

Illinois Republicans Practicing Guilt by Association

Written by Rich Miller

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Illinois Senator John Sullivan (D-Rushville) was the biggest surprise winner of the 2002 election. Political observers are still scratching their heads at how the Democrat defeated popular Republican Senator Laura Kent Donahue in a Republican-leaning district.

Part of the reason Senate Republicans refused to cooperate with the Democrats during last year's legislative session was to force Sullivan to vote for the governor's more controversial bills. The Democrats hold a slim majority in the Senate, and the GOP object was to keep all their votes off the big Democratic bills and hope that a Dem split would develop, forcing Sullivan to support some of them. Then, the Repubs could use Sullivan's votes against him during his re-election campaign.

But the Democrats managed to hold themselves together like a brick wall, and Sullivan was able to vote the politically safe way every time. As a result, there's just not a lot in his voting record to attack.

So, when Sullivan's Republican opponent officially kicked off his campaign, the Repubs were forced to use guilt by association.

Republican Gary Speckhart, a farmer and a banker, said he was running to bring western Illinois "values" back to the Senate. Speckhart, according to the *Quincy Herald-Whig*, slammed the Democrat-controlled Senate for considering bills to require sex education for kindergarten students, create a jobs program for ex-cons, and give driver's licenses to illegal aliens.

"Right now, Chicago politics is controlling Illinois," Speckhart said. "We need a state senator who fights against the machine ... who fights for us, one who is a strong voice for the values and priorities of western Illinois."

Across the state, in eastern Illinois, recently appointed state Representative Bill Grunloh (D-Effingham) has been building a solidly conservative reputation in a Republican-majority district.

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Not long after being appointed, Grunloh announced that he had worked out a deal to restore funding for a state program that accredits private and religious schools.

Then, Grunloh held a press conference in front of a giant cross to unveil a bill that would allow the Ten Commandments to be displayed in public buildings.

Late last fall, Grunloh introduced legislation that would allow employers to opt out of providing insurance coverage for contraception if it would “abridge or violate” their conscience.

And last week, Grunloh said he would sponsor a state constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages.

So Grunloh’s Republican opponent, David Reis, held a press conference to attack Governor Rod Blagojevich for spending \$6.5 million on a Chicago community center for “gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders” while not spending money on the still-not-finished Grayville state prison. The prison was proposed years ago, and construction had already begun when Blagojevich killed the project.

The *Mt. Carmel Daily Republican Register* quoted a governor’s spokesperson as saying the community center funding was an obligation that had been made previously “and we have to honor them.”

But Reis pointed out that the state had “made an obligation and commitment to the citizens of Grayville” to build the prison, and claimed that the town could be left with several million dollars of debt because of the stalled project. Part of the money for the community center could have been used to alleviate Grayville’s debt, he said, which was incurred through land purchases and infrastructure improvements.

“This is not only offensive to those of us with strong moral values,” Reis said, “but an assault on the taxpayers of Illinois,” adding, “The people of this district should seriously question the governor’s priorities.”

So can these sorts of attacks work? Eventually, the Republicans will have to tie their opponents directly to what they portray as a lapse of Statehouse morality. That might not work, considering the conservatism of the incumbents. But since Senator Sullivan and Representative Grunloh are newcomers, they haven’t had a chance to make sure their voters really understand that they aren’t like the Democrats who are doing those “immoral” things.

Several downstate Democratic senators have been worrying for months about the impression their newly empowered party is making on their conservative constituents. Many have predicted that the Republicans would do just what they’re doing now.

If these attacks are seen as a real threat, any overtly liberal bills (particularly the gay-rights bill that’s sitting in the Senate) are probably doomed this year. But, as Senator Sullivan’s opponent showed, even bills that are introduced and never move an inch could be used as ammunition. There’s probably nothing the Downstaters can do about that.

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