

CRAIG DELLIMORE: After pretty poor GOP showings in a string of state wide and in some cases local elections people are asking questions about the future of the Illinois Republican Party. My guests this week can answer them.

Hello. I'm political editor Craig Dellimore and this is At Issue.

The last election cycle wasn't very encouraging for the Illinois GOP. The woman who was the state's only republican state-wide official former Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka lost her bid to unseat to Governor Rod Blagojevich. Illinois Senate Democrats elected a veto proof majority last November and house speaker Michael Madigan slightly increased his advantage in the lower chamber. Republican Cook County Commissioner Tony Peraica failed in his spirited attempt to become County Board President and Republican congress members had to watch as they became the minority party on Capital Hill. Meanwhile former republican Governor George Ryan was convicted and sentenced.

These are challenging times for a party that has been enduring some ideological and political struggles. It started getting

the most wide spread attention during the 2004 U. S. Senate race. You will recall that's when GOP candidate Jack Ryan's campaign self destructed in scandal and the state central committee drafted conservative activist Allen Keys of Maryland to replace him. Tensions were high between the so called conservative and moderate wings of the party and they continued through that last governor's race, so what now? My guests are among the officials who will help shape the answers.

Andy McKenna is chairman of the state organization, the Illinois Republican Party. He is also a businessman, President of the Schwartz Paper Company of Morton Grove. You may remember he was one of the U. S. Senate candidates in that crowded republican primary field that yielded Jack Ryan.

State Senator Kirk Dillard is chairman of the Dupage County Republican Party. His voters managed to buck the national democratic trend by sending Peter Rockam to congress replacing retiring republican (inaudible) Henry Hyde.

Gary Skoien chairs the Cook County Republican Party, which had high hopes last year, he is CEO of Rosemont Illinois based Horizon Group properties.

Last but not least is attorney Dan Venturi who is the Lake County Republican Chairman. The party regulars there helped Congressman Mark Kirk withstand a strong challenge from Democrat newcomer, Dan Seals. He is also the Lake Villa Township supervisor and gentlemen. Welcome all.

Andy McKenna, as State Chairman you're going to lead a meeting of party leaders next weekend and how are you going to describe the state of the Illinois GOP to them and to us for that matter?

ANDY MCKENNA: Well thanks Craig. We will be meeting with our State Central Committee next week but also have been in the process of discussion really since November about answering many of the questions that you raised through your introduction. I think that first of all it is important to look at the results in Illinois within the national context and clearly it was a difficult election for republicans nationally. The numbers I've heard is that 80% of the people who were troubled by the war voted for democrats and (inaudible) of the people who supported the war voted for republicans and the majority of the country is troubled by where we are in Iraq, and that had a significant effect. I think what we have to say is where did we do

better than the national trend, where did we do worse and then what does it tell us about how we go forward.

One place we did better was in our congressional races. We were the only state in the Midwest that did not give up a seat to democrats in congress. I think that's very important. As a state party we worked hard in grass roots activities and we collaborated with each of these country chairs and their organizations and national party in our victory office which was in the northwest suburbs. And, that was important in retaining Henry Hyde's seat and re-electing Peter Rockam. It was important when we challenged Melissa Bean. She was the only democratic incumbent I believe who only gained 51%. She was very close to losing and our grass roots efforts enabled that to happen.

We also did better in our general assembly races in the Midwestern states. So I think some things were learned from that. As we look about going forward we are going to put further emphasis and resources behind grass roots activity. That means spending more money on research, on voter identification and on direct voter contact. It did enable us to get better turnout where we needed to get it. We are going to focus more on message. We actually think

because the democrats are in leadership it is going to help us get our message across more effectively. In this last cycle as you know, Rod Blagojevich far outspent our nominee and he got his message out there but he created a reality I'm not sure he can live with. Within two weeks after the election a report of the commercial club show that the state is a hundred billion dollars in debt and this Governor almost treated the report as a trivial issue. He is not realistic. He thinks he can solve problems through government. We think less government works. We think less government is the reason we have had economic prosperity in this country. We are going to talk about it in Illinois.

And finally the money disadvantage. We are at a money disadvantage. We've got to correct that. We've got to continue to build your ability to raise money. We also have to in Illinois deal with the issue of corruption. Clearly it seems to be the case that one reason the Governor was able to raise money was because he was making jobs and other state resources available to donors, that's wrong. We got to change it and we are going to talk about that. So it's more grass roots, better clarity on the message and change the money disadvantage.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Kirk Dillard we in the media have probably made a lot of the rift between the moderates and the conservatives in the party. Are we over stating the case? How serious is it?

KIRD DILLARD: I think most people do over state the case. Craig and happy New Year to you and your listeners. You know there is a small faction of our party in Illinois that likes to complain but I think, you know, there are people like myself that bridge the -- as Chairman McKenna of the state party, that bridges the moderates and the conservative gap very well. And sometimes some of the more disgruntled types like to look at the little particular issues but our problems are bigger than that and I think the moderate versus conservative thing is far overblown.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Gary Skoien do you sense much dissatisfaction with the party leadership after years of really having to struggle here?

GARY SKOIEN: Well, you know, there is no doubt that there is frustration. Whenever you are in a situation where you've lost elections people are looking around for excuses but I think what Andy said pretty much sets out the lay of the land for where we are and

where we've been. And, I think and as you've said there has been this moderate, conservative rift but I do think that is over played and I think the real issue for republicans is to get back to being the party of ideals and principles not the idea of government and power and those sorts of things. And, the party that is not a party of corruption and insider dealings. And I think that's the sort of thing we obviously got hurt by what happened to former Governor Ryan, there are no two ways about it. But that's not who we are. We're not like the democrats. Most of us in this room have jobs outside. Politics isn't what got us where we are. Our children don't go into politics. It is not a family business or anything else. We care about good government and we need to get back to those principles.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Dan Venturi how does the party get past the corruption issues which even in the gubernatorial race if there was a cloud over Rod Blagojevich? He also managed with his message to suggest there was a similar cloud over Judy Barr Topinka and that issue kind of nullified itself at least in the voters eyes. How does the Republican Party get past that?

DAN VENTURI: Well I think you are exactly right that the perception was and it was portrayed that there was a cloud over the

Governor's head and that was done by the news media and was in reality people were circling the wagons. And that was all portrayed by the media. In the case against the attacks against Judy Barr Topinka it was just because of the enormous war chest that the Governor had that he was able to do this on paid time and, you know, conjure up and say whatever he wanted. You know he tried very hard just to tie Judy Baar Topinka to Governor Ryan. There wasn't a tie there and the news media wasn't going to give him free ads for it but he had such a tremendous war chest he was able to buy time to get that message out. So getting back to what Chairman McKenna said really he out spent Judy Barr Topinka by so much he could get out whatever message he wanted to.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Craig I also think that, you know, the Governor he had this high end budget. He was effective at talking about historical problems with past republicans but the Governor has a host of issues with current conflicts of interest and his own administration, current investigations. I mean if you just look at your own news stories today there are suits to have him release freedom information suits, to have him release the subpoenas, the many, many subpoenas that his administration has received. So I

think -- and he was able to have this ad campaign in the midst of a trial and conviction of a past governor who no longer involved in this party. I just think that this current Governor won't have the luxury going forward of being able to distract things that way. He has many serious conflicts of interests and he is going to be judged by that.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Gary Skoien you wanted to say something?

GARY SKOIEN: Well you know the other thing tying the Governor's issue to what happened in Cook County we talked -- you mentioned in your introduction, Tony Peraica. I mean the fact is that Tony Peraica ended up losing by a pretty small percentage relative to what's happened over the last --

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Relative to Cook County.

GARY SKOIEN: Absolutely. He came very, very close and going through the numbers that Andy went through about, you know, how people voted based on the war, it is clear that if that were not an issue Tony would have won. And the reason Tony would have won is because of the corruption and the absolute abuse and waste of taxpayers' money that occur in Cook County. And it is atrocious and

we are different on those issues than the democrats are and that's the thing that we've got to bring home to people.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Look at this morning here, Todd Stroger hires his best friend's wife to be a purchasing agent for \$120,000. I just tell you the average voter looks at that and says that's ridiculous. And it's every level of government. So I think that, you know because they have leadership now they are going to be held accountable and I think Gary's right we now have the opportunity to bring forward candidates who aren't in this for any other reason than the right ideas. And, I think Tony Peraica showed himself to be that kind of candidate and that ultimately is what I think will allow us to get voter's trust

CRAIG DELLIMORE: And headlines are easy things to toss around. We should also point out that the counter from the Stroger camp is that this woman was the head of purchasing. She has become head of purchasing for the county. She was the head of purchasing for the Forrest Preserve District for years and so, you know, yeah we can say yeah they are best friends. But, you know -- and that's been the way that these kind of races have gone where someone will say yeah it sounds bad but look at other facts and

sometimes the voters sort of shrug and say how do we know which side to believe, and we just move on.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Of course now you're making the case that corruption isn't important and your question began by saying how are you going to deal with corruption. So, I do think the voters -- I think it is turn off for the voters. I think he was able to win this last election. He had a money advantage. The money advantage helped him in the end. But I just think the voters are getting tired of a government that serves itself and I think it is another sign of someone who is serving themselves.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Kirk Dillard?

KIRK DILLARD: I think that we should point out and one of the things our party needs to do better is compare ourselves, sometimes to the democrats. Sitting here with Chairman Skoien from Cook County I mean in republican controlled DuPage County we have one third the number of country employees per capita as democrat controlled Cook County. We've reduced our real estate levy ten years in a row and when you compare republican controlled county the lowest cost county in the United States of America with the highest percentage of open space and green space and

environmental friendly land in DuPage County to Cook, I mean I just think both at the state level with Rod Blagojevich's spending record amounts of money and having his problems, we need to compare ourselves to the Democrats and I think we will do that much more effectively in the future.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Now let's talk about one issue that is undoubtedly going to come up when you meet with the State Central Committee and that is let's face it, anybody who has gone on the Internet or listened to the political rhetoric has heard the name Robert Gilander who is a National Republican Committeeman for the State Party and he has become sort of a symbol for the conservatives in the party.

Now we should point out for listeners unfamiliar with him he is a White House connected lobbyist. His name has come up in connection with some of the investigations of Blagojevich administration dealings. He has not been accused of anything worse than making money under a democratic administration but still some people are saying he is a symbol of that era of corruption that the party is trying to put behind itself. And, that he has to go and there are a number of people and frankly even, you know, even some

candidates have publicly called for his ouster and that's going to be an issue when you go before the Committee. How do you deal with Robert Gilander who has become a symbol?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Well I think that -- I mean clearly Republicans, and it is not just a conservative issue. I think Republicans across the board have expressed concerns to Bob about his role and what they view as a conflict. Many have and I expect more will. I have and I'm sure we will as we go forward. And hopefully Bob in time will do the right thing. But by the same token I do think some people over play it as a significant issue for us going forward. I think going forward we have to do the things that have been talked about here this morning and get the right candidates, people who can run on principles and continue to build our grass roots organization, be more clear on messages. (inaudible) the kind of (inaudible) that (inaudible) Dillard just did between Republican successes in government and what we view as Democratic failures and deal with the money issue which we think has brought corruption into politics in Illinois.

KIRK DILLARD: Just speaking of comparisons and, you know

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CRAIG DELLIMORE: This is Kirk Dillard.

KIRK DILLARD: -- I think that Andy has stated the Bob Gilander issue very well but Bob's democratic counterpart, Joe Kary is going to federal prison and, you know, again we need to just keep doing our comparisons and Mr. Gilander would be better I suppose if he left right away but he is going to retire at the end of his term and --

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: When does his term end?

KIRK DILLARD: His term ends sometime in the next couple of years so he is leaving and I want to point out that a difference between the Republican Party and the Democrat Party is when we have a problem we purge our problems. George Ryan was not our gubernatorial nominee. It was Jim Ryan versus Rod Blagojevich five years ago and Mr. Gilander is going to leave sometime in the next year or so, you know, we actually do purge our problems as opposed to letting them carry on.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: You are listening to At Issue on News radio 780, WBBM. I'm Craig Dellimore and we are talking about the future of the Illinois Republican Party with four top party officials. The leader of the pack is State GOP Chairman, Andy McKenna. Also joining us in the studio are Lake County Republican, Chairman Dan

Venturi, DuPage County Chairman and State Senator, Kirk Dillard and Cook County GOP Chairman, Gary Skoien.

Dan Venturi has the State Party been doing enough for the local candidates who, you know, may have had mixed success. Some state legislative candidates didn't fair as well as perhaps the congressional ones. Has the party done enough?

DAN VENTURI: Well I actually want to commend the State Party. This election cycle I've seen more activity and more support coming from them than I've ever seen in the past. And it has just been a tremendous asset I mean they have shared their resources with us. They've spent tremendous amounts of money. The State Party in itself doesn't get involved in the Country Board races or – they are purely local but clearly there was a tremendous amount of money and support that went to, you know, State House races, State Senate races and obviously the national races. You know, I think the State Party has really stepped up a lot and I can only speak for the short term since I've been round the past, you know, few election cycles. But, I think they did a tremendous job and if it is an indication of the support we'll see in the future I'm excited about that.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Gary Skoien in Cook County I know that Dan Venturi said that the state doesn't really get involved in the local races like Cook County but, or the counties but in Cook County some would argue that the Republicans have the best chance since Ogilvie of capturing the Cook County Board's President's spot. Todd Stroger was considered a fairly weakened candidate with admittedly a strong organization behind him. How satisfied were you with what the State Party did

GARY SKOIEN: Well there are two different things. First of all I think, Andy, personally and as leader of the party was very helpful to Tony Peraica. I mean he was involved in raising money along with me and was helpful. I do not think the State Party just in general probably did as much as it could for Cook County but unfortunately, you know, the way things work there is what 102 counties in the state and, you know, if all of a sudden if the State Party helps Cook County then Dan Venturi is going to say well why aren't you doing this in Lake County and Senator Dillard is going to say why aren't you doing this in DuPage. I have a little different take and it is obviously selfish and self serving but a little different take. I honestly think that if we could turn Cook County around and do better in Cook County it would

serve the whole party and I would like to be making the pitch over the next year that the party should focus more attention on Cook Country, but that is not a criticism. It is kind of just dealing with a reality that exists. And like I said there is probably, Andy personally was involved and helpful and is a good friend of Tony's and did a lot for him

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Well let's talk but an issue that has been one for the State Party for years and I know I have had conversations with former Chair Judy Barr Topinka even about this and that is recruiting and developing good candidates across the state and that seems to have been a problem. Is it typified now the headlines this week have been that, you know, the party may have trouble finding somebody strong to run against Dick Durbin who is obviously going to be a high profile figure in the Democratic controlled Congress and we've already had Mark Kirk put his hands up and say no not me. But that's just an example of a problem that the party has had and Andy McKenna how do you address that?

ANDY MCKENNA: Well again I think that is something people like to write about. I am really proud about people who ran particularly state wide. I think a number of new faces came forward

that I thought were great candidates. Christine Rodonuo (phonetic) I think demonstrated herself to be the very bright person that she is, someone who relates well to voters, speaks particularly effectively for suburban voters. I think Dan Rutterford we knew would be a strong campaigner and demonstrated that. I think that, you know, the Henry Hyde seat was a tough seat to fill and yet we had a young person in Peter Rockam who had success in public office and stepped up and was very effective as a candidate. I think that, you know, you can look -- there is probably 15 people between the State Senate Caucus and the State House Caucus who could easily step up to be state wide candidates and certainly Senator Dillard who is with us is one of those people. I have already had several people approach me interested in Senator Durbin's race and Senator Durbin I mean we are excited about that race. His popularity has fallen since he has been in leadership. If you look at the tracking, his unpopularity has grown because he is not main stream. I mean, Senator Durbin, he couldn't even bring himself to vote for a common sense Midwesterner in John Roberts become Chief Justice because he represents a very narrow set of interests. So I think it would be unreasonable to expect that someone emerges as a likely nominee, but I certainly feel good.

We have many good people and strong interests, you know, in that race

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Kirk Dillard since we have you at the table here are you considering perhaps challenging Dick Durbin?

KIRK DILLARD: Not Dick Durbin. You know I may at some point in time look at state wide office and for the first time in my legislature career I'll be off cycle so to speak where I wouldn't have to give up my Senate seat to run state wide and I have young children, so those are other issues that are out there. But I think on candidate recruitment in DuPage County obviously Craig one of the challenges facing our party is the massively rapidly changing demographics in the State of Illinois. DuPage County has the largest percentage of registered Latino voters in the state higher than Cook, higher than Kane. Yet, we won every race in our county and we have put a young Latino woman on the County Board and we need to recruit among and, you know, a growing immigrant population in Illinois without giving up our party principles. And, I think we can do that by showing that we are the better party for growing manufacturing and good jobs in Illinois. You know we just don't just care about the minimum wage and I do care about the minimum wage, but we want a maximum

wage with good benefits for people. And, that's what I hear from my Latino voters and others that's why they came to this country and I think that we need to show that our party is the party of growing the better jobs for these people. They care about education. I think we are the better party for education whether it is education choice or it was us, the Republicans, that set up the Chicago school reforms even though Mayor Daley has done a nice job running with this Republican led idea that came out of the General Assembly. Only one Democrat voted for Chicago school reform but the Mayor has done a nice job taking it. And, last but not least I think that under Governor Blagojevich especially with my middle class listeners out in my area, college tuitions in Illinois, public college tuitions have gone up 50% under Governor Blagojevich and the Democrats. About the highest in America and I just think we got out with a message that the Republicans are the better party for middle class and working people. I believe that, but we need to be aware of these new demographics and go out and sign up and recruit and have, you know, the new people who are out moving into places in the (inaudible) counties get on the Republican band wagon. And, we need to remember that for our Eastern European immigrants and there are plenty out there that

Ronald Reagan is the reason most of these former Eastern European immigrants have been allowed to come to American. And, we have to remind them that Ronald Reagan, who let them come here, was a Republican.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: But even because of those, perhaps because of those changing demographics even among your candidates and officials, you've got differences of opinion on a number of those issues even the ones you cited on immigration. There are going to be some differences on what should be done about for example the 12 million immigrants who are already in the United States. There are some candidates on both sides of the aisle who would refuse to talk about that issue during the campaign just because of fearing to touch off some kind of backlash from the voters. You've got stem cell research where there are going to be some republican officials and republican candidates who are for embryonic stem cell research and some who are against it and there are going to be some people in your party who, whatever position is taken, are going to rally against those who don't adhere to the party platform exactly the way it is written. And, make an issue of it as was the case in -- I mean I got more anti Judy Barr Topinka e-mails from

Republican conservatives than I did from Democrats during that gubernatorial campaign. It is supposedly a big tent but then, you know, what happens when people try to bring all those philosophies inside the tent. Andy McKenna?

ANDY MCKENNA: Well I mean even on a national level I think a good number of conservative voters were turned off in Washington because Republicans didn't show the fiscal discipline that we have historically and when you are trying to appeal to a lot of people it is always a matter of balancing. And I don't think it is any different on a democratic side. I don't think there is (inaudible) on certain core issues for them but I think this is the opportunity of a new day that's in front of us. It's an opportunity to reach out to fresh people and to re-group around some issues that are both important to us and relevant to the voters and that's what we are looking forward to doing.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Gary Skoien is the platform itself an issue? I mean does that need to be re-thought or does some kind of, I don't even know what word to use, somehow getting people together where it doesn't become a fist fight every time somebody takes a position that may not be the traditional republican position.

GARY SKOIEN: You know I don't know exactly what the traditional republican position is when, you know, when you state it that way and people that are conservatives in our party would say social conservatives would say that their view is what the traditional conservative, you know, the republican principles are. A lot of us are republicans for a lot of different reasons but I think we are all republicans because we believe in lower taxation, we believe in less government, we believe in a strong national defense, we believe in local government serving people better than national government and we believe in people's right to work and get ahead and we believe strongly in capitalism. And, that does distinguish us from the Democrat Party. And I have a lot of respect for people who are pro-life. I have a lot of respect for people who are pro-choice but at the end of the day those other issues are the ones that really bind us together and that is what we have to focus on.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: And --

GARY SKOIEN: And the last thing, I'm sorry Craig to interrupt you but the last thing is the point I made earlier. We also have to be the party of honesty and good government and all these things, which we always have been.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: I need a 30 second answer on this and I am going to ask it from you Andy McKenna. What do you say to the social conservatives who say we've been shut out for too long now and we are still being shut out now?

ANDY MCKENNA: I don't think they have been shut out. I think George Bush was one who appealed to both the base of the party as well as broader voters and I think that he has set some good examples and, you know, we have to continue to do that.

CRAIG DELLIMORE: Okay. Well I would like to thank my four guests for spending time with us; State GOP Chairman, Andy McKenna, Cook County Republican Chairman, Gary Skoien, Lake County Chairman, Dan Venturi, State Senator, Kirk Dillard the GOP Chairman for the great County of DuPage. And thanks to you for listening. If you would like a copy of this program you can download one for free or listen on line at our web site [wbbm780.com](http://wbbm780.com). It should be there beginning Monday morning. You can find a lot of other interesting news and behind the headlines information and audio there as well. I'll be back next week with another edition of At Issue. Until then, I'm Craig Dellimore News Radio 780wbbm.