

GOP looks for 'political mileage' with Rezko

Republican state convention couldn't have come at a better time

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These are wilderness-wandering days for Illinois Republicans.

Minority status in both legislative chambers. Locked out of the governor's mansion and all other statewide offices. No individual who stands out as the face of the party.

Now they approach a general election in which Illinois favorite son Barack Obama tops the Democratic ticket.

Against that backdrop, Illinois Republicans convene today for a two-day convention in Decatur, a site chosen in part for symbolic value. This is where the party met in 1860, when matters looked bleak for Republicans before the emergence of a Springfield lawyer named Abraham Lincoln.

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Evocative as that may be, most Republicans join independent observers in acknowledging that they face a steep incline in the short run.

Still, party leaders and members harbor some optimism. They see opportunity in the corruption cloud shrouding Gov. Rod Blagojevich's administration and in Democrats' internal battles that for two years have created legislative stalemate.

Republicans said they hope for political mileage from Democratic fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko's conviction on corruption charges and ongoing federal probes of the Blagojevich administration. But at least one observer noted a fly in the GOP ointment.

"It's not totally a win-win situation for them, in that some prominent Republicans figured in the corruption trial mess and our most recent governor (Republican George Ryan) is sitting in prison," said Charlie Wheeler, director of the public affairs reporting program at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Indeed, Republican national Committeeman Bob Kjellander and GOP power brokers Stuart Levine and William Cellini figured in Rezko trial testimony -- and not in a positive light.

Which is one reason some Republicans are focusing more intently on money issues -- unbalanced budget proposals, underfunded pensions, possible tax hikes and lack of a capital construction program -- under Democratic control. That, say some Republicans, provides ample campaign fodder.

"While the governor gets a lot of attention, it's Democratic House and Senate members that have helped cause this," said House Republican leader Tom Cross, of Oswego. "These guys have been trying to run the government, and they've failed miserably."

Like Cross, state Sen. Kirk Dillard said his party must go beyond pointing out Democrats' budget failings.

"We need to have an economic vision that shows how we're fiscally better able to run the state and create jobs," said Dillard of Hinsdale.

Republicans also could help themselves, said Mike Lawrence, one-time aide to former Gov. Jim Edgar, by acting on changes in the state's demographics.

"They need to make a sincere outreach to minority groups, and I stress the word sincere," said Lawrence, director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University. "There's potential, looking to 2010, to pick up some support in

African-American and Hispanic communities, but Republicans have to go into those communities and listen."

That 2010 governor's race, Dillard said, will be crucial in determining the party's longer-term fortunes. "Otherwise the Democrats will pass a map that will put us into oblivion for another decade," he said.

That success, said state GOP Chairman Andy McKenna, will rest partly on strengthening the grass-roots organization, a process he thinks is well under way.

But winning statewide offices could require more than that and even more than the emergence of strong candidates. It might also mean Republicans bridging the ongoing divide between social moderates and social conservatives who split over such issues as abortion, gay marriage and gun control.

Were he advising the party, Wheeler said, he would "tell social conservatives to suck it up, forget about your core issues and be more pragmatic, because Illinois tends to be a more liberal state."

State Rep. David Reis, a social conservative from downstate Willow Hill, doesn't buy it.

"Republicans have long stood for being pro-life, pro-Second Amendment and being for traditional marriage," Reis said. "As moderates try to push us away from that, that's when we get into trouble; that's when social conservatives stay home."

Former state Sen. Steve Rauschenberger, of Elgin, now seeking the party's national committeeman post, said the party splits less over social issues than on tactics and strategy. He said longtime members follow what he calls the Jim Thompson model of largely seeking accommodation with Democrats. By contrast, he said, more recent arrivals favor a more aggressive approach that draws sharper distinctions between the two parties on issues.

Two days in Decatur will neither make nor break the party, but it could determine in part how well equipped Republicans are to face the immediate challenge of November's election.

"We do need to come out of this unified," Cross said.