

SNG-Nowlan-GOP going all out-9-30-13

Illinois GOP going all out for governorship

By Jim Nowlan

Illinois Republican leaders see the 2014, non-presidential year elections as their opportunity to recapture the governor's mansion (not that anyone lives there anymore) and claw back a few seats in Congress. Their chances are good.

By all visible indications, Democrats are the 220-pound bullies to the GOP weaklings. The state legislature is dominated by the Dems, who hold big majorities in both chambers, and the party holds a 12-6 majority in the state's congressional delegation, including three seats in the once impregnable GOP suburbs.

In presidential elections, Republicans don't even contest that top race in Illinois, conceding it to the Dems, which only weakens GOP candidates down the ballot.

But the dominance is overstated. I talked recently with Jack Dorgan, the new chair of the Illinois state GOP. He contends there are 350,000 hard core Republicans and only a few more, 357,000 or so, hard core Dems. These are voters who consistently vote in their party's respective primaries.

Dorgan contends all the rest of the state's 4 million or so likely voters in 2014 are "savable," that is, potential GOP voters at least for some offices, such as the governorship.

Further, the GOP fares better in off-year (non-presidential) elections, as their faithful tend to turn out in higher percentages than do the Democrats.

For example, in 2010, state Sen. Bill Brady lost to Quinn by only one percent of the total vote and GOPers Judy Baar Topinka and Dan Rutherford captured statewide offices.

And the Dems controlled the 2011 redistricting process, drawing boundaries that accentuated the Democrats' votes and thus their majorities.

(By the way, gerrymandering by either party can be eliminated by a constitutional amendment proposal petition drive being conducted at present, which would create an independent commission to draw district lines. Sign it.)

The state GOP has been on the ropes and broke, riven by ideological and internal divisions. The party recently elevated Jack Dorgan to the post of chair.

Dorgan is a lifelong political operative and self-styled "mechanic," who is focused laser-like on winning rather than ideology.

Dorgan says the Republican National Committee is all-in with money for Illinois to recruit staff and set up sophisticated, computer-based get-out-the-vote operations of the sort that catapulted Obama into a second term.

The GOP has four attractive candidates for governor. Each has his strengths. State senator Brady has the loyalty of many deep-seated conservatives. State senator Kirk Dillard is well-known among the GOP in the vote-rich suburbs.

State treasurer Dan Rutherford has for years been fine-tuning a network of supporters throughout the state. And new-to-politics, megabucks investor Bruce Rauner has the money to buy himself a place at the table in the primary.

If the four candidates can avoid beating up one another too badly in the primary, any one could win the governorship over a crafty yet vulnerable Gov. Pat Quinn.

I have been guest-lecturing in college classrooms for friends recently. In each class, I give the students a quick political philosophy quiz (you can determine yours by googling The World's Small Political Quiz on the Internet).

I have been struck by how many of the students, often a majority in each class, end up not as conservatives or liberals, but as libertarians. That is, they are conservative on economic issues but more liberal on social issues.

In that regard, if the Republicans could change their position on an issue like abortion from a litmus test of party loyalty to a constructive dialogue on how to reduce abortion, the party could, I contend, capture many of these young voters.

Nobody I know is “for” abortion. My arch-conservative and GOP activist friend Perry Klopfenstein of Gridley has come up with a “pro-reduction strategy.” Perry would bring conservatives and moderates and maybe others together to forge policies to reduce the incidence of abortion, which is not likely ever to be completely eliminated.

Republicans need to start thinking that way if they are to help their candidates win elections in Illinois.