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Senator wants election of GOP committee members

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State Sen. Chris Lauzen, R-Aurora, said Wednesday the Illinois House should vote on a bill, already passed unanimously by the Senate, to give Republican primary voters the power to directly pick members of the GOP State Central Committee.

But the House sponsor of the bill, Rep. Angelo "Skip" Saviano, R-Elmwood Park, who sits on that committee, intends to hold the legislation for more study.

Democratic primary voters elect members of the Democratic State Central Committee, but since the mid-1980s, the GOP committee members are elected by precinct committeemen in downstate areas and ward and township committeeman in Cook County.

"If we're going to ask our neighbors to volunteer and expand our base, we need to demonstrate our respect for their opinion, their voice and their votes," Lauzen said.

He added that under the current GOP leadership, Democrats have come to hold most levers of power in the state, including control of the House and Senate, both U.S. Senate seats and most state constitutional offices.

"It's time to change the system," Lauzen said, which involves "a few establishment ... political leaders

who continue to clutch at the power." He said they "stood by silently" through party problems, including a corruption scandal that resulted in the indictment of former Gov. George Ryan.

Among supporters at the news conference was Phil Collins of North Chicago, a petty officer 2nd class in the Navy Reserves. He recently returned from Iraq and said Republicans in Illinois should be able to elect their leaders directly — the same right Americans have helped Iraqis secure.

Lauzen also said he sent letters to 2,100 precinct committeemen to seek their thoughts on the bill, SB600, and responses favored it by a 4-1 margin.

Asked for actual numbers, Lauzen said 35 committeemen sent responses, with 28 for the bill and seven against it.

Saviano, at a State Central Committee meeting in Springfield Friday, said he became the House sponsor of the bill to study it and has found overwhelming opposition to the idea. Direct elections could be expensive, draining money that could go to GOP candidates in general elections, he said. He also said precinct committeemen enjoy the privilege of choosing the State Central Committee members, and in strong Democratic areas, Democrats could turn out enough voters in GOP pri-

maries to place a Democrat masquerading as a Republican on the central committee.

Lauzen disputed those arguments.

Saviano said he may have a hearing this summer to air the opinions, but he believes there is just "this little group" of the GOP that supports the idea.

State Sen. Bill Brady, R-Bloomington, a potential candidate for governor, also appeared at the news conference to support the bill.

Bob Turner, the Boone County GOP chairman and president of the state GOP county chairmen's association, issued a statement Wednesday saying that grass-roots Republican leaders overwhelmingly oppose SB600.

The bill could lead, he said, to "expensive, combative political campaigns that favor those candidates with the largest war chests and not necessarily those who have worked the hardest or who have the most experience in party building."

Lauzen urged House GOP Leader Tom Cross of Oswego to seek a full House vote. David Dring, spokesman for Cross, said Saviano "knows this issue the best; we're going to defer to him."

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