

Back to Square 1 for GOP

As the national tide turns against Republicans, state officials seek to reverse wave

By Rick Pearson and John Chase, Tribune staff reporters. Tribune staff reporter Ted Gregory contributed to this report

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After four years in which Illinois Republicans lost their quarter-century hold on the governor's mansion, failed to field a credible candidate for the U.S. Senate and saw a former governor convicted on federal corruption charges, the GOP faithful learned something last week:

Things can get worse.

Not since Franklin D. Roosevelt scored a huge victory over Alf Landon in the 1936 presidential election have Illinois Republicans been completely shut out of statewide elected office, as well as being in the minority in the General Assembly and on the state Supreme Court.

In the aftermath, some question whether a rebuilding is needed, or a revolution.

Already, party insiders are discussing the status of state Republican Chairman Andy McKenna as well as the fate of Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson of Greenville. Watson suffered devastating losses and the Senate GOP will find itself next year all but irrelevant in a chamber that now has a Democratic super-majority.

State Sen. Kirk Dillard of Hinsdale, the DuPage County GOP chairman, is considering running for the Senate Republican leadership.

On the federal level, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park, who survived an election scare in an increasingly Democratic North Shore district, is considering a 2008 U.S. Senate challenge to two-term Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin, said one Republican close to the congressman.

McKenna said leading Republicans have told him they would like him to continue as chairman "and I have the passion to continue to do it."

He contended Republicans at all levels in Illinois found themselves at the mercy of a

national environment favoring Democrats: "We would have been more successful if that hadn't occurred."

Roskam seen as model

McKenna points to Peter Roskam's victory in the open-seat west suburban 6th Congressional District race against Democrat Tammy Duckworth as a template for the GOP's future, investing in ground forces and targeted-household data-files to recruit voters.

"Peter Roskam demonstrates what can happen when you put the right kind of field organization in place and have a candidate who can win on the issues, even in suburban communities that have trended away from us," McKenna said. "Now we've got to build that same thing across the state."

Yet Roskam's victory came in a longtime Republican congressional district less affected by Democratic gains than other suburban areas. The multimillion dollar cost to give Roskam an edge points to the difficulties that the GOP may face in years ahead.

The GOP also finds itself struggling from the after-effects of a scandal that led to the conviction of former Gov. George Ryan and helped Democrats to win the governor's mansion in 2002.

And it continues to witness an ideological split between social moderates who have dominated the party leadership and social conservatives looking to gain control.

A vocal minority of conservatives advocated a rejection of failed Republican governor candidate Judy Baar Topinka, and instead preferred the re-election of Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich, hoping that would help them oust the moderate state party leadership.

Struggling with moderation

Some conservatives argue that moderates have corrupted the party infrastructure for their own personal benefit. They also have long complained that the party's moderate leadership has done little to back conservative candidates when they have won primary nomination.

Yet Alan Keyes' 2004 U.S. Senate candidacy, which was quickly crushed beneath the weight of the candidate's bombastic self-promotion, also symbolizes the credibility problem that conservatives face.

"I'm not sure this will ever change," Dallas Ingemunson, a longtime state GOP official

and the Kendall County Republican Party chairman, said of the infighting.

Where the party turns for its new leaders is likely to set the stage for new battles. Members of the predominant moderate wing argue that with the state turning increasingly Democratic, Republican candidates of the future will need to adopt a more centrist approach.

"The voters of Illinois have always rewarded moderate candidates of both parties and if the Republican Party can get that through its head in the state of Illinois, and nominate candidates that can not only win the primary but can win the general election, then we'll do very well," said former Gov. James Thompson. Thompson is one of the founding fathers of the GOP's moderate wing and led the 26-year string of Republican governors broken by Blagojevich.

Republican state Sen. Bill Brady of Bloomington said the state GOP needs to focus more on developing common ground between conservative and moderate elements.

"It comes to leadership that focuses on what we can accomplish together," said Brady, a conservative who lost to Judy Baar Topinka in the March GOP primary for governor. "There's no pro-life Republican that's going to convince every Republican that they should be pro-life. But if we focus on issues that unite us and build a stronger team, understanding that nobody is going to agree on everything, that's what is important."

Brady has come under fire from some conservative elements who contended he played a spoiler role in the primary by taking away votes from conservative businessman James Oberweis and allowing the socially moderate Topinka to win the nomination.

"To think I would spend 120 hours a week away from my friends and family and business and invest tens of thousands of dollars on this just to be a stooge for somebody else borders on lunacy," he said.

Topinka's loss on Tuesday brought an end to her 26 years in public service, and it marks the beginning of at least a generational change for the GOP as it looks for new leaders.

Next generation

In addition to Brady, leading Republicans also cite House Minority Leader Tom Cross of Oswego, state Sen. Dan Rutherford of Chenoa, who was defeated in the race for secretary of state, and Kirk as potential leaders and candidates.

Dillard said the state GOP also should look to the suburbs for future candidates, including DuPage County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom, Kane County Board Chairwoman Karen McConaughay, state Sens. Christine Radogno of Lemont, who lost a bid for state treasurer, and Pamela Althoff of McHenry.

"We're all disappointed with the results," McKenna said. "Right now, it's difficult. But there is a path there."

rap30@aol.com

jchase@tribune.com

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