

Barack Obama's old senate seat in danger of becoming Republican

Barack Obama's old senate seat is in danger of falling to a Republican, as even the president's home state of Illinois has begun to lose faith in the president.

By Alex Spillius in Chicago

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In what would be perhaps the most symbolic defeat for the president in the November midterms, Alex Giannoulias, the Democratic senate candidate for Illinois, is only a percentage point ahead of his Republican opposition Mark Kirk.

Mr Obama has already made one fundraising appearance in Chicago to rally support for Mr Giannoulias, 34, a former state treasurer who has suffered from his inexperience and the revelation that his family's bank, now failed, lent money to mobsters.



Barack Obama on the campaign trail Photo: GETTY

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But the support of the president may not be enough save the seat that Mr Obama held for four years before entering the White House.

"He is not as popular nationally or in Illinois as he was two years ago," said Kent Redfield, a professor political science at the University of Illinois. "There is a national mood, a worry about the economy and the country's future, that is bleeding into Illinois.

"It says a lot about how bad he and the Democrats are doing that this seat is in play. It's not a seat they should have to worry about."

Analysts agreed that Mr Giannoulis will only win if Mr Obama and others can persuade the large African American community to turn out in significant numbers. Democrats are concerned too many of the most ardent supporters of the first black president will stay at home as the optimism his presidential campaign generated has evaporated.

"He was looked upon as the great black hope, and all people came together to put him in office," said Crystal Reddin, a congregant at the Apostolic Church of God in the Hyde Park neighbourhood, where the Obama family still keeps a home. "We were desperate for hope at the time but it's stagnated, and we have never seen poverty like we have now."

Many in the community believe the president has done a reasonable job, inheriting a deep recession and two wars. There is also plenty of resentment at what is seen as a racially-tinged lack of respect shown by critics on the Right. But some wish he had shown more muscle in his dealings with Republicans.

"You can't change Washington in two years, but he would be a more effective president with a more go-for-broke mentality," said Terry Hughes, an IT consultant.

"Speeches are great but they don't do a lot for people without jobs and people who don't have medical benefits."

Mr Hughes had just finished listening to Mr Kirk speak at a forum at the Apostolic Church, and said he could consider voting for the Republican.

For Mr Kirk, a former naval intelligence officer, the evening was a foray into a community that traditionally overwhelmingly votes Democrat. In his presentation, he was careful not to criticize the president by name, while making clear he thought the \$800 billion stimulus and the \$1 trillion healthcare reform bill were ineffective. Government spending, he said, was out of control.

"How do we handle the American dream when every child will be born owing the government \$43,000?" he asked.

"I am a coalition builder," he said. "I am a guy who wants to find solutions."

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