

ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

GOP candidates crowd 2014 governor's race

By: [Jeremy Duda](#) November 8, 2013



Next year's primary is shaping up to be the hottest contest for a Republican gubernatorial nomination in more than 20 years.

With the general election one year away, most political observers say the crowded GOP field is essentially a three-way race between Secretary of State Ken Bennett, state Treasurer Doug Ducey and former GoDaddy executive Christine Jones. If Mesa Mayor Scott Smith enters the fray, many believe he'll be a formidable contender as well. The winner, politicians say, could get the nomination with less than 30 percent of the vote. In the meantime, Democratic nominee-in-waiting Fred DuVal, is biding his time. DuVal is running unopposed in the Democratic primary, which will allow him to stockpile campaign cash, avoid direct attacks and wait for a bruised and battered Republican nominee to emerge. Opinions differ on how strong the GOP candidates are. All have their strengths.

The candidate most frequently mentioned as the potential frontrunner is Ducey, though the opinion is far from universal. Ducey, the founder of the ice cream franchise Cold Stone Creamery, has a broad base of support that includes business organizations and social conservatives. He is also expected to be an exceptionally strong fundraiser. Bennett, who spent four years as Senate president before becoming secretary of state, has probably the highest name identification of any candidate in the race. He has a strong base of support in rural Arizona, especially his home of Yavapai County, and an endearing personal style. Jones can bank on her business background at the web domain giant GoDaddy, an enormously successful Arizona business. Tongues are wagging about her potential personal wealth, and she is expected to be a big self-funder in the race. And some say she could gain

at least a little benefit from being the only woman in a field full of men.

The candidates have their weaknesses as well.

Some question whether Jones, whose campaign hit a couple of early hiccups, is a serious contender. Others wonder whether Bennett will be able to compete against well-funded opponents with only Clean Elections money. And Ducey is largely unknown to the electorate. He was expected to benefit more than anyone from a substantial increase in Arizona's campaign contribution limits, but the courts blocked those limits from going into effect, throwing a potential wrench into his fundraising machine. In addition, other Republicans who aren't widely viewed as serious contenders can still have an impact on the race. GOP politicians largely believe Sen. Al Melvin and especially former Maricopa County Attorney Andrew Thomas can't win the nomination, but can still take a chunk of the vote.

No dominant frontrunner

Republican campaign consultant Nathan Sproul said the other GOP candidates and the "chattering class" largely view Ducey as the frontrunner because of his perceived fundraising ability. Early polling shows Ducey starting with fairly low support, the consultant said, but he'll have plenty of money to build it.

But that could be a detriment to the state treasurer if the rest of the field gangs up on him, Sproul said.

"If I were running another campaign, my first priority would be to keep him as low as possible in the polls and keep him from gaining traction," Sproul said.

While Ducey has a lot of potential, Sproul said Bennett is probably ahead of the pack at this stage. Sproul said he has seen several polls showing Bennett with an early lead. The question, he said, is whether Bennett can hold onto it.

"I think Bennett starts with a substantial lead in the polls. The question is, how solid is his support and can it move?" Sproul said.

Chris Baker, also a Republican political consultant, said if he had to pick a frontrunner at this point in the race, it would be Ducey. But he is far less of a favorite than people think, Baker said.

"You've got three candidates in Bennett, Ducey and Jones, all of whom are relatively unknown statewide, and none of them are necessarily in a dominating position with voters," Baker said.

Baker said Bennett is probably the only GOP candidate right now with any real base of support. But he thinks it was a mistake for Bennett to run with Clean Elections, which provides about \$753,000 for gubernatorial races and allows candidates to raise an additional \$56,000 in seed money.

Stan Barnes, a lobbyist and former lawmaker, said Capitol insiders are focused primarily on Bennett and Ducey as the contenders, but many are awaiting Smith's decision on the race. Jones, he said, may not be up to the task.

Jones generated unflattering headlines when she made inaccurate comments claiming Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio put water in the desert for illegal immigrants so they didn't die while crossing the Rio Grande, which doesn't flow into Arizona, and about the percentage of

Arpaio's deputies who are Latino. Revelations that she was convicted of a DUI in 2006 became public shortly afterward.

"It may be unfair, and politics itself is not fair, but the early line on Jones is she's not ready for prime time," Barnes said. "In her style and rhetoric, she does not evoke the feeling of executive leadership that she may desire."

But others say Jones' potential ability to self-fund her campaign makes her an automatic contender. Sproul said Jones hasn't had a good rollout for her campaign, but noted that she has a lot of time to recover from her "minor flubs" before the August 2014 primary.

Lobbyist Gibson McKay agreed.

"It's a year out. People won't remember that in a year," McKay said of Jones' early missteps.

If Jones has money to spend and runs a good race, Baker said she could be a contender.

"Christine Jones has probably no name ID right now. But that isn't a barrier to winning," he said.

Unique blend of experiences

Jones, an attorney who served as general counsel and executive vice president for GoDaddy, touts her business background and is quick to emphasize that she's new to politics. She also said she has experience in shaping policy after testifying before Congress on GoDaddy's behalf on a wide range of Internet-related issues.

"I bring a unique set of experiences, from policymaking to being a CPA to being a lawyer to building a technology company. I just have this sort of unique blend of experiences that nobody else quite has," Jones said. "It's a significant strength, particularly when the other two leading contenders appear to be one who has no policy authority whatsoever, and one who has been part of the Legislature that's dysfunctional."

Bennett and Ducey boast of a combination of public and private sector experience. Ducey is a relative newcomer to elected politics whose first campaign was his successful race for state treasurer in 2010. He said he will focus both on his leadership of Cold Stone Creamery and his role as state treasurer, including his part in helping to defeat Proposition 204, a 2012 ballot measure that sought to make permanent the temporary 1-cent sales tax increase shepherded through by Gov. Jan Brewer.

"If you talk about the leadership and team-building demonstrated in how we fought Proposition 204 and stopped a \$1 billion permanent sales tax increase, that we were actually able to keep a temporary tax temporary, that's something that we'll ask the electorate to look at," Ducey said. "I also think that the ability to look at a local idea and turn it into a national and now international brand will be messages that we'll communicate throughout the campaign."

While primarily known for his time at the Senate and the Secretary of State's Office, Bennett is also in the oil and gas business. He noted that he has 30 years of private sector experience and 25 years of public service, which he said is more experience than Ducey has in either sector.

"The combination of the two is what I think will appeal to voters. There's lots of good people from the business side. There's lots of good people with some public experience side. I think I have probably the broadest depth of a combination of both there," Bennett said. State treasurer is a fairly anonymous post with little real power or authority. But its prominence has changed in recent years. Sproul said Ducey's predecessor, Dean Martin, transformed the office by using it as a fount of GOP opposition to former Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano. Ducey has used it well, too, he said, but has done it while serving with a Republican governor, and has quietly worked behind the scenes to build a strong coalition of supporters.

That coalition includes numerous business community figures, Tucson auto dealer and major GOP contributor Jim Click, whose support generally brings substantial fundraising, former U.S. Sen. Jon Kyl and Cathi Herrod, president of the Center for Arizona Policy, an influential Christian social conservative organization.

Fundraising powerhouse

Thanks in part to his business background and broad support, many expect Ducey to be a fundraising powerhouse. He has also shown a propensity for self-funding after putting \$600,000 of his own money into his 2010 treasurer's race.

Ducey would not say whether he planned to self-fund in his gubernatorial campaign.

"We're going to be raising money," he said. "We've got an early start and have high expectations."

Jones said she plans to put some of her own money into her campaign, though she wouldn't say how much. But she said she is focusing on fundraising as well, and is soliciting small-dollar contributions from as many people as she can.

"Inasmuch as I've asked and will be asking other people to contribute, I'm certainly willing to contribute myself. But I think the message to take away from this is we're going to have the resources to be heard," Jones said. Bennett disputed the conventional wisdom that he'll have trouble competing while relying on public funding. Though that likely won't buy him much television airtime, he said he's taking a "one-on-one" approach and is focusing on building grassroots support.

He said he also expects to get outside help, though he said he didn't know of anyone specifically who planned to run an independent expenditure to boost his campaign.

"I think there are probably going to be some people who are supportive through independent expenditures," Bennett said.

Sproul said he expects both Bennett and Ducey to have independent expenditures supporting them because of their business backgrounds and connections.

Though many observers tout his higher name ID as a major strength of his campaign, Bennett said he isn't relying on it to be a major factor in the race.

"There's going to be a big jump from the good name ID that I think I have, but it's going to have to go way above that for the governor's race," he said. "Maybe I have a bit of an advantage, but I don't think that's a big deal."

Pragmatic problem solver

Mesa's Scott Smith could shake the race up significantly if he gets in. He has made a name for himself as a successful mayor in one of Arizona's largest cities, also serves as president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, has a strong business background and is viewed by some as potentially big fundraiser.

Smith is known as a moderate Republican, which is often viewed as a detriment in GOP primaries. But with most of the candidates expected to hew to the right, Barnes said Smith could win by occupying the more moderate niche.

"He is willing to be the pragmatic center-right problem solver," Barnes said. "Among the five people that have declared intention, there's no one playing that role."

Melvin, R-SaddleBrooke, disputed the notion that he's not a legitimate contender. The third-term senator said he's the most conservative candidate who can win the general election and has a far more-developed platform than any other candidate. He said Thomas, who was disbarred after leaving office, has some issues to overcome.

If elected, Melvin said he would eliminate Arizona's income tax, create a school voucher program, pursue "Texas-style tort reform" and push for the creation of a deep-water port in Sonora, Mexico.

"I've got very bold ideas," Melvin said. "(Voters) don't want a bunch of buzzwords. ... And that's what they're getting from the others."

Melvin is running a grassroots-oriented campaign and plans to visit every city, town and county in Arizona. He said he can compete with Clean Elections money, in large part because he believes his campaign consultant, Constantin Querard, is a game-changer.

"If he wasn't my consultant I wouldn't be running. But he chose to take this campaign on," Melvin said of Querard. "It's not a slam dunk. But I would not be running unless I thought I could win."

Some observers don't even expect Thomas to get on the ballot, let alone be a contender. After being disbarred for questionable prosecutions of county supervisors, judges and others, Thomas' reputation is severely damaged. He still insists that he was unfairly targeted by corrupt judges and other enemies for his conservative views, and still has a loyal coterie of followers, but Thomas is largely a toxic figure in Republican politics these days.

Democrat waiting in the wings

While the Republicans beat up on each other for the next 10 months, DuVal will be waiting in the wings.

Though Arizona is a conservative state where Democrats traditionally struggle in statewide races, some say a bruising GOP primary could work to his advantage in the general election.

DuVal is running as a centrist candidate. He acknowledged that it will help if the Republican candidates all run to the right in the primary.

"I will be the only centrist in the race," DuVal predicted. DuVal said the first job of the next governor will be to promote job creation and a strong economy. To do that, he said, Arizona needs to keep taxes low and regulations fair.

Like Bennett and Ducey, he promotes himself as a candidate with a strong combination of public and private sector experience. He touts his years of public service in former Gov. Bruce Babbitt's administration, the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Clinton White House and the Arizona Board of Regents. But he also has a business background that includes his own consulting firm and his role as an executive at Clean Energy Fuels, an energy concern started by oilman T. Boone Pickens. "I would say that bringing my business perspective to this race is very, very important," DuVal said. "The political rhetoric is easy. The solutions are hard." DuVal is expected to be a strong fundraiser, though, like Ducey, he could be hurt by the recent overturning of Arizona's higher new campaign contribution limits. Despite Arizona's strong Republican leanings, lobbyist and former lawmaker Chris Herstam said DuVal will be a legitimate contender. Unless Smith gets into the race, Herstam predicted that Bennett or Ducey will be the GOP nominee, and that DuVal would pose a serious challenge.

"Fred DuVal will be extremely organized, well-financed and unopposed in his primary. That makes him a serious Democrat threat for the Ninth Floor. The 2014 general election will be fun for political junkies," Herstam said.

McKay said DuVal starts at a disadvantage because of the voter registration deficit that Democrats face in Arizona. But DuVal will have broad appeal to the electorate, McKay said, and a bloody Republican primary could boost his chances.

"DuVal is probably licking his chops, watching to see if the Republicans will self-destruct. But it's a tough state for someone like DuVal to win in," McKay said.

Barnes also said DuVal's best hope is to benefit from a "Republican civil war" in the primary.

"DuVal is erudite, sophisticated, very likeable, smart. He also has a 'D' behind his name. That means he starts with a few hundred thousand vote deficit. It's a challenge for our statewide Democrats," Barnes said.

DuVal may also benefit if Libertarian or independent candidates take a chunk out of the Republican nominee. Libertarian standard-bearer Barry Hess has expressed an interest in a fourth consecutive campaign for governor, and Lake Havasu City radio station owner Rick L. Murphy, a former Republican congressional candidate with a history of self-funding, has filed to run as an independent.