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Insights

Take Five: 5 Things You Need to Know About Indiana Government - May 2024

May 21, 2024

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Indiana Governor's Race

After a highly contentious primary race, US Senator Mike Braun won the Republican nomination for Governor over a field of six candidates. Braun led the field with 39.5% of the vote, followed by Lt. Governor Suzanne Crouch with 21.7%, Brad Chambers with 17.5%, Eric Doden with 11.9%, Jamie Reitenour with 4.8%, and Curtis Hill with 4.0%. This was the most expensive gubernatorial primary in Indiana's history, with over $45 million collectively spent by the candidates in advertising. Senator Braun is strongly favored to prevail this Fall against former Republican Superintendent of Public Instruction Jennifer McCormick, who was unopposed in her race for the Democratic nomination. The day after clinching the nomination, Senator Braun announced his selection of State Representative Julie McGuire (R-Indianapolis) as his pick for Lieutenant Governor, which is voted on at the Republican State Convention. While delegates to the convention typically confirm the gubernatorial nominee's choice for Lieutenant Governor, Noblesville pastor Micah Beckwith has campaigned for the position for the last year without aligning himself with Senator Braun or any of the other candidates.

State Legislative Primary Winners

At the state level, incumbent Representatives and Senators largely retained their positions with two notable exceptions. Senator David Vinzant in Lake County, who was caucused into his seat when Gary Mayor Eddie Melton left the Senate, lost to Gary Councilman Mark Spencer. In the House, long-time State Representative Sharon Negele was beaten by Warren County Councilman Matthew Commons in a race that was focused on rural representation and issues.

In addition to these races featuring incumbents, there were some heavily contested open-seat Republican House primaries.

- House District 24 (Schaibley): Former Colts punter Hunter Smith defeated businessman Bill Gutrich 61.5% to 38.5%.
- House District 29 (Goodrich): Alaina Shonkwiler prevailed with 59.2% of the vote over former Hamilton County Library Board Member Laura Alerding's 40.8%.
- House District 51 (Zent): Realtor Tony Isa defeated Dr. Rhonda Sharp in this Northeast Indiana race by a margin of 57.2% to 42.8%.
- House District 53 (Cherry): Former Holcomb aide Ethan Lawson emerged victorious from a four-way field with 33.8% of the vote, followed by businessman Kevin Mandrell with 26.3%.

- House District 90 (Speedy): In another four-way field, former deputy attorney general Andrew Ireland currently holds a slight lead over Elizabeth Williams by a margin of 38.2% to 36.7%.

Interim Study Committees

The Indiana General Assembly's Legislative Council, which consists of leadership from the four legislative caucuses, met last week to approve topics to be discussed by interim study committees, including committees created pursuant to a statutory directive. The interim study committee process allows lawmakers, and in some cases non-legislative experts in certain fields, to discuss items in greater detail than what the compressed timeframe of the legislative session often allows. Certain study committees will adopt recommendations for legislation to be considered during the 2025 Legislative Session, though that is not required. The complete list of topics that were assigned can be found here. The committees are limited to consideration of only those topics assigned. We expect members to be appointed to the committees sometime in June, with most committees not meeting until later this summer or early this fall. Committees must adopt a final report that details their work by November 1st.

Federal Reschedule of Marijuana and Implications for Indiana

On April 30, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) announced that it planned to move marijuana to Schedule III from Schedule I under the Controlled Substances Act, which puts the DEA in alignment with a similar recommendation from the US Department of Health and Human Services last year. This move could make research on the potential medical benefits of marijuana easier to conduct but would not result in any concrete policy changes on legalization of marijuana for medical or recreational use in the near-term in Indiana, absent additional action at the state level. Legislators studied the legalization of adult-use cannabis during the 2023 interim, but those studies did not result in any legislation that moved during the 2024 session, and the topic is not scheduled for study in any of year's interim committees. When asked about why the issue was not assigned this year, Senate President Pro Tempore Rod Bray stated "The topic, especially if the federal government does make a change, obviously is relevant… But we've had a couple of summers of public hearings on those and it's one of the reasons it didn't get selected this year." More information on this topic is available from the Congressional Research Service here.

Continued Focus on State and Local Tax Reform

The State and Local Tax Reform Task Force will continue to look at property tax issues during this year's interim study committees, as property taxes continue to increase for Hoosiers and after House and Senate Republicans were unable to come to agreement on various proposals made to provide property tax relief during this year's legislative session. The Task Force, which is authorized through June of 2025, was also approved to study school districts' use of debt and the possibility of capping the amount of operating referendum tax that school districts can levy, as well as possibly expanding the use of the petition and remonstrance process for local government projects. The Task Force will also consider whether to change the base tax rate for agricultural land, as projections show a significant increase in that rate coming soon based on historic averages. This committee's work will be particularly important as the state will be crafting a new two-year budget during the 2025 legislative session.

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