Written by Rich Miller Friday, 27 February 2009 15:27



Every two years, the Illinois Republican Party tears itself apart over a piece of legislation that supposedly would allow rank-and-file party members to have more say in party affairs This year may be worse than usual, however.

Senate Bill 600, sponsored by Senator Chris Lauzen (R-Aurora), would stop the practice of allowing Republican township, ward, and precinct committee members to elect the state central committee. The bill would instead force the GOP to adopt the same rules as the Democrats and allow primary voters to elect the state central committee.

Most people don't care about this, and I can understand if you're with them. But since this tiny little change has been one of the most divisive issues in the Illinois GOP's recent history, it's worth a closer look.

The concept has always been vigorously opposed by the Republican establishment, partly because of who is pushing it. Lauzen is among a large handful of "insurgent conservatives," whose most prominent member is ultraconservative activist Jack Roeser. The insurgents have sharply criticized the state party for its alleged top-down insider ways and its refusal to allow them a seat at the table.

The "powers that be" have complete disdain for the Roeser/Lauzen types. The insiders view the insurgents as troublemakers who can't win elections and instead blame party leaders for their own failures. They worry that the bill would spark endless intraparty battles and divert precious financial resources away from their attempts to fight the Democrats. Plus, they simply don't want to give up any power to "those people."

The ultraconservative activists say they want elections because the insiders have locked them out of the system. They were enraged last year at the state GOP convention in Decatur when delegates voted to pass a resolution in favor of retaining the status quo. The insurgents claim the vote was rigged.

The GOP Establishment Versus "Those People"

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Republican state legislators are put smack-dab in the middle of this fight every time the bill is introduced. Two years ago, the bill was unanimously passed by the Senate, but House GOP leadership strong-armed the House Republican sponsor into giving up the bill, then sat on it until the session clock ran out. That, of course, infuriated the insurgents.

The state Senate's new GOP leader has been put into an awkward position by the legislation. Christine Radogno is a moderate Republican who was allied with the "insider" faction and was vigorously opposed by the insurgents. She hasn't yet fully consolidated control over her caucus, and this legislation is not making her task any easier. Complicating matters further, Radogno has taken a strong stand in favor of calling a special election to fill Barack Obama's former U.S. Senate seat, so opposing a bill to open up the party process to voters would appear hypocritical.

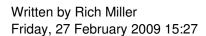
Radogno signed on as a co-sponsor of Lauzen's bill, which surprised the heck out of other party leaders. The bill was set for a committee vote last week, and legislators' phones were ringing all day from upset people on both sides of the issue.

Things got even weirder when Republican Senators Bill Brady and Matt Murphy removed themselves as co-sponsors of the legislation. Brady is running for governor, and Murphy is seriously considering a bid for Cook County Board president. Murphy was backed by Roeser the first time he ran, and both Murphy and Brady are very conservative. But they apparently believed that winning support from party leaders was more important at this stage of the game.

The Democrats, of course, love this bill. With their own party facing one nightmare after another, anything they can do to weaken, divide, and distract the GOP further is viewed as a good thing.

Republican Party insiders completely freaked when they learned that Representative Paul Froehlich, a former conservative Republican who switched to the Democratic Party, had filed to sponsor the bill when it gets to the House. With a Democrat controlling the bill, the Republicans couldn't slow-walk the legislation into oblivion again, so they figured that House Speaker Michael Madigan was behind the maneuver. The Republicans worry that Madigan could use the bill to essentially blackmail GOP leaders to get in line when it comes time to vote on tax hikes, or anything else he chooses.

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Last week's vote was eventually delayed. But this fight is far from over. And if you still wonder why the Republicans would bother to wage a civil war over this issue, you're not alone.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and <u>TheCapitolFaxBlog.com</u>