

Conservative Leader Has Eye on Illinois

Written by Rich Miller

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“We are trying to change the tones in the state capitals – and turn them

toward bitter nastiness and partisanship,” Grover Norquist recently told the Denver Post.

Norquist runs a group called Americans for Tax Reform, and his organization was scheduled to participate in a Chicago press conference last week that was called to attack Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich for his anti-business proposals.

 Norquist was profiled in the

<I>Chicago Tribune</I> this month, but his Illinois activities were barely mentioned, even

though he spoke to a group of 100 Illinois conservative activists in suburban Bolingbrook a few weeks ago.

 The activists had come together under the umbrella of a new

organization called the Illinois Center Right Coalition. Norquist, who has enormous influence on the White House and over some important congressional leaders, frequently claims national polls show that issues conservatives most care about are in the “center” of American politics.

Center Right is the name of his high-powered group that meets weekly in Washington, D.C.

 Two years ago, Republican state Senator Patrick O’Malley announced he was running for governor at a conservative conference that featured Norquist. O’Malley is now an

Illinois Center Right board member.

 Republican businessman Gary MacDougal used the same event to raise his profile, which most likely led to MacDougal’s solid backing by conservative activists for state-party chairperson a year later. One of the first actions taken by

the Illinois Center Right Coalition was to demand that the state Republican Party formally apologize to MacDougal for the way it took away his chairperson position after the election.

 Norquist is not someone to be dismissed lightly, even though the <I>Tribune</I> published results of a poll last week showing large majorities of Illinoisans support gay rights,

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the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and gun control. Norquist claims that 60 percent of the public routinely supports conservative proposals, but the *Trib* poll showed that nearly 60 percent of Illinoisans support the three traditionally “liberal” ideas. Even so, Norquist “never gives up, he never gives in, and he never goes away,” Republican pollster Frank Luntz told the *Boston Globe* in April.

One of his top targets has been “moderate” Democrats, and Norquist was widely believed to have been a driving force behind the failed plan in Texas to re-draw congressional boundaries that would have wiped out several moderate-to-conservative Democratic incumbents.

“Bipartisanship is another name for date rape,” Norquist, a former adviser to onetime U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich, told the *Denver Post*. He has since backed away from that comment, claiming he was merely quoting a conservative axiom, but at the recent Illinois conservative meeting, he reportedly called Democrats “competing parasites and coercive utopians.”

State Senator Steve Rauschenberger is one of Norquist’s biggest fans in Illinois. Rauschenberger spoke at both the 2001 and 2003 conferences that featured Norquist and is a board member of the Illinois Center Right Coalition. Rauschenberger, a possible U.S. Senate candidate, was one of the main Republican architects of and cheerleaders for the Senate Republican policy of refusing to support anything that could generate revenue for Governor Blagojevich’s budget, even though several business organizations supported at least one of the ideas, the \$10-billion bonding scheme that immediately freed up \$2 billion for the governor’s budget.

The idea was to force as many moderate Democrats as possible to vote for the often controversial revenue generators to cause them trouble in upcoming elections. The plan also succeeded in alienating some moderate to liberal Senate Republicans who broke ranks and voted for the governor’s proposals.

By focusing conservative ire on Blagojevich, the activists might finally have something to do besides organize circular firing squads. Outmaneuvering their fellow travelers in an endless game of “I’m the most important conservative in Illinois” seems to be their favorite pastime. Still, it remains to be seen whether the same people forming yet another “new” coalition – even if it is affiliated with Norquist, the right’s most successful consensus-maker – will be able to move beyond their self-immolating habits.

Demonizing Blagojevich will also make it easier to pressure what Norquist often calls RINOs, “Republicans in Name Only,” to follow the conservative course here in Illinois. Pro-choice, pro-ERA House Republican Leader Tom Cross, pro-gay-rights Illinois Treasurer and state-party chairperson Judy Baar Topinka, and the handful of Senate Republicans who broke ranks this year on the governor’s budget are tops on the list.

It’s possible that this could get interesting. Stay tuned.

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