

Illinois House Races More Interesting Than Expected

Written by Rich Miller

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No real drama was expected out of Illinois House campaigns this year. The Democrats have a lock on the chamber. A combination of a new and loss-proof legislative-district map and the political might of House Speaker Michael Madigan's campaign operation guarantee that the Republicans can't take the House for the next 10 years – barring a cataclysmic political event that would have to surpass the Great 1994 Republican Landslide. In other words, unless Chicago is nuked by North Korea, the Dems are gonna run the Illinois House.

 But, all of a sudden, political insiders are taking a closer look at a handful of House races, because those contests could decide who will be the next House Republican Leader.

 Representative Beth Coulson (a Glenview Republican) is in the race of her life against a hard-working Democratic opponent. Coulson supports Representative Tom Cross (an Oswego Republican) for the leadership job. Cross has about the same number of votes lined up as his rival, Representative Art Tenhouse (of Liberty). So, if Coulson loses, Cross has to make up her vote elsewhere. Cross has shoveled money and volunteers into Coulson's race, and more help is reportedly on the way.

 In Champaign County, Republican state Representative Tom Berns is battling for survival in a heavily Democratic district. Berns supports Tenhouse for leader, so Tenhouse is busily raising money for the freshman incumbent.

 The leadership contest is so intense that retiring House Republican Leader Lee Daniels is accused of pulling a campaign staffer out of a closely contested race in Aurora because his own GOP candidate backs Cross. Daniels supports Representative Tenhouse to replace him as leader. The Daniels people deny the accusation.

 Two other closely

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fought races in the northern Chicago suburbs are also being watched with interest. Vernon Hills Mayor Roger Byrne is virtually tied with Democrat Kathy Ryg in the 59th House District, and Republican Mary Childers is in a surprisingly tight race with the previously heavy favorite, Elaine Nekritz.

 Downstate has its hot spots as well. In northwest Illinois, Republican Jim Sacia is fighting off Warwick Stevenson, whose father was a U.S. senator, whose grandfather was governor and a United Nations ambassador, and whose great-great grandfather was vice president. And the Daniels/Tenhouse forces are looking to get a lot more involved in Representative Kurt Granberg's southern-Illinois re-election battle against Don Cavaletto, a Salem Republican.

 You might figure that downstaters would mostly back Tenhouse, who is from western Illinois, and suburbanites would support Cross. But several suburban legislators who are closely allied with Daniels are standing with Tenhouse. And some downstate House Republicans are grumbling loudly these days about certain folks among them who are backing or leaning toward supporting Cross over fellow downstater Tenhouse.

 The general complaint is that downstaters haven't had this good of a shot at taking over the caucus in decades, so the downstate Cross backers, many of them younger or less experienced, should get with the program.

 But, in one case at least, the complainers ought to zip it. They have no one to blame but themselves for the rumors that Representative Bill Mitchell (a Decatur Republican) is siding with Cross and against Tenhouse and, by extension, Daniels.

 A couple of sessions ago when Mitchell was a freshman targeted for defeat by the Democrats, he supported a pharmaceutical-discount bill sponsored by tier-one targeted Democratic Representative Jack Franks. Leader Daniels strong-armed just about everyone in his caucus off the bill because he didn't want to give Franks a significant win at the Statehouse.

 Mitchell strongly believed his district favored the bill, so he told Daniels he would not vote the party line. In retaliation, Daniels took away his district-office staff and even reportedly told Mitchell that he would destroy him. That's some serious stuff, and Mitchell, who is both gutsy and talented, probably hasn't forgotten it.

 Throughout the ordeal, none of the downstaters on Daniels' leadership team stuck up for Mitchell with Daniels, even though Daniels' response to Mitchell's display of independence was inexcusably over-the-top.

 So, if Bill Mitchell isn't with the program, nobody should be surprised. Payback is definitely within his rights.

 No drama? No way.

 <I>Rich Miller also publishes </I>Capitol Fax<I>, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at (<http://www.capitolfax.com>). </I>