

GOP rallies its core, looking for a rebirth

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ROBINSON, Ill. -- Amid the red, white and blue balloons, table decorations and floral arrangements, the only discordant note during the annual Crawford County Lincoln Day dinner came when outgoing Mayor Wally Dean forgot a few words of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

As the southeastern Illinois county's Republicans took their turn to raise money, while dining on fried chicken, ham and potato salad--washed down with lemonade and speeches--an unusual call for GOP unity emerged, directed at a state political organization better known for its ability to fight from within.

"Whatever we do as we move toward '06, there's one thing I'm going to ask you," state Rep. Roger Eddy of nearby Hutsonville told 200 people last week in the Robinson Community Center. "We have to make sure the things that we disagree on do not divide us to the point that we have a disaster."

For Crawford County, like dozens of other counties across Illinois, the Lincoln Day dinners held between January and April are a traditional way to raise money for the local GOP organization as well as recognize the work of precinct and township party leaders and elected officials.

But with just under a year to go before primary elections for governor and other statewide offices, the dinners are akin to the Catskills circuit of Illinois Republican politics--a place for aspiring politicians to try their act out on the road, see what plays and what doesn't.

In that vein, the events have a more vital role: to rally the core toward a political rebirth after seeing the political organization teeter toward irrelevancy.

The Illinois GOP has been sullied by the scandals associated with former Gov. George Ryan that cost it the long-held governor's mansion in 2002. It also has been tainted by the embarrassments of Alan Keyes and Jack Ryan in the 2004 U.S. Senate race that strained its credibility and has been marred by continued infighting between some of its moderate and conservative factions.

In a scene repeated throughout the state on different nights, some or all of the more than half dozen people exploring a Republican run for governor schmoozed the crowd, passed out campaign literature and tried to give a brief sales pitch.

On this night, potential candidates for governor Judy Baar Topinka, the state treasurer, and Ron Gidwitz, a Chicago businessman, worked the audience along with a representative if Peoria-area U.S. Rep. Ray LaHood. And at this early stage, each shared their respect for one another, with Topinka going so far as to credit Gidwitz's fundraising prowess and Gidwitz joking that he thinks he has her endorsement.

On other nights in other places, it's state Sens. Steve Rauschenberger of Elgin and Bill Brady of Bloomington, DuPage County State's Atty. Joseph Birkett and dairy magnate James D. Oberweis making similar pitches for support.

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But in Robinson, Eddy, a former educator and school superintendent serving his third term in the Illinois House, may have delivered the strongest message. Eddy is a conservative on social issues, befitting a county where Republicans sided overwhelmingly for Patrick O'Malley over Jim Ryan in the 2002 primary for governor. Eddy's message, however, was "it's time to move on" past divisions over abortion rights and gun control that will not be resolved.

"We need to focus on what people are really interested in that affects their everyday lives," Eddy said, listing job creation, accessible health care, medical malpractice reform, education funding changes to reduce the property tax burden and drug abuse.

The independent spirit of Republicans "generate ideas and good debate," Eddy said. "But the potential is we let that debate turn into division that turns into disaster--and it has. ... For this party, it means not tripping over those things that have tripped us up in the past."

To be sure, Republicans view Downstate as fertile territory, contending Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich has ignored the region in favor of Chicago.

What began as a parochial negative against Blagojevich over his decision not to live in the Executive Mansion in Springfield has grown to symbolize a much greater problem among Downstate voters who were key in giving him the Democratic nomination three years ago.

In Crawford County in 2002, Blagojevich swamped his closest opponent in the primary nearly 10-1. He virtually split the general election with Jim Ryan, narrowly losing the county by little more than 300 votes out of nearly 7,300 ballots cast.

Among local Republicans, feelings of antipathy toward Blagojevich are, not surprisingly, deep. What is surprising is the way they are expressed.

"We wouldn't have our schools in Crawford County if it wasn't for George Ryan. He don't get any credit for it," said Bill Swaner, 75, a retiree from the Marathon Ashland Petroleum Refinery, the area's largest employer. "I know he's a crook, but I still like him. This guy [Blagojevich] has done nothing. All he's done is help Chicago."

Still, such attitudes ignore a three-year, \$475,000 worker-training grant that Blagojevich began distributing to Swaner's former employer a year ago, though the governor touted the move as "an important step to keeping [gasoline and oil] prices stable here in Illinois."

With Blagojevich's huge financial advantage for a re-election bid, some Republicans, including new GOP Chairman Andy McKenna, have discussed the concept of trying to rally around one candidate for governor to avoid divisiveness and to save resources that could be devoted to the general election. LaHood already has said he supports such a move and would abide by any decision.

But for a GOP looking to find its footing, the concept of slatemaking in the race for governor, endorsing a candidate behind closed doors, may run counter to a push for greater openness and grassroots involvement in decision-making. A wide-open primary, however, could cost the party the unity some hope to achieve.

"I think we should have a primary. That gets people out there and makes them work for what they want. Let people see who they are," said Jack Martin of Newton, who retired in 2001 after 16 years as GOP chairman of neighboring Jasper County. "I don't believe in that handpicked thing. We've done too much of that for years. I think an open primary is the way to go."

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