



What's Illinois voters' mood?

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There is little joy in this state that sent Barack Obama to the White House.

That should be bad news for Democrats in November's congressional elections, especially in the face of Republicans and their conservative and libertarian Tea Party allies who promise to target Democrats for backing health care reform.

Polls show Americans — at best — are split on the issue. Even so, Republicans will have a difficult time unseating Democrats in Illinois, where Obama remains very popular.

The stakes are high as voting day approaches for the first national balloting since the 2008 election that put Obama in the White House, with majorities in both houses of Congress.

Fighting bitter partisanship

Illinois is reliably Democratic and, as the political launch-site for Obama, the extent to which Democrats must struggle to hold on to their seats offers clues about the outcome of the national vote. That is particularly true in the present U.S. political climate, which is as bitterly partisan as any time in at least the past three decades.

Obama's former Senate seat is among 36 in play nationwide in November; all 435 seats in the House of Representatives will be on the ballot. Thirty-seven state governorships also are up for grabs.

Illinois Republicans and tea partiers want to pick off five Democratic seats in Congress, banking on voters punishing Democrats who voted for health care reform, viewed by some as the government's takeover of health care.

"We know that two-thirds of Americans didn't want this bill," said Denise Cattoni, state coordinator for Illinois Tea Party, an umbrella organization of about 50 groups around the state.

Cattoni, a mortgage broker in Lisle, a Chicago suburb, said she and fellow Tea Party members believe government has grown too large, threatening individual liberties. They are outraged by increases in government spending and what they see as the cost of health care reform.

"The sheer amount of money being spent that doesn't really exist anywhere, it's horrifying," she said. "This (the Obama) administration is about nothing but bigger government. The American people don't want government in their homes."

Few predicting a big swing

Voters across the country, suffering through the worst economic downturn since the 1930s Great Depression, are in a "throw the rascals out" frame of mind, but few experts in Illinois are ready to predict a big swing to the Republicans.

That's in the face of a state unemployment rate of 11.4 percent, which ties Mississippi. Only six states and Washington, D.C., are in worse shape.

Democrats hold an iron grip on Illinois state government, control both U.S. Senate seats and occupy 12 of

the state's 19-seat delegation in the House of Representatives.

The previous governor, Democrat Rod Blagojevich, was impeached and removed from office. He is under indictment on corruption charges, including allegations he tried to sell appointment to Obama's vacated Senate seat to the highest bidder.

The budget deficit is forecast to hit \$13 billion by the end of the next fiscal year, second only to California — worst in the nation.

The state pension shortfall is \$77.8 billion, according to the Legislature's economic forecasting unit.

In the face of all that, Illinois, remains solidly in that Democrats' column, said Christopher Mooney, a professor with the Institute of Government and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Springfield. The state has a lot of union members who tend to vote Democratic and are bolstered by the party in return.

"The political culture here is not ideological. It's all about where you are pouring concrete, providing services," he said. Solidly Democrat Chicago still "dominates state politics."

'Anti-Obama' won't work

Given the political makeup of the state, minority Republicans won't be able to make much headway on national issues like the Obama administration's passage of health care reform, said Charles Wheeler, director of the Public Affairs Reporting graduate program at the university.

"It's going to be a bad idea to run against Obama who is still wildly popular here," he said. "Health-care reform has more support in the state than it does nationwide."

That apparently has sunk in with five-term Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, who is now pulling back from his vow to lead the effort to repeal health care. Kirk is in a spirited battle to fill the Senate seat Obama once held.

Democrats seem to have hit a nerve. Two weeks ago, Kirk said he would "lead the effort" to repeal the health care law.

Earlier this week, when asked repeatedly by reporters whether he still wants it repealed, Kirk would say only that he opposes the new taxes and cuts to Medicare, the government-sponsored health insurance plan for the elderly, that come with the new law.

Kirk, historically a moderate on issues like abortion and gun control, ran hard to the right in the Republican primary. That could leave him open to charges of flip-flopping on those issues as well as health care repeal.

Wheeler said it appeared that Kirk would get major backing from the national Republican organization and run an anti-Obama campaign, which would not play well with middle-of-the-road Illinois voters let alone dissatisfied Democrats.

Even so, it's a toss-up whether Democrats can hold Obama's Senate seat in the November vote. The Blagojevich-appointed Roland Burris isn't running.

Illinois state Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias, a 33-year-old newcomer to state office and basketball playing friend of Obama, is vying for the seat but is weighed down politically by problems at the bank his family founded.

Sen. Richard Durbin, the no. 2 Democrat in the Senate, doesn't face Illinois voters again until 2012. But he is a possible candidate to become majority leader if Sen. Harry Reid loses his bid for re-election in Nevada this fall.

Economy at the forefront

Durbin's Illinois chief of staff, Michael Daly, said handicappers of the November election would be wrong

to overlook Obama's transcendence in virtually every issue in Illinois politics.

And beyond that, he said, "It's all about the economy. The passage of health care, things like the Afghan war, they won't be on voters' minds come November," he said in an interview in his office overlooking Lake Michigan in Chicago's federal office building.

Daly is sanguine about the prospects of Illinois Democrats in November, suggesting that only a couple of seats in the state delegation to Congress might be in danger in the November election. The party of the sitting president historically has lost congressional seats in those polls.

Gov. Pat Quinn, who was lieutenant governor when Blagojevich was ousted, wants to tackle Illinois financial problems by raising taxes and cutting services. Quinn will have a hard time persuading fellow Democrats to bring up the issue before Nov. 2.

Republicans, whose main strength lies in the more rural, farming districts in the south of the state, also refuse to consider that move.

Quinn is facing state senator Bill Brady, a very conservative politician, and the race, so far, doesn't show a sure victory for the sitting executive. He is tainted for having served under Blagojevich even though insiders said the two men were — at best — not friendly.

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