

SNG-Nowlan-Can GOP win in IL-9-17-12

Can GOP win statewide in Illinois?

With President Obama holding a commanding lead in Illinois, and with most statewide offices in Illinois in recent years held by Democrats, a reader inquired: Can Republicans win statewide in Illinois anymore?

Republicans can win statewide in our state, but the deck is stacked against them in demographic terms, and according to elections expert Kent Redfield, "It will take 'the right kind' of Republican to win."

Illinois has been trending more Democratic for decades. I wrote a paper on this topic back in the 1980s. At that time, University of Illinois trustees were elected statewide, but voters knew almost nothing about them except the party banner under which they ran.

Thus, students of elections used election results for UI candidates as a substitute for party identification. From the 1940s to the 1980s, the Republican vote trend line for UI trustees declined slowly on a moving average from about 52 percent of the two-party vote to about 48 percent.

Demographics probably played a big part in this trend, as it has to the present. Illinois has been losing white voters and gaining those of Hispanics. In the last three decades, Illinois has lost about two million whites (that many more have moved out of the state than have moved in, on a net basis), mostly to the South and Southwest. The whites who left tended to vote Republican.

In the past decade, Illinois would have lost population if it weren't for the increase of 475,000 Hispanics.

In polls of the past decade, about 10 percent more Illinois voters have identified as Democrats than as Republicans. About one-third of voters identify as independents but many of them lean toward the Dems or the GOP, leaving about 10 percent who are truly undecided.

Some recent population trends may benefit Republicans. Democratic Chicago continues to lose population (although they often leave for the nearby suburbs), and numbers of African-Americans in Illinois declined by 4 percent in the last census, as some appear to be moving “back home” to the South.

So how do Republicans win statewide when the state appears to be solidly Blue (Democratic)?

A retired professor of politics at the University of Illinois at Springfield, Redfield believes successful Republican candidates have to appeal to those suburbanites who are moderate on social issues like gun control and abortion as well as to the growing numbers of Hispanics.

He cites the multiple successes of former GOP governors Jim Thompson and Jim Edgar, both of whom were socially moderate.

At the same time it should be noted that social conservative Bill Brady of Bloomington lost his gubernatorial bid in 2010 to Pat Quinn by only 44,000 votes. Redfield thinks that if suburban Republican state senator Kirk Dillard had been the standard bearer in 2010, he would have defeated Quinn.

Spending on media can also make a difference. If a wealthy GOP candidate spent two to three times as much as his or her opponent on television ads, such might persuade enough voters to support him or her.

For example, in 2006 Democratic governor Rod Blagojevich outspent his opponent Judy Baar Topinka about five to one, primarily on negative ads, and he won re-election even though he himself was under a cloud. Indeed, the moderate Topinka bounced back and was elected as state comptroller in 2010.

Given the strong statewide party identification bias to the Democrats, the Dems are likely to maintain majorities in the state legislature and among the congressional delegation in the years to come.

On the other hand, once-Democratic Southern Illinois has been trending more Republican in recent years, primarily on social issues. The problem for the GOP is that there are few people, and thus few districts, in that part of the state.

Regardless of my pessimistic assessment for the GOP, Republicans are jockeying enthusiastically for a chance to contest the 2014 governor's race, and the same will probably be true for the U.S. Senate, if Democrat Dick Durbin decides to step down.

So, attractive GOP candidates can win the 400-meter race to statewide election; they just start about five to ten yards behind the Democrats.