

# Area Republicans fear an Obama ticket

## GOP running scared if state's favorite son on top of ballot

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Published: 5/19/2008 12:06 AM

At a recent community luncheon, a suburban county board member leaned over to a table mate and quietly speculated about the November election.

Despite a strong history of public service and an undefeated election record, the politician, a Republican, was nervous.

"I could lose to Barack Obama," the board member whispered.

That sentiment is not unusual in the suburbs this spring. If Obama, Illinois' junior senator, wins the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, some Republicans feel it could boost the candidacies of Democrats seeking a variety of posts in the state, including in the General Assembly and on county boards.

"It's got everybody working harder," said veteran Lake County Board member Larry Leafblad, a Grayslake-area Republican who launched his re-election campaign earlier than usual because of Obama's bid. "In 20 years of campaigning for the county board, I've never done this much organizing."

Many Democratic candidates hope an Obama win will help propel them into office or retain political posts they already hold.

"If Obama's on top of the ticket, I think there'll be a lot more Dems who come out (to vote), and I plan on reaping that benefit," said Lake County Coroner Dr. Richard Keller, a first-term Democrat who narrowly won in 2004.

If Obama beats Hillary Clinton for the nomination, Illinois voters likely will turn out in bigger-than-usual numbers to support the home-state candidate, said Wayne Steger, associate professor of political science at DePaul University.

Although voters in many Chicago suburbs often split tickets on Election Day, the enthusiasm Obama has generated could trickle down to lower-level races, Steger said.

"The potential for impact is huge," he said.

And it's not just Democratic turnout that could be affected. If John McCain cedes Illinois and focuses on other states, as the GOP did in 2000 and 2004, Republican volunteer and fundraising efforts might dry up in some areas, said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois' Springfield campus.

That could lead to lower Republican voter turnout on Election Day, Redfield said.

"It will be more difficult to generate Republican activity and excitement at the state legislative and local level," he said. "You have the potential in the fall for another 2006-style wipeout."

An Obama candidacy could be even more damaging to the GOP, Steger said, if state lawmakers approve a Democrat-led proposal that would allow people to vote a straight-party ticket with one ballot punch on Election Day.

"Any time you allow straight-party ticket voting, you dramatically simplify the voting process, and you're going to get much more of a top-down (effect)," Steger said.

The Lake County Board's Leafblad is among the suburban Republicans concerned about the consequences of an Obama nomination.

Those worries prompted Leafblad, running against Democrat Melinda Bush in the 6th District, to study voter behavior and other statistics like never before.

Leafblad also has set a campaign budget of \$25,000, more than three times the size of what he said he spent on his bid in 2004.

"We know the Democrats are going to try really hard to knock us out and spend big bucks," he said.

Republican DuPage County Board member Grant Eckhoff will be one of five candidates, including two Democrats, seeking two 4th District seats.

He said he expects the county-level races will be much closer than usual even in DuPage, which has long been dominated by the GOP.

"Obama is not going to make that any easier," said Eckhoff of Wheaton. "I don't think anybody's taking anything for granted."

Suburban Democrats, meanwhile, would welcome an Obama-McCain match up.

Lake County's Keller edged Republican incumbent Jim Wipper by less than a percentage point to win the coroner's post in 2004. Now facing Republican Dr. Michael Oster, Keller expects the challenge should be easier if Obama is the presidential nominee.

Obama's grass-roots campaign effort should propel Democrats to the polls, Keller said. Additionally, Obama will generate enthusiasm among Democratic voters that should trickle down to the coroner's contest, he said.

"We'll be able to ride coattails," Keller said.

Democrats trying to unseat sitting Republicans also are optimistic.

"He's a hometown son, so to speak, and I think that will probably draw out a lot of people who might not vote otherwise," said Keith Farnham, an Elgin resident who's challenging state Rep. Ruth Munson to represent the 43rd House District. It is a historically Republican area in Kane and Cook counties.

Farnham said frustration over the weak economy and rising gas prices could help Democrats too.

"We've always joked in this area that you had to be a Republican to run, and that's changed," Farnham added. "That's totally changed."

In the 51st House District, which incorporates parts of Lake and Cook counties, Republican state Rep. Ed Sullivan easily dispatched Democratic foe Amanda Howland two years ago to win a third term. Howland's back for a rematch this year, but Sullivan isn't resting.

He's already walking neighborhoods and greeting potential voters door-to-door, about three months earlier than he did in previous campaigns. He's even sent out his first campaign flier.

With the specter of Barack Obama looming large on the horizon, Sullivan isn't taking chances.

"Republicans should take into account that Obama has proven he can attract new voters," said Sullivan of Mundelein. "And if you fail to realize you have to get in front of these new voters, the potential is you're going to lose the election."