

New GOP chair will have to unite ranks**Vanderburgh County party thrown in turmoil**

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**Vanderburgh County GOP Chair Mike Duckworth introduces his party's winners at The Foundry on Main Nov. 7, 2024. Houston Harwood/Courier & Press**

EVANSVILLE – Whoever is chosen to succeed Vanderburgh County Republican Chairman Mike Duckworth in a March 1 party caucus will tackle an unusual problem.

Party chairs typically attempt to mediate and resolve intraparty disputes, but the second half of Duckworth's four-year tenure was marked by near-constant turmoil in GOP ranks.

The next chair of what is one of Indiana's largest political organizations likely will have to prioritize uniting warring factions in anticipation of countywide elections in 2026 and city elections the following year.

Having presided over a divisive 2023 mayoral primary that contributed mightily to the GOP's top-to-bottom losses in that year's municipal elections, Duckworth began 2024 with an opportunity to lead a reconciliation.

He didn't take it.

In February 2024, Duckworth used Indiana's 'two-primaries' law to block Republicans he didn't support from running for GOP precinct committee (PC) and state convention delegate positions in May's primary election. Among those Duckworth blocked: Levi Christmas, who attempted at age 18 to run for a PC position, and Brian Boone, a Black former Chicago resident who had been the only person willing to serve as the party's PC from Ward 5 Precinct 9.

The two-primaries law requires that a candidate's two most recent votes in Indiana primary elections must have been cast in primaries held by the party he or she seeks to represent. Christmas, who had never voted before, and Boone couldn't meet the standard and Duckworth wouldn't give them waivers, so they were out.

'(Challenges) don't sound too welcoming,' Boone said afterward. 'If you want to grow some, don't put up obstacles. Put down obstacles and get people to join you.'

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Passions were further enflamed because Duckworth had allowed other Republicans who hadn't voted in two consecutive GOP primaries — Republicans he supported — to seek office by giving them the required waivers. Maytes Rivera, the GOP's unsuccessful 2023 nominee for a City Council seat, received Duckworth's permission even though her only recent vote in a Republican primary was the one held that year. Rivera also had voted in the Democratic Party's 2016 primary.

Duckworth said he acted because he didn't know whether the Republicans he blocked were 'friendly Republicans.'

'All those people that I have challenged? I don't know them,' he said at the time. 'They've never contacted me. They've never been to any of our events.'



Cheryl Musgrave, left, and Amy Canterbury. Provided by Courier & Press

'I have no idea who these people are — so I don't know if they're friendly Republicans or what they are, because they've not given me the courtesy to give me a call.'

But party conservatives saw it as a move by Duckworth to exclude those he suspected would not support his continuation as GOP chairman.

Duckworth rejected his next chance for a reconciliation against the wishes of his vice chair.

GOP Vice Chair Dottie Thomas told the Courier & Press in December 2023 that then-County Commissioner Cheryl Musgrave had earned the right not to have to worry about a Republican primary challenger in 2024. Musgrave had been defeated in the divisive 2023 mayoral primary, but she had served nearly 10 years in two stints on the Board of Commissioners and had won several contested elections.

But Duckworth admitted he was still sore because Musgrave supported Democrat Jeff Hatfield against him in his unsuccessful 2018 campaign for a Board of Commissioners seat. She also supported Democratic Commissioner Ben Shoulders in his 2020 re-election campaign.

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So the party's chairman wielded the two-primaries law against a longtime incumbent Republican officeholder when he gave his permission for United Way CEO Amy Canterbury to challenge Musgrave in the primary election. Canterbury, who had voted in the 2022 Democratic primary, didn't meet the two-primaries law's standards.

Musgrave responded with a furious counterattack, calling Duckworth 'unfit to hold any elected office' and dredging up news stories about questionable incidents from the GOP chairman's past.

Canterbury ultimately won the intraparty contest against Musgrave by a 53-47 percent margin, but Musgrave supporters said Duckworth's action unnecessarily extended the GOP's internal warfare. Musgrave's detractors shot back that she declared her intention to run for Evansville mayor in 2023 before Republican incumbent Lloyd Winnecke had decided whether to seek re-election.

Even with all this, the local GOP's most bitter and consequential conflict was yet to come — and again, it would be initiated by Duckworth.

GOP infighting escalates to all-out civil war

The mother of all intraparty battles under Duckworth's chairmanship began when he unsuccessfully tried to block former Republican Michael Daugherty's attempt to rejoin the party by running in the May primary. Daugherty, a vocal critic of Duckworth, was seeking a PC position and a delegate slot at the 2024 state GOP convention.

Duckworth didn't welcome his rival back into the fold.

The party chairman cited Indiana Republican State Committee rules stating that candidates can't seek office if they are not 'in good standing' with the party. Daugherty wasn't in good standing, Duckworth argued, because his 2023 Libertarian campaign for mayor put him in direct opposition to unsuccessful Republican nominee Natalie Rascher.

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But the Vanderburgh County Election Board foiled Duckworth's attempt to remove Daugherty from the ballot, with the GOP's own representative to the board — attorney Joe Harrison Jr., a former party chairman himself — siding with Daugherty. Duckworth responded by replacing Harrison on the board with Chad Sullivan, the lawyer who had represented him in his attempt to block Daugherty.

Duckworth's opposition to Daugherty didn't stop Republican voters themselves from supporting Daugherty in the primary.

Daugherty defeated another Republican for a PC slot with 73% of the vote. He received 1,260 votes to finish fourth in a field of 24 Republicans seeking 10 seats at the state GOP convention.

But Duckworth did not accept the election victories of Daugherty and two other intraparty critics of his, conservative activists Cheryl Batteiger-Smith and Ken Colbert. Sixteen days after they were elected by GOP voters and a week after their victories were certified by the Vanderburgh County Election Board, he appealed to 8th District GOP officers — a group aligned with him.

After a June 3 hearing held at Duckworth's request, the 8th District GOP committee's four members unanimously voted to remove Daugherty, Colbert and Batteiger-Smith from their elected positions and forbade them from running for elected office under the GOP banner until 2030.

The four GOP committee members were:

- Posey County resident Brenda Goff, chair;
- Jon Winkler, chairman of the Spencer County Republican Party, vice chair;
- Mike Myers, secretary of the Daviess County GOP, secretary; and
- Linda Painter, treasurer of the Knox County GOP, treasurer.

In the middle of all this, Duckworth acted to exclude the GOP's newly elected PCs from an important intraparty decision. He scheduled a caucus of GOP precinct committee members to replace departing County Clerk Carla Hayden for May 15 — two days before the victories of Daugherty, Batteiger-Smith, Colbert and others recruited by them could be certified.

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With this controversial but legal maneuver, Duckworth facilitated the election of his ally, Marsha Abell-Barnhart, over Colbert in the caucus.

Colbert later said he would have won decisively had Duckworth allowed the newly elected PCs to vote.

Later in June, Daugherty found out the 8th District GOP committee's vote meant that not only was his election by GOP voters invalidated and his right to run for office as a Republican curtailed — he was also banned from the state party convention. Daugherty had intended to be there to work for Noblesville pastor Micah Beckwith's campaign for lieutenant governor.

8th District GOP committee member Painter told the Courier & Press after the committee's disciplinary action that the Republican voters who elected Daugherty, Batteiger-Smith and Colbert probably didn't understand state party rules.

Painter insisted that voters' support for Daugherty in May's GOP primary election was trumped by the rules stating a Republican 'in good standing' cannot have openly opposed a GOP nominee for elected office in the past. Daugherty did that when he opposed Rascher as a Libertarian in 2023.

Pointing to his election victories in intraparty contests, Daugherty said he was 'dumbfounded' by Painter's remarks. He said they illustrate just how far GOP leaders had drifted out of touch with rank-and-file Republicans.

It was a classic case of selective enforcement against Republicans who wanted Duckworth removed as party chairman or would cooperate with others who do, said supporters of Daugherty, Batteiger-Smith and Colbert. They bitterly noted that Duckworth had not tried to prevent Steve Hammer and Steve Ary from seeking party offices in the May primary election.

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Ary directly opposed Republican Mayor Lloyd Winnecke's 2019 re-election campaign by running against him as an independent in that year's election. He criticized Winnecke, too, insinuating that the Republican mayor showered campaign funds on local organizations to buy their votes.

Hammer, a Republican who openly supported Democratic mayoral nominee Stephanie Terry over Rascher, also won a contested election for a precinct committee position. But Duckworth didn't challenge Hammer's right to run.

Hammer was at that time a field representative to then-U.S. Sen. Mike Braun, who was elected Indiana governor several months later.

Duckworth insisted he wasn't targeting anyone but was simply enforcing party rules.

The caucus to choose Duckworth's replacement is set for 10 a.m. on March 1 at Faithway Baptist Church.

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