

October 25, 2021



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## Adam Kinzinger's stance against Trumpism serves as a microcosm of split within the GOP

Allies and adversaries who've seen the congressman's political career develop over 20 years say his willingness to buck his own party is not surprising

By Alex Ortiz

May 04, 2021 at 9:43 am CDT

 Expand



U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Channahon, speaks with constituents at the Dollinger Family Farm in Channahon on March 29, 2021. (Alex Ortiz)

On a Zoom call with the Grundy Economic Development Council in late February, U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger addressed a long list of issues facing the country and his north central Illinois district.

He shared his thoughts on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic, detailed his efforts to save nuclear plants in Illinois and touched on his worries about foreign adversaries in Syria and China.

Yet among the bevy of issues he spoke about, there was one that he said concerns him greatly.

“The thing that actually really keeps me up at night is not overseas. It’s here at home,” said Kinzinger, R-Channahon. “It is the level of division in this country right now.”

He said Americans see those with different political opinions as “the enemy. That is a really big problem,” he said.

The 16th Congressional District representative tried to illustrate the level of partisan polarization with a dramatic hypothetical: Kinzinger said he feared that if China were to drop a nuclear bomb on California, one of the most Democratic states in the nation, then “there would be some on my side of the aisle [Republicans] that said, ‘Good, now we can win the Senate back.’ ”

“I say that kind of jokingly, but kind of not,” Kinzinger said.

It’s that concern over the present political climate in the U.S. that has prompted the six-term congressman to not only call out what he views as extremism in both parties but also to buck former President Donald Trump and his supporters.

Kinzinger’s well-documented stances, from calling for the removal of Trump from office after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol to being one of only 10 Republicans to vote to impeach the 45th president, have invited backlash from several constituents.

Despite that criticism from a party that largely still approves of Trump, Kinzinger, 43, has remained steadfast in his journey to #RestoreOurGOP, a hashtag he uses on Twitter.

Even as the country begins to rebound from the devastation of a pandemic that's killed more than half a million Americans and an economic crisis that cost millions of jobs, Kinzinger's fight with members of his own party has captured headlines and, at times, sparked debates locally and nationally.

Interviews with more than a dozen of Kinzinger's former colleagues, observers, political adversaries and allies reveal the kinds of rifts on the local level that could have broader implications for the future of the Republican Party.



An estimated 125 people showed up Jan. 30, 2021, for The Rally For Representation at Washington Square in Ottawa to express their frustration with U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Channahon. (Tom Sistik)

**'I don't know what he's thinking'**

The political knives were out for Kinzinger during a Will County Republican Central Committee meeting in late February.

A group of more than 100 members, many of whom attended in person at the party's office with few face coverings and seemingly little regard for social distancing, overwhelmingly voted to censure the congressman.

They cited not only his vote to impeach Trump but also his announced effort to challenge sitting Republican members of Congress who had echoed the former president's false claims of election fraud.

"As long as he was going after the [former] president, it's politics as usual," Chairman George Pearson said during the meeting. "But you start raising money to go after other Republicans, I have a real issue with that. That's a problem. Not only did he insult other Republicans who were supporting the president, he then started insulting me as a voter, and I'll be damned if I'm going to have somebody that's elected insult me as a voter."

The attendees applauded Pearson's statement.

Another member said Kinzinger was not a Republican and called him a "bum."

There still were a couple precinct committee members who said that while they didn't agree with Kinzinger's actions, they did not see the sense in censuring one of their own, especially one with proven electoral success in a blue state.

The arguments fell flat, however, as the party members voted, 111-5, with one abstention, in favor of censure.

Similar debates took place across the 16th District in the weeks after Kinzinger's vote to impeach Trump.

Republican groups in La Salle and Iroquois counties voted to censure him. The chairwoman of the Ogle County Republicans said that while her organization didn't censure Kinzinger, "we're not supporting him, either."

The debates were something of a microcosm of the broader internal divisions within the GOP playing out on a national scale.

Fidelity to Trump appeared to be a – if not the – defining factor causing those fissures.

“I don’t know what he’s thinking,” Larry Smith, chairman of the La Salle County Republicans, said of Kinzinger. “I just know that after he got elected, he went completely off the reservation.”

Smith said Kinzinger’s remarks about Trump were “so out of line” that he and his members felt obligated to take action.

When asked about Trump, Smith conceded he wished he were “more of a statesman” and that he can be “abrasive” at times.

“Sometimes he’d make me cringe,” Smith said of the former president.

But he also said he admired Trump’s ability to take the heat from liberals and the mainstream news media.

“I don’t know anybody who could have survived the beating that guy took for four years,” he said. “I think a lesser man would have folded under the pressure.”

Of course, some still failed to see the use of censure votes and bashing Kinzinger.

Aren Hansen, chairman of the Grundy County Republicans, said he thought Kinzinger has been a “great representative” who “doesn’t bite his tongue.”

Moreover, Hansen argued it made little sense to ostracize a staunchly conservative Republican who is “arguably our most talented, up-and-coming” representative. He said Kinzinger could provide Illinois Republicans their best chance to win a statewide office, all of which Democrats control.

Observers have speculated that Kinzinger is positioning himself to run for a U.S. Senate seat or governor in 2022. When asked about it during a virtual news conference in February, he said he did not have any plans to run for higher office.

He argued his priority is to “save” the Republican Party, which he said is “a great party that’s very much lost its way,” but he also conceded a more practical reason for not seeking higher office.

“People that speculate that don’t know me, and I would even argue that they probably don’t know something about politics if they think I can get through a primary pretty easily,” Kinzinger said.

Kinzinger already has drawn several primary challengers for the 2022 cycle.

Even though the new map for legislative districts has yet to be determined, two Republicans who challenged U.S. Rep. Lauren Underwood, a Democrat in the 14th Congressional District, have set their sights on Kinzinger.

Catalina Lauf of Woodstock and James Marter of Oswego announced runs in Kinzinger’s district.

Lauf has called Kinzinger a “fake Republican.” Another challenger, Jack Lombardi of Manhattan, has called Kinzinger a RINO – an acronym meaning Republican in name only – on Twitter.

In effect, these candidates have turned down the opportunity to take on a potentially vulnerable Democrat such as Underwood in favor of challenging Kinzinger.

It’s that calculus that appeared to perplex Kinzinger’s allies.

State Rep. David Allen Welter, a Republican from Morris, said he thinks Kinzinger is taking his stance without regard for his political future. He conceded it’s a risk for Kinzinger, as many local Republicans have turned against him.

“I don’t think they care about the political realities,” Welter said of Kinzinger’s critics. “It doesn’t matter what you say or what logic you use.”

Some allies pointed to how well Kinzinger did in the 2020 cycle, winning his district by nearly 30 points, compared with Trump, who won it by 16 points.

Although some Illinois Republicans have embraced Trump and his brand, others, such as Hansen, advocate an approach that can attract swing voters the party lost in 2018.

But Hansen said he feared the GOP faithful were effectively eating one of their own and possibly hindering their party’s journey back to competitiveness in Illinois.

“It’s been frustrating watching our own party members throw him to the wolves,” he said. “Maybe it’s a peek into the window of why we struggle so much.”



Former U.S. House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio (left) performs a mock swearing in for Rep. Adam Kinzinger in this 2011 file photo on Capitol Hill in Washington as the 113th Congress began. Kinzinger was first elected to Congress in 2010. (AP)

### **‘He’s got guts’**

For those who’ve known Kinzinger from his earliest days in politics, his stances over the past few months are not surprising.

When he was a 20-year-old sophomore at Illinois State University, Kinzinger beat a three-term incumbent and became the youngest member of the McLean County Board.

Tari Renner, the mayor of Bloomington, served with Kinzinger on the board starting in 1998. Renner, a Democrat, said he remembers working quite well with Kinzinger, who even then was a conservative Republican. They both took practical approaches to local and less partisan issues.

“We both wanted to blow the place open,” Renner joked. “The old guard who ran the place forever didn’t like questions or open government.”

Renner said he’s kept in touch with Kinzinger since their days as colleagues. In recent weeks, as he saw Kinzinger take heat for his stances against Trump, Renner said he sent him text messages lauding him for “sticking by your guns.”

It was that principled stand without resorting to personal attacks that Renner said he remembers seeing when Kinzinger was a younger man.

Renner recalled one instance involving another board member who he said was “incompetent” and “nasty.” He remembered Kinzinger once calling out that member for his incompetence but without any name-calling.

He said Kinzinger’s actions showed his “deepest, strongest character,” traits he again sees in this latest set of battles.

“It’s not about issues,” Renner said. “It’s the fact that he realized that we shouldn’t have a sociopath in the White House.”

George Gordon, who also served on the McLean County Board from shortly before Kinzinger was elected until last year, also remembered Kinzinger as a “serious” and “conscientious” elected official.

Gordon, a Democrat, remembered that one of the most hotly debated votes on the board was one in 2000 for who would be chairman.

Kinzinger gave the decision “serious thought,” Gordon said, and he ultimately decided against the preference of some within his own party. Gordon said other members were struck by Kinzinger’s ability to buck partisan expectations, much like he’s done recently.

“He’s got guts,” Gordon said. “I think he’s been entirely sincere with the things he’s said.”

Kinzinger routinely has decried the latest evolution of electoral politics, including on his new podcast, “Country First Conversations.” In the first episode, he said the advent of social media helped encourage new members of Congress to focus more on self-promotion than legislating.



As if reminiscing about a bygone era, Kinzinger said he remembers his first years after being elected to Congress in 2010 were focused on more substantive issues. His congressional YouTube page is full of speeches from his early days criticizing the Obama administration for its spending and pushing for regulation cuts to help boost an economy still suffering from the Great Recession.

John McIntyre, the Republican chairman of the McLean County Board, said that as he watched Kinzinger's career play out, he's seen the deterioration of American politics unfold as well.

McIntyre said he's been friendly with the Kinzinger family for many years and that his wife taught Kinzinger when he was in grade school.

As a Republican, McIntyre said he, too, thinks modern politics has become hyper-polarized around more and more extreme viewpoints and also admired Kinzinger for his stand on principle.

"We need more people like Adam," McIntyre said.



U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Channahon, speaks with constituents at the Dollinger Family Farm in Channahon on March 29, 2021. (Alex Ortiz)

## **‘I’ll never look back’**

In late March, as national politics moved on and Republicans turned their focus on attacking the Biden administration’s push for a huge infrastructure package and its handling of a migrant crisis, Kinzinger was back in his district.

He met with members of the Will County Farm Bureau, who presented him with their Legislator of the Year Award for his votes on pandemic relief for farmers, a trade deal with Canada and Mexico, and estate taxes.

The congressman appeared at ease, complimenting the host farmer for his old-school tractor and fielding questions about his latest concerns over China.

But Kinzinger also told of the tensions lingering in Congress after a “really rough year” between navigating new safety rules on Capitol Hill because of the pandemic, and even more measures after the Jan. 6 insurrection.

He said additions such as metal detectors, which even members of Congress needed to go through, were installed “just to make a point.”

“That just boils the tension up,” he said.

Despite the challenges, he said he felt reinvigorated to debate actual legislation. Even if he was on the side out of power and in dissent of what Democrats were doing, it felt to him like he was “fighting for a purpose.”

He expressed no worries about a looming reelection bid in 2022 and was about to announce a big fundraising quarter, but he also appeared to acknowledge the political fights engulfing the country had perhaps taken a toll on him.

“When I’m done with politics,” Kinzinger said, “I’ll never look back.”

### **Alex Ortiz**

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education and more. He earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a master's degree from Northwestern University.



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## For many Will County residents, a year of struggle and perseverance

Residents reflect on the business closures, debates over school reopenings and political divisions that marked a year like no other

By Alex Ortiz

March 13, 2021 at 6:00 am CST

 Expand



Jim Zografos kisses his godson Nicolas Georgiou on the cheek, a rare occasion since COVID restrictions were put in place, on Wednesday, March 10, 2021, at the Old Fashioned Pancake House in Joliet, Ill. Last March the Herald-News spoke with local restaurants on the day Governor Pritzker delivered a stay-at-home order, and one year later these restaurants have found ways to adapt to the pandemic restrictions. (Geoff Stellfox - [gstellfox@shawmedia.com](mailto:gstellfox@shawmedia.com))

It's been almost exactly one year since the Old Fashioned Pancake House in Joliet, along with all other restaurants in Illinois, had to shut down indoor service as the novel coronavirus spread throughout the state.

Jim Zografos, the owner of the Old Fashioned Pancake House, remembered he couldn't believe it when Gov. JB Pritzker made that announcement on March 15 of last year.

"I almost had a heart attack," he said.

The last year has brought the biggest challenges Zografos has seen since he opened the restaurant in 1988.



Lea Bulger takes a to-go order at the checkout counter while behind a plexiglass partition on Wednesday, March 10, 2021, at the Old Fashioned Pancake House in Joliet, Ill. Last March the Herald-News spoke with local restaurants on the day Governor Pritzker delivered a stay-at-home order, and one year later these restaurants have found ways to adapt to the pandemic restrictions. (Geoff Stellfox - [gstellfox@shawmedia.com](mailto:gstellfox@shawmedia.com))

As with many other business owners, he said the mitigations implemented to slow the spread of the deadly virus took a toll on his bottom line. During the first weeks of the pandemic, the restaurant saw about an 80% drop in revenue and Zografos said he had to lay off about half of his employees.

But with the help of loans from the federal Paycheck Protection Program and a grant from Will County, the restaurant stayed open.

In all, nearly 9,000 local businesses earned PPP loans, which the Will County Center for Economic Development estimated saved about 87,000 jobs. So far, the county has distributed almost \$21 million in federal aid to more than 1,400 businesses.

Despite efforts to get relief out, Mike Paone, the vice president for government affairs at the Joliet Region Chamber of Commerce, said the swift shut down without more support really hurt.

“From the early stages, I think the biggest issue out there was the uncertainty and sometimes lack of clear communication,” Paone said.

At times, Paone and others in the business community criticized the state’s mitigation strategy.

Restaurants and bars in Will County were ordered to stop indoor service on three separate occasions: once last March, a second time in the late summer and again in the fall when COVID-19 cases spiked to the highest levels across the state.

Many restaurants flouted the restrictions even as the county’s test positivity rate reached 20% in mid-November.

But for Zografos, despite the financial hits, he understood why Pritzker and the state took action to prevent overcrowded hospitals and more death.

“I think he did the right thing,” Zografos said of the governor.



Christina Melesio poses for a portrait with her son, Santos Lopez, on Wednesday, July 22, 2020, at their home in Joliet, Ill. (Eric Ginnard)

### **‘He has his days’**

Christina Melesio said she was relieved last week when her son, Santos, finally returned to the classroom.

As Joliet Public School District 86 began returning small groups of students into its buildings for in-person learning this semester, Santos was one of the kids offered the opportunity because he requires special education classes.

When cases began to rise in Will County late last summer, just before school was set to restart, Melesio wondered which risk was worse: the potential for her son to fall behind if he stayed home, or be exposed to infection.

The decision was made for Melesio as District 86 began the year with fully remote learning. Still, she said it was a challenge to essentially fill the role of teaching assistant at home for her two kids.

“It was definitely harder than I thought to keep them on track,” Melesio said. “It was constant communication with teachers.”

Even though she lost her job, Melesio said she was lucky because her parents were able to help her and she eventually found work again. But, she said the pandemic opened her eyes to the struggle of some of her neighbors on the east side of Joliet. She said one of her son’s best friends couldn’t consistently attend school virtually because he didn’t have reliable internet access.

As for Santos, Melesio said the last year hasn’t been easy for him academically. His attention deficit hyperactivity disorder required Melesio to be diligent in keeping him on task.

“He struggles,” she said. “He has his days.”

Melesio added that after this year, she’s gained more appreciation for teachers and the job they have to do.

“I understand more what teachers go through,” she said. “It’s a struggle.”





Nearly 200 Plainfield teachers and faculty gathered Thursday, July 23, 2020, while demonstrating outside District 202's offices in Plainfield, Ill., to vocalize their concerns about returning to in-person instruction for the upcoming school year during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Eric Ginnard)

## **‘We really are so, so polarized’**

Of course such school closures didn't occur without criticism from parents who argued the risk of students missing out on in-person learning outweighed the risk of the virus.

Sherrie Graham, who has three children in Plainfield School District 202, was one of the parents who organized demonstrations outside the district's administration building as officials discussed the potential of returning to in-person learning last summer. District 202 elected to go remote as infections rose in Will County.

“I feel like they could have gone back safely in August and September,” Graham said, “especially when they already knew schools weren't super spreaders.”

This month, Graham said she was happy her twin boys were able to attend high school twice a week and play their senior seasons on their respective sports teams. But as she reflected on the debates over in-person learning, she said she felt some proponents of a more cautious approach let “fear take hold of them.”

But, Graham added, she has taken time to remember to “check” herself and show empathy for other points of view.

“Not everyone is like me,” she said.

Those debates over weighing residents' health and livelihoods, and the division they caused, is what has stood out about the past year for New Lenox Mayor Tim Baldermann.

“We are so, so polarized to the detriment of everybody,” Baldermann said.

As mayor, he argued for taking a “balanced” approach like advocating for tweaks to the state's mitigations, but also encouraging residents to wear masks. The village, he said, even handed out over 20,000 masks near the start of the pandemic.

Baldermann thought the village did a good job following the science and “being honest with people,” even with backlash on social media where he said “everybody thinks they're an expert.”

“We said all along ... that we were not going to approach this politically,” he said.

Pat McGuire, who was serving as a state senator until his term ended in January, also tried to combat that division with an empathetic appeal. On more than one occasion, he publicly implored residents to heed health guidance and think of the first responders and essential workers who were risking their own well-being for others.

“There’s been an enormous sacrifice for the common good,” McGuire said.

Given that, he said he hoped those sacrifices and struggles would engender more compassion among neighbors during an unprecedented time.

“Treat each other well,” McGuire said. “This has been a yearlong life and death experience and if anything should cause us to think twice before criticizing or condemning others, it should be this.”

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## Democratic party asks Will County Board candidate to quit race after groping allegation

Joliet activist says she was groped, flashed after Will County Progressives event in 2016

By Alex Ortiz

August 26, 2020 at 8:49 am CDT

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A roll of "I Voted" stickers sit behind a counter at the Will County Clerk's Office on Monday, Nov. 7, at the Will County Office Building in Joliet. (Shaw Media)

The Will County Democratic Central Committee said it asked a candidate for the Will County Board to withdraw from the race after a woman said he groped her in 2016.

The allegation centers on Joel Brown, an attorney from Romeoville who is running for a seat on the Will County Board in District 3 as a Democrat.

Nicki Serbin, a Joliet political activist, wrote a public Facebook post earlier this month in which she said a candidate for the board flashed and groped her, although she did not name Brown.

“The dirtbag that flashed and groped me when I was alone in an office with him in 2016 is now running for Will County Board with the support of the local party. Gross. I need to go manage my anger. #metoo,” Serbin wrote.

In an interview with The Herald-News, Serbin identified Brown as the person who allegedly groped her.

“I felt preyed upon,” she said.

She said they met through Will County Progressives, a political group she helped lead in 2016. She said Brown would come to social meetings the group held.

In the late summer of 2016, Serbin said she and Brown were alone cleaning up after a meeting at the group’s “clubhouse” in Joliet. Serbin said Brown asked her if she was single, if she had ever dated a “Black guy” or if she had a “hook-up buddy.”

Serbin said she told Brown she was not interested in dating anybody. Brown then asked if she was sure, pulled down his pants and exposed his genitals, Serbin said.

She said she tried to “defuse the situation with humor” with a joke and told him she that “wasn’t taking any applications at this time.” Serbin said Brown proceeded to put his right arm around her and groped her breast with his left hand.

Serbin said at that point, she tried to scoot away from him and repeatedly said, “No thank you.” Brown stopped and then left, she said.

Serbin said that very soon after the incident she told her friend Jonathan Mulick, who was also part of the organization at the time, about what happened. Mulick confirmed that

Serbin told him about the incident and that her story was consistent with what she told him back in 2016.

“I have no reason to doubt her,” Mulick said.

Over the next four years, Serbin said, she told a handful of fellow political activists about the incident, including County Board members.

Democratic members Jackie Traynere, Amanda Koch and Meta Mueller confirmed that Serbin told them directly about the incident.

Koch said Serbin’s account to The Herald-News was “very consistent” with what she told her in 2017. Back then, Serbin was helping Koch’s campaign for the County Board.

Mueller said Serbin told her of the incident about a year ago.

Koch said she thought Brown should “do the right thing” and step out of the race.

Mueller said she thought the party leadership should address the incident with Brown, adding that “if he did this, I don’t think he should represent residents.”

Traynere said she was also concerned about the allegation and confirmed the account with Serbin earlier this year. She said that now that the allegation was made public, “it’s something we’re going to have to talk about.”

Bill Thoman, the former chairman of the Will County Central Democratic Committee, said Serbin also told him that Brown flashed her. Thoman said he spoke directly to Brown last year to warn him the allegation might come up ahead of the election.

“I tried to help him understand and anticipate that this was going to be an issue,” Thoman said of his discussion with Brown.

Thoman said he was unsure about whether Brown should withdraw from the race or not.

“It’s just unfortunate,” he said.

Suzanna Ibarra, who still leads the Will County Progressives, also confirmed that Serbin told her that Brown had flashed and groped her in 2016. While both women said they had a

falling out since then, Ibarra said she thought the allegation was credible and that Brown should “answer to these allegations.”

Nora Gruenberg, chairman of the Will County Democratic Central Committee, said in a statement Friday that “any allegation of harassment or discrimination is taken very seriously, and we will take appropriate action in response to founded allegations.”

Gruenberg added, “To that end, the Will County Democratic Central Committee has asked Joel Brown to withdraw his candidacy for the Will County Board’s 3rd District.”

Brown confirmed that he was aware of Serbin’s Facebook post and that the Democratic Party asked him to quit the race.

“I’m staying in the race,” Brown said.

He said in a statement that he and Serbin “engaged in a conversation ... that became sexual in nature.”

“Due to our conversation I misinterpreted Ms. Serbin’s signals,” he said in the statement. “When she demonstrated that she was not interested, I backed away. We continued to talk for another hour and a half and then we left in our vehicles and I went home.”

He added, “I take full responsibility for my actions.”

Serbin said she felt “a little bit of shame” for not speaking publicly about the incident sooner, although she had worried about any potential fallout, citing Brown’s status. She said she never reported it to law enforcement.

Brown is an attorney practicing criminal defense and family law, according to the website for his law firm, Reeder & Brown. He also was an assistant state’s attorney for Will County, according to the website.

Serbin said she had “nothing to gain” from publicly accusing Brown and said she worried for other women in county government if he were elected. She said she hopes Brown withdraws from the race and that the Will County Democratic party can replace him on the ballot for November.

“I can’t stay quiet,” she said. “I can’t pretend it didn’t happen.”

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