

Bill targets changing name to get elected

Lawmaker spurred by judicial candidate's new Irish moniker

BY JIM RITTER
Staff Reporter

A candidate running for Cook County judge created a stir after the Chicago Sun-Times revealed he had changed his name to attract more votes.

Now a lawmaker plans to introduce legislation to crack down on such strategic name changes.

State Rep. John Fritchey (D-Chicago) said his bill would require candidates to maintain their legal names for at least three years before circulating petitions for an elective office.

If a candidate did change his or her name during that period, the change would be noted on the ballot, along with the date the name was changed.

The bill would exempt a candidate who took a spouse's name, or got divorced and changed back to her maiden name, Fritchey said.

Fritchey plans to introduce his bill in January. It would take effect in 2007, and would not affect candidates running in 2006.

Others have done it

Fritchey said his bill was inspired by the news that 2006 judicial candidate Frederick S. Rhine recently

changed his name to Patrick Michael O'Brien — the same last name as the candidate who trounced him in an earlier bid in 2002.

"But he's not the first guy who has done it," Fritchey said.

In previous judicial elections, Edwin Korb became Edward Flanagan, L. Michael Getty became Michael Brennan Getty and James G. Smith became James Fitzgerald Smith.

Such name changes "only serve to heighten cynicism and reduce voter turnout," Fritchey said.

"I understand why Mr. Rhine did it, and I sympathize with what he recognizes as a flaw in the system where names can matter more than qualifications. But changing a name to be complicit within that broken system is not the answer."

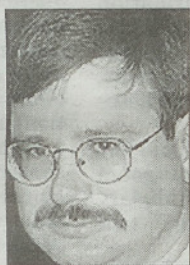
Reached at his Park Ridge home on Sunday, O'Brien corrected a reporter

who addressed him by his former name of Rhine. O'Brien said the proposed bill would not reform the system. Rather it would lock in an advantage "to candidates fortunate enough to be born with names popular with voters."

"It seems to be a Band-Aid solution," he said. "The problem is not me. It's people who select judges on irrational criteria."

O'Brien and Fritchey agreed on one thing: Judges shouldn't be elected.

As Fritchey put it, judges should be selected "based on merit instead of phonics."



Patrick Michael O'Brien
Was named Rhine