

Kansas attorney general race heats up from the start

TOPEKA (AP) — Memo to the majority of Kansans who dozed during the primaries: Time to wake up and watch the rowdy race for attorney general.

Featuring charges and countercharges, the Nov. 7 general election pits conservative Republican Phill Kline fighting to keep his job against Johnson County District Attorney Paul Morrison, a newly minted Democrat seeking to oust him.

The end game is simple. Morrison must give voters a reason to dump the incumbent; Kline must convince voters he's done a good enough job to merit another four years.

"To some degree, the attorney general is supposed to be a crime fighter, and the debate will be over who is more aggressive against crime and the priorities of the office," said Allan Cigler, University of Kansas political science professor. "It becomes who is the tougher law guy."

Kline is counting on his conservative base, plus Republicans upset over Morrison leaving their party. Morrison is banking on a mix of Democrats and moderate Republicans wanting to get Kline out of office.

Both are reaching out to the growing segment of independent voters who could make the difference in a tight race.

Right now, perhaps Morrison's biggest handicap are voters asking: "Paul who?"

"His problem is getting himself a little better know," Cigler said. "Right now, the thing he is trying to do is let people know he's a tough guy prosecutor and also soften up Kline by saying he's not qualified for the job and the like."

For Kline, there's the perception that he's politically vulnerable, in part because he barely won in 2002 against a Democrat with little statewide recognition.

"Paul Morrison is going to play up that vulnerability by playing up all the issues and hit Phill Kline with a big broad brush on all these issues," said Ken Ciboski, Wichita State University political science professor.

"He is viewed as being part of the very conservative segment of the party and some of those social issue

"This is one of those races where they are going for the bacon right down to the wire."

Ken Ciboski,
Wichita State University

areas are what is hurting Phill Kline," Ciboski said.

Normally, most attention is focused on the governor's race, but this year's bout between Democratic Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and conservative Republican Jim Barnett so far hasn't created a lot of political fireworks.

Enter the scrappy, snappy duo of Kline and Morrison.

"You have two candidates with aggressive personalities," Ciboski said. "It won't be one of those quiet races. This is one of those races where they are going for the bacon, right down to the wire."

Each candidate is trying to sell himself as the best protector of children against predators and molesters.

"It's something parents fear and it attracts voters," said Bob Beatty, Washburn University political science professor. "The real chunk of

voters are parents who see this as a big issue."

Each candidate also will be talking about the role of the attorney general and how his opponent isn't up to the task.

Morrison says Kline has taken the office into issues it shouldn't be involved in and is using it to promote the conservative agenda by going after abortion clinics.

Kline says there more to being attorney general than simply prosecuting criminals and he has served all Kansans well as the state's chief law enforcer.

"If Kline can convince 50 percent plus one that he is interested in doing things an attorney general is supposed to do, he will win," Beatty said. "Morrison must convince voters that Kline will want to spend time on things that have nothing to do with him being attorney general."

Following the dismal 18 percent

voter turnout in the primaries, there's reason to worry whether that apathy will spill over to November. Each camp is hoping for a large turnout. To that end, Kline and Morrison are unleashing their acrimony.

For instance, the Morrison camp criticized Kline for receiving a \$500 donation in 2002 from a son of the Rev. Fred Phelps, who protests funerals of U.S. troops killed in combat. Learning of the contribution, Kline quickly donated the same amount to a group that counters

Phelps' protests.

Kline scored Morrison for supporting legislation in 2000 that he says resulted in early release for many inmates. Morrison contends Kline has misrepresented the measure.

And so it goes. "Studies show more people will vote when there is a high stimulus campaign. The more intense the campaign, the more information voters learn and the more they vote and that is what Kline and Morrison want," Beatty said.

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