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Democrats Face Tough Fight to Keep Obama's Old Senate Seat

By JOE BARRETT

CHICAGO—Illinois Democrats are locked in a dogfight to retain President Barack Obama's troublesome former U.S. Senate seat.



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Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Alexi Giannoulis.

A Chicago Tribune poll released this weekend has first-term Democratic state Treasurer Alexi Giannoulis up by two points over five-term Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, 38% to 36%.

Last month, the same poll found the candidates tied at 34%. Democrats enjoy as much as a 10-point margin over Republicans among registered voters in the state.

The race is considered crucial for Illinois Democrats, who control every major elected office in the state.

"To be honest, it'd be quite embarrassing to not win that seat," said Rep. Danny Davis, in an interview Saturday after a Giannoulis

campaign event.

For Mr. Giannoulis, 34 years old, the race comes down to a get-out-the-vote effort that banks heavily on Mr. Obama's continued popularity in the state. A Giannoulis ad featuring an endorsement from the president is getting heavy air time. On Thursday, Mr. Obama will be in Chicago to further bolster Mr. Giannoulis's prospects.



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Associated Press

Illinois Republican U.S. Senate candidate Mark Kirk.

Mr. Kirk, 51, a moderate Republican from the wealthy North Shore of Chicago, has steered somewhat to the right recently to appeal to the tea-party movement, but political observers say the key for him will be a broader appeal to moderates.

"Kirk has got to win moderates and independents in order to win as a Republican in Illinois," said Kent Redfield, a professor at the University of Illinois in Springfield. "Giannoulis has to get enthusiasm within his base."

Democrats here are still reeling from the Dec. 9, 2008, arrest of then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who was charged with attempting to sell Mr.

Obama's old Senate seat. Before being forced from office, Mr. Blagojevich appointed Roland Burris, a former state attorney general, over the objections of national Democratic leaders. Mr. Burris isn't running.

Democratic leaders wanted someone more experienced in the race, but Mr. Giannoulias won the primary after Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan declined to run.

In an escalating TV ad war in the last month, Mr. Giannoulias has attacked Mr. Kirk for supporting the extension of tax cuts for the wealthy and for claiming he had won a military award that had actually gone to his entire unit. Mr. Kirk said he was sorry for the errors and quickly changed the information on his website.

"Why would we want to send people to Washington who created the debacle that we're in now," Mr. Giannoulias said in comments to reporters on Saturday. "All we have to do is make sure that turnout is where it's supposed to be and we'll win."

Mr. Kirk's ads cite loans made to figures tied to corruption at Mr. Giannoulias's family bank, which was taken over by the government in April. Mr. Giannoulias has denied being involved in those loans.

"In the end, this is two men and one choice," Mr. Kirk told reporters after an appearance Saturday. "I think people are going to decide based on their pocketbooks. Who will raise taxes? Alexi Giannoulias. Who will fight raising taxes? Mark Kirk."

The race will get national attention Oct. 10 when the candidates appear on NBC's "Meet the Press."

Recent campaign events highlighted the differences between the candidates. On Friday, Mr. Kirk, a Navy reservist, attended a ribbon-cutting at a \$130 million Veterans Affairs Administration hospital in North Chicago. On Saturday, he gave a speech at a rally in a Chicago suburb.

Mr. Giannoulias's Saturday schedule included a press conference at the mail carrier's union hall in Chicago's gritty Third Ward in which he was endorsed by Reps. Davis and Bobby Rush and other African-American leaders.

Mr. Rush said excitement was just beginning to build in the race. "We know how to turn it up," he said, referring to get-out-the-vote efforts, which are just getting under way.

Later, Mr. Giannoulias, a former college basketball star who played professionally in Greece, changed out of his suit and tie to join a three-on-three tournament at a community center in Hyde Park.

In his first minute on the court, Mr. Giannoulias quickly shifted from smooth politician to fierce competitor as he chided the referee over a missed call. "He's got to bleed before it's a foul?" he asked.

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