

Few fireworks as Illinois GOP governor hopefuls share stage for first time

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CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

WASHINGTON, Ill. — Far ahead of his Republican primary opponents in the most recent public polling, Darren Bailey told a half-filled central Illinois auditorium in that he expected to be “the punching bag.”

Instead, Bailey walked away relatively unscathed from a candidate forum Thursday evening as the four Republican candidates for governor struck a conciliatory tone with one another. The four candidates preached unity after years of intraparty conflict, called for an end to the state’s robust protections for immigrants and took aim at Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker while pitching themselves as the most electable candidate in a general election.

It was the first time the candidates — Bailey, former conservative think tank president Ted Dabrowski; video gambling mogul Rick Heidner; and DuPage County Sheriff James Mendrick — shared a stage. It comes just a few weeks ahead of the kickoff to early voting, and two months before Republicans choose a nominee to take on Pritzker, who is seeking a third term, in November.

“We’ve got to make sure that we commit ourselves right here — that on March 18, we stick together and we work together,” Bailey, the party’s 2022 nominee, said.

The fireworks were few and far between, with the candidates largely in alignment on their conservative visions for the state. Dabrowski took a few swings, suggesting Bailey, who lost to Pritzker by 12.5 percentage points and more than 500,000 votes in 2022, did not have enough appeal to win in the vote-rich Chicago suburbs. He also suggested Heidner’s past donations to Democrats were at odds with conservative values.

WINNING IN CHICAGO AREA

The Illinois GOP hasn’t won a statewide election in more than a decade, has been relegated to the superminority in the state legislature, holds just three of the state’s 17 congressional seats and occupies just two of the seven Illinois Supreme Court seats.

That reality framed the forum’s opening question: how the candidates planned to reverse the party’s fortunes in the suburban collar counties — once GOP strongholds that have drifted away as the party’s grown more rigid in its conservatism on social issues like abortion and gun rights. President Donald Trump also remains deeply unpopular in the northeast corner of the state.

“I know, and I feel confident that all of us are going to do well downstate,” Dabrowski said. “The question is going to be: Who can do well enough in Cook County and in the suburbs?”

Dabrowski, a resident of Wilmette and the son of immigrants from Poland and Ecuador, suggested that he could appeal to voters from Chicago’s wealthier North Shore communities to the patchwork of ethnic enclaves in the city and suburbs.

He said this sets him apart from Bailey, a farmer from downstate Xenia who lost all but one of the suburban collar counties while referring to Chicago as a “hellhole” over the course of his failed 2022 campaign.



Capitol News Illinois photo by Brenden Moore

Ted Dabrowski pitches his candidacy for governor as his primary opponents — video gambling mogul Rick Heidner, former state Sen. Darren Bailey and DuPage County Sheriff James Mendrick — listen during a forum sponsored by the Tazewell County Republican Party on Jan. 15, 2026.

Mendrick said his election as sheriff of the state’s second-most populous county is proof of his viability in this race. Both he and Dabrowski also suggested Republicans would appeal in Chicago’s African American community over the issue of immigration.

“They’re all flipping red,” Mendrick said. “They’re all going with Trump. The sanctuary state (policy) is driving them.”

However, a poll conducted by Emerson College earlier this month found Trump with an 82% disapproval rating among the state’s Black voters. By contrast, 71% approve of Pritzker’s job performance. Immigration ranked a distant sixth in terms of what the group believes are the most important issues facing the state. Mendrick added, however, that he’s “always ignored the polls.”

Whether it’s shown in a poll or an anecdote from the campaign trail, the top issue on voters’ minds is cost of living. The candidates criticized the state’s high property tax rates and each suggested implementing caps — though they were vague on how they would fill in funding gaps that could create for school districts and other local taxing bodies.

Bailey said that if they focus on that issue and can get Republican voters who’ve sat out past elections to the polls, they have a chance.

“We’ve got the message: affordability,” Bailey said. “Our property taxes are too high, energy costs are too high. We need more police officers on the streets. We need to repeal the SAFE-T Act. We need to improve education for our children. And people all over the state agree and believe in that. That’s how we will win in November.”

ENDING SANCTUARY STATUS

However, none of the candidates appeared willing to move off their conservative positions to win over voters despite Illinois’ Democratic lean. Dabrowski suggested instead that “Democrats are going to meet us” due to “extreme” policies from Pritzker, then listing off topics such as transgender girls having access to girl’s bathrooms and sports.

The state’s immigration policy was also front-and-center, with the candidates criticizing state spending in recent years on health care for undocumented immigrants and to address the migrant crisis caused by the busing of migrants from border states like Texas to Chicago in 2023 and 2024.

“We’re being washed out with a dependent society,” Mendrick said.

A February 2025 audit found the state had spent over \$1.6 billion on an immigrant health care programs from 2021 through 2024. Lawmakers and the governor ended the program that provided Medicaid-like benefits to immigrants aged 42-64 in the current fiscal year. The state also paused enrollment in an ongoing program serving immigrants age 65 and older.

Heidner, who jumped into the race in late October but whose campaign had been radio silent up until this week, added that undocumented people are “coming here and then just feeding off of us.”

The state’s TRUST Act, signed by then-Gov. Bruce Rauner, a Republican, in 2017, generally prohibits state and local law enforcement from assisting the federal government with immigration enforcement unless a federal criminal warrant is presented. All four said they support repealing the law and would withhold state funds from cities like Chicago that maintain sanctuary ordinances.

“We can’t be a sanctuary state,” Heidner said. “I’m on board with President Trump. I mean, we cannot house the world when we can’t take care of all our own citizens.”

They signaled support for Trump’s crackdown on illegal immigration. A targeted campaign in the Chicago region last year led to the arrests of 4,500 people in the country without authorization. But it also led to violent clashes between armed, masked federal agents and protesters.

Dabrowski said that Pritzker was “the one fomenting a lot of this problem in Illinois” by not cooperating with federal immigration authorities and by describing them as “jackbooted thugs,” among other names. There was no mention of language utilized by Trump, who has referred to protestors as “insurrectionists” and “domestic terrorists.”

“If we would have opened our doors for ICE to come in, they would have been in and out of here probably six to eight weeks to get the worst of the worst out of here,” Heidner added.

DEM DONATIONS ‘HUGE MISTAKE’

Though chummy with one another for most of the night, Dabrowski took Heidner to task for campaign donations to prominent Democrats, including a \$25,000 contribution to Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson in 2023 and a \$2,500 donation in 2015 to Kim Foxx, who was running for and later elected Cook County state’s attorney.

“I still can’t square up the values with giving money to somebody like Brandon Johnson and Kim Foxx, who have such different values, I think, from what we’re saying here — and I think that’s something that maybe needs to be answered,” Dabrowski said.

Heidner, who operates businesses in the city of Chicago, said he supported Paul Vallas in the 2023 mayoral election but agreed to help Johnson pay off some campaign debt.

“It was like cutting my arm off,” Heidner told the audience.

As for Foxx, the two-term state’s attorney who was one of the chief supporters of the state law that ended cash bail, Heidner had no defense, calling it a “huge mistake.”

“That one there I really can’t even forgive myself for, so I apologize for that,” Heidner said.

Though Bailey leads in recent polling, Dabrowski and Heidner have raised more cash. Heidner has donated more than \$1.25 million to his campaign while Dabrowski has raised more than \$1.5 million, mostly from a series of large donors.

Dabrowski said he’s the one who can compete financially with Pritzker in a general election — but also will be principled.

“There’s too many people who are breaking off and doing things with Democrats,” Dabrowski said. “We have to be principled with the conservative values that we all need and trust.”

Bailey, however, said that Republican voters should give him another shot.

“I have been that steadfast rock for you since 2019,” Bailey said. “I’ve stood, I’ve not wavered in my convictions, I’ve been your voice, and I intend to, hopefully, continue to be that voice of reasoning to all of Illinois, and especially the Democrat Party. We can win Illinois. We have the blueprint.”

DABROWSKI SUPPORT GROWS

Earlier in the day, more than a dozen current and former central Illinois Republican lawmakers endorsed Dabrowski, touting his credentials as a conservative policy wonk. They said they believe he can raise the money and build the broad support needed to end the party’s decadelong shutout from elected statewide office.

“There’s one person who has the best chance to get Illinois back on track as our governor, and that same person has the best chance to beat JB Pritzker,” said state Rep. Travis Weaver, R-Peoria, referring to Dabrowski. “When you thoughtfully consider who has the ability to win new voters, repair our state, attract support statewide and unite our party, the choice is clear, period.”

Dabrowski also added support from state Sens. Li Arellano, R-Dixon; Chris Balkema, R-Channahon; Sue Rezin, R-Morris; and Sally Turner, R-Beason; and state Reps. Regan Deering, R-Decatur; Bill Hauter, R-Morton; Kyle Moore, R-Quincy; Brandun Schweizer, R-Danville; and Dennis Tipword, R-Metamora.

It furthers the consolidation of establishment support around Dabrowski — and away from the party’s 2022 gubernatorial nominee, Bailey.

Capitol News Illinois is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news service that distributes state

government coverage to hundreds of news outlets statewide. It is funded pri-

marily by the Illinois Press Foundation and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.

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