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Big '08 win boomerangs on Democrats

Victory vacated 4 Senate seats

By [Seth McLaughlin](#)

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In Washington, where short-term political gain often morphs into long-term political pain, the breakthrough victories of President Obama and the Democrats in 2008 are coming back to haunt them in 2010.

With less than five weeks to go before Election Day, the Senate seats vacated by Mr. Obama, Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in the wake of the 2008 vote are in the political crosshairs of Republicans and could play a critical role in GOP hopes of recapturing control of the Senate in November.

"Democrats face a great irony," said Darrell M. West, vice president and director of governance studies at the left-leaning Brookings Institution. "President Obama's victory in 2008, along with his vice-presidential and Cabinet choices, have made it more difficult for his party to do well in 2010."

After Mr. Obama's White House win, New York Gov. David A. Paterson appointed Kirsten Gillibrand, a House member, to Mrs. Clinton's seat. Delaware Gov. Ruth Ann Minner tapped longtime Biden aide Ted Kaufman for his boss' seat.

In Colorado, Gov. Bill Ritter Jr. named Michael Bennet, superintendent of Denver public schools, as Mr. Salazar's replacement, and embattled Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich in Illinois tapped Roland W. Burris, a former state attorney general, to serve the last two years of Mr. Obama's Senate term.

Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Gillibrand are on the ballot this fall, while Mr. Kaufman and Mr. Burris are retiring and creating open-seat opportunities for the GOP.

Forecasters and opinion polls say Republicans are well-positioned to win the races in Illinois and Colorado, and are gaining ground in Delaware and New York - even with candidates that parts of the GOP's political establishment consider flawed.

"There are four states that have appointed senators ... and it is tougher in a difficult political environment to hold those seats than if the person were a full-fledged incumbent," Mr. West said. "When you have been appointed, you have many of the disadvantages of incumbency without all the advantages."

Republicans argue that it is both Mr. Obama's policies and his Cabinet choices that have created potential pickups for the GOP across the political landscape.

"Whether it's been creating new opportunities in states like Colorado and Delaware, or ramming through a liberal and reckless spending agenda that has led independents to move away from the Democratic Party, there is no doubt that the Obama administration is one of the biggest reasons Republicans are on the doorstep of important gains in the Senate," said National Republican Senatorial Committee spokesman Brian Walsh. "Democrats know that they

can't run and win on their own agenda, so they're doing anything and everything to distract voters with negative, personal attacks against Republicans."

In New York, a Quinnipiac University poll of likely voters last week found that Mrs. Gillibrand, once considered a prohibitive favorite, holds a slim 6-percentage-point lead over her little-known Republican opponent, former Rep. Joseph DiGuardi.

Susan Del Percio, a New York-based GOP strategist, said that if Mrs. Clinton still held the seat, "there would not be nearly as close a contest."

"Most likely you would have seen Sen. Clinton with a very, very strong war chest, and with very strong popularity here in New York. It would have made her less likely to be a target," Ms. Del Percio said.

The transformation of Democratic fortunes since 2008 underscores the political reality of this election, where Republicans enjoy an edge in voter enthusiasm and hope to hand Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, the 10-seat swing he needs to control of the upper chamber.

Democrats think they dodged a bullet this month in the Delaware race for Mr. Biden's old seat after "tea party" favorite Christine O'Donnell scored a stunning victory over establishment favorite Rep. Michael N. Castle in the GOP primary. Mr. Castle, a nine-term incumbent and former governor, was considered a heavy favorite to the seat while Ms. O'Donnell is considered to be an underdog against Democratic nominee Chris Coons.

Different stories are unfolding in Colorado, where polls show Mr. Bennet trailing Republican Ken Buck, like Ms. O'Donnell a favorite of tea party activists, and in Mr. Obama's home state of Illinois, where Republican Rep. Mark Steven Kirk is in a dead heat with Democrat Alexi Giannoulias, the Illinois state treasurer.

The Illinois race seemed unlikely two years ago after Mr. Obama resigned his seat to move to the White House. Filling it in such a heavily Democratic state with a Democratic governor seemed to be a mere formality.

But Blagojevich, then about to be ousted in a corruption scandal, sparked a political circus by appointing the obscure Mr. Burris to the seat and getting charged with, among other things, scheming to peddle Mr. Obama's seat for personal profit, campaign contributions or a lucrative post in the new administration.

The scandal has been a heavy political burden for Democrats in the state, where four of the past eight governors have been convicted of crimes or left office under an ethical cloud.

Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said that if Mr. Obama still held the Senate seat, "he would essentially just be cruising toward re-election" and that Mr. Kirk likely would not have run.

"The Senate seat would not be in play," Mr. Redfield said.

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee has responded in the past two weeks by going after Ms. O'Donnell, Mr. Buck and Mr. Kirk, doling out more than \$1.7 million in media buys and to cover the costs of online advertising, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

While the 2008 gains brought problems for the Democrats this year, history suggests the political picture could change, and losses in 2010 could translate into a Democratic win in 2012.

"Obama could benefit from political triangulation, as voters may begin to share the blame for economic and government woes between both parties instead of concentrating their frustration on Democrats who currently control the federal government unilaterally," said Isaac Wood of the University of Virginia Center for Politics.

"If a Republican wave in 2010 begets Obama's re-election in 2012, that would add yet another layer of irony to a

political world already quite familiar to the concept," he added.

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