



Illinois voters asked to choose twice for Senate seat

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Springfield, Ill. —

No, Illinois, you're not seeing double.

The Nov. 2 ballot asks for two votes for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by President Barack Obama, another twist of the state's wacky politics.

A judge has determined the same candidates must run for two terms: one being the normal six years beginning in January, the other an interim stint beforehand that probably will last little more than a month.

In both cases, voters will choose from among Democrat Alexi Giannoulas, Republican Mark Kirk, Green LeAlan Jones and Libertarian Mike Labno. Polls show the race extremely close between Giannoulas and Kirk.

Kirk has tried to make the short-term Senate seat a selling point in his campaign, reminding people they have a rare chance to vote twice for the same office.

He argues the temporary position shouldn't be seen as a throwaway vote. He warns Democrats might try to sneak through legislation like new taxes during the period between the election and the start of the next Congress. Kirk says if he's there, he could help prevent such moves.

Giannoulas has said little about the short-term position in his campaigning.

Just how long the short-timer would even serve is unclear. Illinois election officials must certify the results of elections, which might take weeks, and the Senate ultimately decides when its members are seated.

The saga of the double vote began when Obama, a Democrat chosen senator in 2004, resigned after he won the Oval Office in November 2008 with more than two years left on his term.

The U.S. Constitution's 17th Amendment gives governors the power to choose a replacement until the Legislature conducts a special election.

Former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who had been arrested on political corruption charges, including a claim he tried to sell the appointment to the Senate in exchange for personal gain, named former state attorney general Roland Burris. Blagojevich was convicted this summer of lying to the FBI, but a jury could not reach a verdict on 23 other counts, including the Senate-seat allegation. He will be retried this winter.

Burris decided not to seek election to a full term in November, but the leaders of the General Assembly never called a special election. Former Chicago Alderman Martin Oberman sued, saying the state had violated the 17th Amendment.

A federal appeals court ruled last summer that there should be a special election after all - on Nov. 2, the same day Illinois would choose a lawmaker to serve until 2016.

The interim senator would warm the seat until the 112th Congress is sworn in on Jan. 3, 2011.

Both races will appear on the same ballot, with the tally for the full, six-year term first, followed by the unexpired term.

Chris Mooney, a political scientist at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said the chances the vote could be split between two candidates - so that one serves the short term and another the full six years - is slim.

But he wouldn't totally rule it out.

"The way it's polling, it's so close, I guess that's possible," Mooney said.

Burris had wanted to serve out Obama's term, but the court ruled only candidates certified for the full term were eligible. The U.S. Supreme Court refused to intervene when Burris argued that the appeals court had overstepped its authority.

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