

Iowa Politics Roundup: Legislative Democrats Pick Leaders, Fear Extremism by Republicans

Written by Lynn Campbell

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Iowa House and Senate Democrats voted this week to stick with their leaders, despite losses in the 2010 election.

Representative Kevin McCarthy (D-Des Moines) was re-elected the leader of House Democrats but will now serve as the minority leader instead of the majority leader. He said the caucus saw its losses in the 2010 election as part of a nationwide setback for Democrats, and did not blame individual decisions made by legislative leaders here.

“There was not a lot we could do in this campaign environment to stop that trend,” McCarthy said. “Some serious setbacks were dealt to Democrats nationally, really pretty epic in scope in what occurred around the country. We are very united as a caucus and hopeful and optimistic about the future because when you have setbacks politically like occurred recently in the election, the opportunity for moving the ball down the field for future success is much, much greater.”

McCarthy said House Democrats will work with Republicans whenever possible but fear that the GOP will push an agenda of extremism.

“As long as the Republicans operate in the mainstream focusing on bread-and-butter issues, we will be a loyal opposition party and we will help and try to improve legislation and work with them in a very cooperative fashion,” McCarthy said. “If they steer towards a more extreme approach, whether it’s social extremism or whether it is policy extremism at the expense of

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ordinary, average lowans, then we will let our voices be heard, and they will be heard very loudly.”

McCarthy indicated that House Democrats will be largely united in voting against a resolution calling for a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. “There may be some individual legislators that will vote their conscience or vote their district, or may have alternative views, but I think the majority of the Democrats will be standing strong on civil rights,” he said.

As for the “several hundred million dollars” of budget cuts that House Republicans said they will make in the current budget year, McCarthy said Democrats will see what the cuts are. He expects some moves, such as eliminating Governor Chet Culver’s Iowa Power Fund, to be largely symbolic and predicted that Republicans will still find a way to fund renewable energy in some other way, such as through the Department of Economic Development.

“If there are cuts that can make Iowa government leaner and more efficient, then we will work with them in a bipartisan way. I have yet to see actually what they’re proposing in terms of specifics,” McCarthy said. “But if they come in and start cutting programs – health care, education, or otherwise that deliver for corporate interests – then we are going to let our voices be heard.”

House Democrats also elected state Representatives Mark Smith of Marshalltown, Ako Abdul-Samad of Des Moines, Sharon Steckman of Mason City, and Mary Mascher of Iowa City as assistant leaders.

Meanwhile, Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal of Council Bluffs and Senate President Jack Kibbie of Emmetsburg will remain the leaders of Senate Democrats going into the 84th Iowa General Assembly.

Gronstal said Sunday that members of his caucus are openly disagreeing with him and trying to convince him to change his mind regarding a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage in the state. He again said he will not allow a vote on the issue, while Kibbie said that’s a bridge Senate Democrats will cross when they come to it.

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“We had a slight discussion about that today, and we’ll deal with that,” Kibbie said. “If we receive a constitutional amendment from the House we’ll deal with it at that time. In the State Government Committee, I’ll assume we’ll discuss that.”

Also elected as leaders for Senate Democrats were Senate Majority Whip Tom Courtney of Burlington and Assistant Majority Leaders Joe Bolcom of Iowa City, Bill Dotzler of Waterloo, Amanda Ragan of Mason City, Wally Horn of Cedar Rapids, and Steve Sodders of State Center.

Special Election Set to Fill Seat Vacated by New Lieutenant Governor

Two women are seeking to fill the vacancy in Iowa Senate District 48 in a special election that will be held January 4 following Lieutenant Governor-elect Kim Reynolds’ resignation from that seat.

Control of the Iowa Senate is currently at 26-23 in favor of Democrats, although recounts are underway in two close races that could potentially change that balance.

Iowa Republicans will hold a special nominating convention in Creston at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, November 23, to select their candidate. Montgomery County Auditor Joni Ernst of Red Oak announced last week that she will seek the Republican nomination and has been endorsed by both Reynolds (R-Osceola) and state Representative Cecil Dolecheck (R-Mount Ayr).

Ernst is a married mother of three who is serving her sixth year as auditor. She has served 18 years in the U.S. Army Reserves and the Iowa Army National Guard and spent 14 months mobilized and overseas in Kuwait at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. She currently serves as a major in the Iowa Army National Guard and is assigned as operations branch chief of logistics with Joint Forces Headquarters in Johnston.

“I look forward to serving the people of Senate District 48 and making sure government is once again accountable to the people,” Ernst said. “We need to reduce the size of government and get it back to serving the people. We the people also know how to spend, save, and invest our

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paychecks better than government.”

Iowa Democrats will hold a special nominating convention at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, December 1, in Creston to select their nominee.

Ruth Smith of Lamoni, who ran in 2008 against Reynolds, is seeking the Democratic nomination. Smith is a married mother of three who's a rural physical therapist, entrepreneur, and business owner. She is also an adjunct instructor at Graceland University in Lamoni, and a volleyball and softball coach at Lamoni Community Schools.

Republicans have the advantage over Democrats in the district's voter registration, 38 to 26 percent, although nearly 36 percent of voters have no party affiliation, according to November 1 statistics from the Iowa secretary of state's office. Smith acknowledged that the district leans Republican.

“I think the task at hand is to be convincing that I can represent all people of any party affiliation,” Smith said. “My experience in 2008 has set a good foundation of supporters throughout the seven counties. It's a large geographical area. Making those relationships is quite a good start.”

Pro-Judicial-Retention Group Already Looking to Future Elections

Groups in favor of judicial retention are ready to ramp up their efforts to support Iowa Supreme Court justices after being outspent more than two-to-one in a failed effort to retain three justices on November 2.

Dan Moore, co-chair of the Fair Courts for Us Committee, said some opponents of judicial retention have signaled they won't give up until all seven justices that signed on to the unanimous ruling legalizing same-sex marriage in the state have been ousted.

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Fair Courts for Us made \$383,309 in independent expenditures to support the three justices, according to the Iowa Ethics & Campaign Disclosure Board. Iowa for Freedom and a bevy of other conservative groups – including the Family Research Council, Iowa Family Policy Center Action, the National Organization for Marriage, and the Citizens United Political Victory Fund – spent \$958,459 to oust the justices.

“We tried to get our message out as best we could with the limited resources we had,” Moore said. “It’s ironic because ... we’re trying to get campaign money and politics out of the judicial branch. And yet that’s what hurt us”

The retention elections removed Iowa Supreme Court Chief Justice Marsha Ternus and Justices David Baker and Michael Streit.

Moore, a Republican, is a former president of the Iowa State Bar Association who worked with Bob Vander Plaats’ gubernatorial campaign. Moore now finds himself working against Vander Plaats, state chair of Iowa for Freedom, one of the groups that successfully worked to remove the three justices.

Vander Plaats hasn’t said what Iowa for Freedom’s future plans are, although this week he announced he’ll be working with the Iowa Family Policy Center and Marriage Matters.

Justice David Wiggins is up for retention in 2012, while Justices Mark Cady, Daryl Hecht, and Brent Appel are up in 2016.

The more than \$1.3 million in independent expenditures spent on the issue had a definite impact, said Charlie Smithson, executive director and legal counsel for the Iowa Ethics & Campaign Disclosure Board.

“I think it’s clear that they had to have some sort of impact in the way that vote came out,” Smithson said. “I mean, that was an unparalleled result in Iowa.”

Judge Encourages Attorneys to Apply for Judiciary; Proposes More Transparency

Iowa Court of Appeals Judge Mary Tabor on Thursday urged members of the Iowa State Bar Association against letting the ouster of three Iowa Supreme Court justices in the November 2 election discourage them from applying to be a judge.

"I don't think we should let the recent upheaval in the retention election discourage good candidates from applying," Tabor said during a continuing-legal-education course for attorneys. "Don't be discouraged. Don't be deterred. It's a very high-quality process."

Frank Carroll, a Des Moines attorney who's president of the Iowa State Bar Association, told IowaPolitics.com that he doesn't think that the outcome of the retention election is going to have much of an impact on the interest by future applicants.

"I think you're still going to have extremely qualified individuals submitting their names for the Supreme Court," Carroll said. "I don't think it's going to have any significant impact."

According to judicial-branch spokesperson Steve Davis, 17 people applied to fill Supreme Court vacancies in both February 2008 and July 2006, and 18 applied in both September 2006 and August 2003.

Tabor suggested Thursday that Iowa make public the questionnaires that attorneys must fill out when they apply to become judges, in light of the recent election.

"My view is perhaps an addition of transparency is a good thing for the nominating process, and I think one place might be to have these confidential questionnaires not be kept confidential," Tabor said. "I don't think there's anything that the public shouldn't see in there about what your qualifications are and why you want that position."

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Redistricting to Kick Off Next Month

Next year's redrawing of political boundaries is expected to shake up Iowa's political world, pit some congressional and legislative incumbents against one another, cause some people to sell their houses and move, attract newcomers to the process, and allow some who were defeated this year to run again.

"The shakeup is an opportunity," said Iowa Democratic Party Chair Sue Dvorsky. "When these things all shake out, a lot of talented people already in office and many who are not will begin to look at public office. ... When the district changes, it's a brand-new election, and some people will be thrown together."

It all kicks off December 31, when the U.S. Census reports to Congress the number of congressional seats that each state will have. Iowa's process will possibly wrap up in four months, by the end of the legislative session, but could take as long as eight months, depending on whether lawmakers choose to reject the initial maps drawn by the nonpartisan Legislative Services Agency.

Iowa's nonpartisan process of redistricting – with a strict limitation against the use of political data and incumbent addresses – increases the likelihood of incumbents being pitted against one another in the next election and creates Iowa's own version of term limits.

"Iowa is in a category on its own. It's done without partisan data, but it does involve the legislature," said Tim Storey, the National Conference of State Legislatures' expert on redistricting. "The other thing that makes Iowa unique: You have scores of incumbents paired against each other, which you almost never see in other states."

It's a near certainty that Iowa will lose one congressional district in this round of redistricting, bringing the state down to four seats, according to both political analysts and experts in redistricting.

U.S. Representative Steve King's Republican-leaning district of 32 counties will likely grow even

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larger, while districts will be more condensed in central and eastern Iowa where metro and suburban areas have seen population growth. Three of those four districts are currently represented by Democratic congressmen.

The new 2010 Census numbers are expected to show that Iowa's population has grown to about 3 million in the past decade, according to Ed Cook of the Legislative Services Agency. The elimination of one congressional district will mean that each Iowa representative will have a district of about 750,000 Iowans, rather than the current 550,000.

Following 2011 redistricting, Iowa House members will each represent about 30,000 Iowans rather than the current 29,000, and Iowa Senate members will represent about 60,000 Iowans instead of the current 58,000.

Gingrich Says 2010 Republican Takeover Bigger Than 1994; Will Make Decision About Run for President in February

Former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich remained mum Tuesday during his sixth visit to Iowa about whether he'll throw his proverbial hat into the ring for the 2012 presidential election.

"There needs to be a wave of change deeper than just the presidency," Gingrich said. "I'm still sorting out how it can be done, and if I'm the right person to do it."

Though he was asked a few times if he was seriously considering a bid, Gingrich would only say he would make a definite decision in February.

He also said Republicans' 2010 midterm takeover was "deeper and bigger" than the one in 1994, when he was the architect of the Contract with America, which helped usher in a Republican takeover of Congress for the first time in 40 years.

"This is the biggest House change since 1952," Gingrich said. "The facts are [that] we had about

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60 congressional seats change this year compared to maybe 52 seats in 1994. There were about 680 elected seats that changed from this election, compared to maybe only 400 in 1994.”

Gingrich was at the Borders bookstore in West Des Moines on Tuesday to sign copies of his new novel, *Valley Forge: A Story of Endurance & Transformation*, which explores General George Washington’s tribulations and trials during the American Revolution. He later made stop in Ames and Cedar Rapids.

More than 100 people – political supporters of Gingrich and history buffs alike – came to meet the former congressman in West Des Moines. Gingrich deflected most questions over a potential candidacy and instead chose to focus on what the new House and Senate should tackle in the next few years. “Liberalism should not be changed; it should be replaced,” he said. “The Left somehow survives, but our country is ready to recognize that these institutions do not work anymore.”

He also said judges “have run amok.” When asked about Iowa justices who were not on the ballot for retention this November, Gingrich said: “I’d ask them to step down. Had they been on the ballot, they would have been voted out, and if [Governor Chet] Culver has any sense, he will not appoint more radical judges like the ones who were just voted off the bench.”

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com, an online government and politics news service. Reporter Andrew Duffelmeyer and other correspondents contributed to this report.