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NEWS » POLITICS

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Parker remains at party helm

by Franklin College Pulliam School of Journalism



Indiana Democratic Party Chair Dan Parker at a press conference last week announcing his resignation
 Lesley Weidenbener

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Indiana Democrats acknowledged Monday they face a significant challenge trying to unite the party in time for the important 2012 elections after a messy leadership squabble over the weekend left key officials divided.

Some members of the party's central committee said they are frustrated about a three-hour, closed-door caucus that was supposed to lead to the election of a new chairman. Instead, the committee voted narrowly to reinstate long-time leader Dan Parker, who had resigned the position last week only to rescind the request just hours before the caucus.

"Some people in the state are very upset with the leadership of the party and are very upset with the way the entire vote was handled," said Garrett Webb, a member of the Indiana Democratic Central Committee who participated in Saturday's caucus and supported another candidate for chairman. "It's going to be very difficult to achieve" party unity.

But Mike Jones, a central committee member and chairman of the party's 6th District, said that while the process was "flawed" and left a rift among officials, members can put aside their differences and focus on what matters: winning races in 2012.

"I know I'm going to do everything I can," Jones said Monday. "I'm hoping what's going to come out of this is that the committee members – the district chairs and vice chairs – will soon have more say and more input into the daily direction of the party."

Jones and Webb were among the central committee members who supported electing Joel Miller, a Marion County Democrat, to be the party's new chairman. Miller was thought to have enough support among the party's 18 district chairs and vice chairs – who are charged with picking the party's leader – to win the job.



U.S. Rep. Joe Donnelly, who is running for Senate, is one of the party members who asked Parker to remain in his post. Photo courtesy of Congressman Donnelly.

But the candidates for statewide office – namely former Indiana House Speaker [John Gregg](#), who is running for governor, and U.S. Rep. [Joe Donnelly](#), who is running for U.S. Senate – preferred another candidate. And when it became obvious late last week that their pick, Tim Jeffers, couldn't win a majority of votes, the candidates decided they'd ask Parker to stay on.

So instead of the 18 district chairs and vice chairs voting on a new chairman, the full central committee – 30 members – voted narrowly to let Parker rescind his resignation.

"The candidates asked Dan Parker to stay. They didn't think it was in their best interest to switch horses midstream," said Dean Boerste, a member of the Democratic National Committee and the state's central committee. "And I think if that's what our 2012 candidates wanted, if that's what they thought could help them win, we should respect that."

Andy Downs, director of the Mike Downs Center for Politics at Indiana–Purdue Fort Wayne, said the resulting division among members could be a problem for Democrats as they enter 2012, when the races for governor, senator, Congress, the state legislature and president are on the ballot.

"If the Republicans are smart, they're going to be pointing out that Parker said last week it's time for new leadership and suddenly he is the new leadership," said Downs, who is active in Democratic politics in Allen County. "That means the Democratic Party can't agree on what or who their leadership should be. That might mean the party is in disarray."

But Downs said the latter doesn't have to be true. If Democratic leaders across the state – particularly in larger counties including Marion, Vanderburgh, Lake, St. Joseph and Allen counties – were to come together to announce support for Parker, they could likely erase many of the ill feelings, he said.

"The transition of power can always be messy but it doesn't necessarily mean there is disarray," Downs said. "It can be a sign of a strong party, a diverse party."

Robin Winston, a former Democrat state party chairman, said the key will be for Democrats to remember what matters most – not some family infighting but the struggle to protect Hoosier workers and families.

He said it would be up to Parker and other key leaders to rise above the squabbling.

"There were times when I was chairman that I had people in the room who didn't like one another or who didn't like me," Winston said. "But we appealed to them on a larger issue. It might have been funding full-day kindergarten or putting more police on the streets or whatever the bigger issue was facing us.

"But it is the hardest thing to do, to take people who do not like one another and insist they work together on the bigger issue because the bigger issues are what matters."

Parker was not available Monday for an interview about his decision to remain as chairman and was traveling in northwest Indiana, talking with local party leaders. But he said through

email that he felt "honored to be approached by party leaders to stay in my position."

"What happened this weekend happens from time to time in any family and we'll be stronger for it in the long run," Parker said. "We're all Democrats, and I look forward to continuing my service to the party."

Some members said the key to strengthening the party would be giving more voice to its local leaders. Boerste supported Parker's reinstatement but said he could see why other central committee members were upset.

Many entered Saturday's caucus with little idea why Parker first resigned and why they would no longer have the opportunity to vote on a new chairman.

"These people on the committee felt they were blindsided," Boerste said. "They don't want to see it happen that way again. They have a right to know what's going on."

Jones and Webb said they are hopeful that Parker and other party leaders will be more communicative in the future. But Jones said it's also up to committee members to insist on input.

"I'm confident we sent our message," Webb said. "I have every hope that more people will be brought into the decision-making process. But I'm not going to count my chickens before they hatch."

Lesley Weidenbener is an editor at TheStatehouseFile.com, an Indiana news website powered by students from the Franklin College Pulliam School of Journalism.

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