

SNG-Illinois GOP convention-5-30-16

Illinois GOP and Trump: denial, grieving, acceptance

By Jim Nowlan

I covered the Illinois Republican State Convention this past weekend [or “recently”; meeting was May 20-21] in Peoria. I have been to many such over the decades as a delegate. I offer here a few snapshots from the confab, and a few observations.

What goes on at a state party convention, you might ask?

Not much, I might respond, yet that would be unfair.

Prior to our primary elections instituted a century ago during the Progressive Era, party convention delegates named candidates for state offices. Lacking that responsibility, there is little substantive business at conventions today.

Yet the affair brings together a thousand folks from all over the state. This gives party leaders an opportunity to gauge the mood of the party faithful before the November election, to reassure them about their party’s great potential, and to provide training on how to maximize the vote.

The night before the floor session, delegates grazed the hospitality rooms sponsored by officials to gossip and find out what people really think.

Before the Saturday general session in the ballroom of the Peoria Civic Center, vendors in the corridors hawked buttons and apparel that proclaimed the positive (Make America Great Again) and the profane (Trump the Bitch).

I thought former Democrat and now apparent GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump might be of concern at the gathering. He wasn’t.

As one sage observer put it: Many conservative delegates have gone through the successive stages of denial, grieving and acceptance.

While the enthusiasm at the mention of Trump's name wasn't foot-stompin' passionate, it appeared real—after all, anything is better than Hillary, said one speaker after another.

It matters not in Illinois.

If history be a guide, political operatives in both parties have already declared Illinois a “blue state,” ceding the state's presidential electors to the Democrat nominee. Parties will save limited resources for a very few so-called battleground states such as Wisconsin, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, where the national contest will be decided.

Gov. Bruce Rauner gave an energetic talk in which he declared yet again that he won't sign an unbalanced budget nor a pact that lacks his business-friendly reforms.

Delegates gave the Gov. Rainer their backs, as we say nowadays, with a standing ovation.

Back on the convention floor, I thought the applause for U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk was tepid. Kirk did not attend the gathering, and he has come out in support of same sex marriage this year, as he battles Democrat Tammy Duckworth to retain his seat.

The one piece of unscripted business during the three-hour general floor session came over approval of the party platform and was indeed about same sex marriage.

You and I will never see or hear again about this platform, which scurried its way into the dustbin of history immediately after adoption. Yet this process of shaping and agreeing upon party positions and values helps GOP leaders get a feel for where the faithful stand philosophically.

And they stand at the conservative end of the spectrum. From the dais, every speaker felt it obligatory to thunder his or her commitment to the conservative principles of the party.

The platform committee had earlier recommended to the delegates, by a 11-7 vote, a softening of language from the 2012 platform, which emphatically endorsed “the principle of marriage between one man and one woman. . . .No law should undermine the importance of that union.”

The committee language would have changed that to read, in part: “Non-traditional families are worthy of the same respect and legal protections as traditional families.”

But the delegates would have none of the softening.

There was a brief but spirited debate on the floor. State Rep. Terri Bryant of Murphysboro pointed out that conservative southern Illinois is the only place the GOP has been picking up seats in the legislature.

“The 2012 platform (against same sex marriage) distinguishes us from Democrats (and helps us with voters),” declared Bryant.

Proponents of a softening felt it important to move beyond the issue now that the U.S. Supreme Court has spoken and would make the party more appealing to moderates.

Of the slightly more than 900 delegates on the floor, 782 voted to reject the platform committee and retain the 2012 language about marriage being between a man and a woman.

Delegates appeared to leave the convention floor satisfied they had fulfilled their duties to stand up for the Grand Old Party, girded to carry the good fight to voters in November.