



In Illinois, Republicans fight election déjà vu

By Sean J. Miller - 01/25/10 06:43 PM ET

Republicans hope Illinois primary voters won't get election déjà vu in the battle for Rep. Bill Foster's (D-Ill.) seat.

A bitter primary is the last thing the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) wanted in the state.

But with the election a week away, history could be repeating itself as two GOP candidates battle it out for the party's nomination.

After pledging to run a clean campaign, state Sen. Randy Hultgren (R) recently sent a mailer accusing his primary opponent of supporting human trafficking.

The flier stated that attorney Ethan Hastert, the son of the district's longtime congressman and former House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R), "was employed by the same law firm that lobbies on behalf of foreign mining companies with deplorable human rights records and a history of human trafficking."

In response, the Hastert campaign used a robocall from the candidate's wife, Heidi Hastert, to label Hultgren's accusations a "ridiculous and untrue attack."

"I am disappointed that Randy Hultgren would exploit the suffering of children and women to further his political career," Heidi Hastert said in the call. "My husband Ethan would never be associated with that kind of evil and I am shocked that Sen. Hultgren would say such a thing."

The Hultgren camp maintains it wasn't trying to go negative and was simply drawing a valid contrast with its opponent. The Hastert campaign said it is asking for an apology but noted it's not going to use any personal attacks against Hultgren.

Before Democrats seized control of the district last cycle, it had been held by Republicans since 1939. This year, it's considered a prime target for a Republican pick-up.

Republicans argue Foster won the March 2008 special election and the 2008 general election in a fluke because the nasty primary left the GOP divided. They also point to President Barack Obama's coattail effect, especially in Obama's home state.

Democrats, meanwhile, are hoping the competitive Republican primary hamstring the eventual nominee — just like it did last cycle.

"The last time in the 14th it was pretty nasty," said Mike Kenyon, chairman of the Kane County Republicans.

Republicans downplayed any worries of a 2008 flashback.

"We're confident that at the end of the day [Republicans] will come together in a way they never did" in

2008, NRCC spokesman Tom Erickson said.

The GOP primary in the March 2008 special election became a battle between state Sen. Chris Lauzen and businessman Jim Oberweis.

Lauzen harbored some bad feelings toward the Hastert-backed Oberweis and refused to endorse him after the primary. Foster went on to win by 16 points. Foster defeated Oberweis again the November 2008 election.

Grassroots Republicans have seen enough, said Kenyon.

“The rank-and-file Republicans are disappointed in the mudslinging. I think it’s hurt Randy Hultgren worse than he knows. So far Ethan Hastert has stayed above that. We don’t want it to get any nastier,” he noted.

But with a week to go before the Feb. 2 primary, it certainly could get nastier, Kenyon admitted.

“I know some of [Hastert’s] supporters want to answer the allegations in the newspaper,” he said. “As I understand, they only want to respond to them. They don’t want to throw any more mud on Randy. Hopefully they’ll keep it clean.”

Observers say Republicans are hungry for success in Illinois and the party is getting better at maneuvering its candidates through difficult primaries.

“This time around, in general, the Republicans are being more pragmatic than usual,” said Kent Redfield, a professor at the University of Illinois in Springfield. “There certainly is still a big split among Republicans in terms of moderate and very conservative. But I think there’s a greater chance of papering it over this time.”

Hastert and Hultgren have said they’ll endorse the primary winner in the general election and the campaigns are set to hold a “unity” event on Feb. 6 to make sure that the hard feelings of 2008 don’t reconstitute this cycle.

Illinois has the earliest primary in the country, and Democrats say the bitterness that’s cropped up will emerge in other competitive Republican primaries.

“This is emblematic of the problems that Republicans have been facing in this district, in Illinois and across the country,” said Gabby Adler, a spokeswoman for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. “This happens to be the first primary in the country and it shows a lot about what Republicans will have to expect this year out of their many competitive primaries. They’re going dirty and they’re quick to attack each other now.”

Other competitive primaries in Illinois will be resolved next week. Both sides of the aisle have multiple candidates vying for Rep. Mark Kirk’s (R-Ill.) seat.

Meanwhile, Kirk faces a primary in his Senate bid. But a recent Chicago Tribune poll found Kirk led opponent developer Patrick Hughes (R) by 39 points.

Democrats also face a competitive primary in that race. The same Tribune poll found state Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias (D) with 34 percent of the vote, while former Chicago Urban League President Cheryle Robinson Jackson had 19 percent and former Chicago Inspector General David Hoffman had 16

percent.

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