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Should Illinois incumbents watch their backs?

by [KEVIN BRENNAN](#)

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After three decades, Arlen Specter's Senate career came to an abrupt end Tuesday. The five-term Pennsylvania senator lost the Democratic primary to Rep. Joe Sestak in the latest example of the anti-incumbency fervor that seems to be sweeping the nation.

As the establishment body count increases each week, should Illinois incumbents be looking over their shoulders as November draws closer?

The general answer, according to local political analysts, is no -- at least for now.

Dissatisfaction with the country's economic woes and a general perception that the government has failed to right the ship have fostered the national wave of anti-incumbency feelings.

"You have the worst economic conditions probably since the Great Depression combined with very rapid social change," said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois Springfield. "All of that brings a real sense that the people in charge aren't connecting with or representing the people on Main Street."

But experts point to several factors that might save Illinois incumbents from suffering the same fate as Specter and falling prey to this growing national trend.

The most obvious reason lies with the state's unusually early primary elections. While primary season is heating up across the country, Illinois residents went to the polls on Feb. 2, well before the anti-incumbency trend really took off.

"My guess is that if we had not had such an early primary there might actually have been a different outcome in some of the races," said Dawn Clark Netsch, the former state comptroller and former Democratic gubernatorial candidate. "The question is, 'Was there enough time for it to fully develop?'"

And now that primary season has passed, the anti-establishment movement just might skip Illinois completely. The primaries for the individual parties present a unique opportunity to take down mainstream candidates.

"In the primaries, the extreme wing of each party has a distinct advantage," said Woods Bowman, professor of public service at DePaul University. "The general election is a much different animal."

And Bowman said the most relevant races in Illinois this year could prove immune to any national trends. Both the gubernatorial and senate races have unique, localized circumstances.

In the gubernatorial race, Pat Quinn is not a typical incumbent, having taken over for disgraced and indicted Gov. Rod Blagojevich. And the Senate contest between Alexi Giannoulias and Mark Kirk does not have a clear incumbent, but it does have plenty of controversy.

"You would be hard pressed to look around the country and find a parallel situation in either the governor or Senate race," Bowman said. "I don't think general trends necessarily apply."

But the anti-incumbency movement could reach Illinois in a different form. Netsch speculated that a general sentiment against the Democratic Party could be building throughout the state.

"I could see that being built up not so much on an individual incumbency basis, but as 'get this party out of power because they've been in so long and done so badly,'" Netsch said. "And I say that even being a Democrat."

And it's not too late for this or some other form of the anti-establishment movement to take root in Illinois, despite the state's unusual circumstances. November is a long way away.

"Believe me, a lot can happen in that amount of time," Bowman said. "In politics six months is an eternity."

Stay tuned.