

Washington's Influence Will Finally Be Felt in Illinois GOP

Written by Rich Miller

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Congressmen almost never have much influence in Illinois politics. The political class sometimes even ships them off to Washington to get them out of the way – often to keep them from running for a truly important job, like alderman.

And while their opinions are usually given a respectful hearing – they are congressmen, after all – it is made abundantly clear that their job is to bring home the bacon and leave the heavy local lifting to the professionals.

Those days may be over. A Democratic congressman, Rod Blagojevich, was elected governor this year, and his early support came mostly from his fellow Washingtonians.

Over on the other side, there is little doubt about who is really running the Republican show right now in this state, even though he and his people are doing their best to deny it: U.S. House Speaker Denny Hastert.

Hastert stepped into the breach this year after the FBI began investigating Illinois House Republican Leader Lee Daniels' operation. Hastert earmarked hundreds of thousands of much-needed dollars for state House races because lobbyists and other big-time contributors had stopped giving to the tainted Daniels.

Hastert's generosity wasn't completely altruistic. He funneled the campaign cash through Illinois state Representative Tom Cross of Oswego. Cross wanted to replace Daniels as House minority leader, so he used the Hastert dough to help candidates who could then help him.

As you may have heard, Cross eventually won the House leadership job.

And, last week, Hastert's candidate, Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka, was elected state Republican Party chairperson. Topinka and Hastert ousted Gary MacDougal, a conservative fall guy, in the process.

MacDougal and his conservative allies never saw this coming. They figured that after his

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appointment last summer, he could somehow hold onto the power. But he was handed the job mainly to silence the right wing, which was still giving the pro-life Republican gubernatorial candidate Jim Ryan fits for not being sufficiently pure. Everyone but MacDougal and the wingers knew he would be ousted after the election. This was a setup from the beginning.

MacDougal made his expulsion easier by doing a poor job of raising money for the party, even though he bragged constantly about his contacts in the business community. He eagerly volunteered to be the GOP "hit man" against Rod Blagojevich, but he lost all credibility with the media when his rumor-mongering about Blago's sex life turned out to be unsubstantiated and false. And then he left the country right after the election, allowing the Hastert forces to paint him as the bad guy without interference.

Even though they're "his people," nobody really believes that Hastert will be pulling the strings of Cross and Topinka from Washington. He has known Cross since Cross was in high school. His staff is very close to Topinka's staff, and there is even some overlap. His goal seems to be to put people in place whom he can trust, who won't embarrass the party with extreme positions or a lack of organizational skill, and who won't constantly need his attention.

Things aren't all rosy. Hastert funneled tons of dough to state Senate GOP candidates through Illinois state Senator Steve Rauschenberger of Elgin. Senate President "Pate" Philip was widely expected to retire next year. His Republicans have lost control of the Illinois Senate, and Pate has been around for so many years that most people figured he was ready to hang it up.

But Pate took a little umbrage at Hastert's interference, believing that he and Rauschenberger were trying to force him out of office. That belief might keep Pate in the Senate throughout next spring, while he apparently tries to cut a deal between downstaters and suburbanites who are loyal to prevent Rauschenberger from winning and most likely to elect Senator Kirk Dillard as his successor.

Pate never objected too much to Hastert siding with Cross in the House contest. One of Pate's longtime buddies is Dallas Ingemunson, who is the political godfather of both Hastert and Cross. Ingemunson reportedly had lunch with Pate once a week during the last several weeks of the fall campaign, just to keep him informed of what was going on. But playing with the House is one thing. Mucking around with Pate's Senate is totally different.

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