Quinn victory would make him the first lieutenant governor -- seated because an Illinois governor became ill, ascended to another job or was impeached -- to stake a legitimate claim to state government's top job by winning a gubernatorial election.

The last lieutenant governor in similar circumstances was Democrat Samuel Shapiro, a onetime lieutenant governor who stepped in when former Gov. Otto Kerner resigned in 1968 to accept a federal judgeship. Shapiro lost that year's gubernatorial election against Republican Richard Ogilvie.

The effect of three other gubernatorial candidates appeared to be negligible in the race, though collectively they were pulling down 8 percent of the overall vote with 96 percent of precincts reporting.

Independent Scott Lee Cohen, a pawnbroker who invested millions of dollars of his own cash into a long-shot bid for governor, carried 4 percent of the vote.

Green Party candidate Rich Whitney, who pulled down 10 percent of the vote in the 2006 gubernatorial election, was not faring as well this go-around, drawing just 3 percent of the vote. Libertarian Lex Green had only 1 percent.

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