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Obama Returns to Illinois for U.S. Senate Campaign Dominated by Scandals

By John McCormick - Aug 5, 2010

President [Barack Obama](#), who left Chicago promising hope and change, appears in his adopted hometown today to raise money for a U.S. Senate candidate amid reminders of the difficulty of getting away from the tarnish of a place renowned for its political corruption.

Obama's speech at a downtown hotel for [Alexi Giannoulias](#), the Democrat seeking the seat he once held, will be two blocks from the federal courthouse where jurors are weighing the fate of [Rod Blagojevich](#). The former Illinois governor stands accused of trying to sell the Senate post to the highest bidder.

Giannoulias and his Republican opponent in the Senate race, [Mark Kirk](#), have spent much of the campaign debating who is the more scandalized. Giannoulias has dealt with fallout from the failure in April of a bank his family ran, while Kirk was forced to apologize for repeatedly exaggerating his biography.

"Maybe the candidate pool isn't as deep as it used to be," said [Charles Wheeler](#), a public affairs professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Besides Obama, some of the seat's past occupants include [Everett Dirksen](#), a Republican, and [Adlai Stevenson III](#), a Democrat.

Obama's visit on behalf of Giannoulias is part of a White House effort to fight a tide in November's congressional elections that threatens Democratic control of the Senate and House. The party's loss of the Illinois seat would boost the chances of Republicans gaining the 10 they need to win a Senate majority.

Administration Help

Since June, Giannoulias has had fundraising visits from Vice President [Joe Biden](#), U.S. Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#), Obama senior adviser [David Axelrod](#), White House Deputy Chief of Staff [Jim Messina](#) and 2008 presidential campaign manager [David Plouffe](#), who is helping the administration in the midterm campaign.

Giannoulas, 34, is the Illinois state treasurer and an occasional Obama basketball buddy, while Kirk, 50, is a five-term congressman from Chicago's northern suburbs.

Obama's fifth trip to Chicago since his inauguration in January 2009 comes as Broadway Bank, the now-defunct institution Giannoulas's family operated, was in the [headlines](#) again this week because of a newly reported 2006 loan to convicted Illinois influence peddler [Antoin "Tony" Rezko](#).

Republicans, along with spotlighting the bank issue, have tried to tie Obama and Giannoulas to Blagojevich, who became the state's most recent mascot for political corruption.

"The Democrats are very glad that the Blagojevich decision will come soon and perhaps fade before the election," said [Dick Simpson](#), a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Republican Attack

As he ran for president and since his election, Obama has battled Republican charges that he is a product of "Chicago-style" politics, a line of attack assisted by the cloud that surrounded his Senate seat after he won the White House.

The race in Illinois to replace Senator [Roland Burris](#), a Democrat appointed by Blagojevich who isn't seeking a full term, is one of 12 Senate races rated as tossups by the non-partisan [Cook Political Report](#), based in Washington. Democrats currently control 59 Senate votes, Republicans have 41; in November's election, 37 seats are at stake.

According to a [Rasmussen Reports survey](#) taken July 26, Giannoulas led Kirk 43 percent to 41 percent. The survey had a margin of error of plus-or-minus 4 percentage points.

The latest wrinkle involving the seat has resurrected an adage that long crystallized Chicago's reputation for political corruption: vote early and often.

Voting Twice

Illinois voters in November will indeed vote twice for that one elected office. The double voting, prompted by a judge's ruling last week, is the result of a lawsuit filed after no special election was held to fill the seat after Obama left it.

The voters will pick a replacement for the remaining two months of Obama's original term and someone to begin a six-year term in January 2011. That creates the possibility that Kirk or Giannoulas could win the shorter term while losing the longer one.

Besides appearing with Giannoulas, Obama is scheduled to attend two [Democratic National Committee](#) fundraisers and visit a [Ford Motor Co.](#) plant, where the White House says 1,200 jobs are being added. The Illinois [unemployment](#) rate is 10.4 percent, higher than the national average of 9.5 percent in June.

Obama's event with Giannoulas calls for a minimum contribution of \$1,000, according to the invitation. The candidate could use the money. He raised less than half as much as Kirk during the quarter that ended June 30 and had only about one-fourth as much money in the bank.

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