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Kirk ready for first vote against Obama

By Bob Sexter, Oscar Avila and Todd Lighty, Tribune reporters

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Mark Kirk has vowed to be in the vanguard of a Republican bulwark against President Barack Obama's spending and tax plans. At the same time, Illinois' newly elected senator says he will be a model of conciliation and compromise in an era of sharp partisan divide.

Kirk's ability to reconcile those two very different agendas may come to define his political career and his ability to hold his new post in a state that remains strongly Democratic despite modest Republican gains in Tuesday's elections.

Thanks to a court-ordered quirk in Tuesday's voting, Kirk will likely be seated for the lame duck session of the outgoing Congress. He said Wednesday that he's eager to vote with others in the GOP to protect wealthy Americans from paying more when Democrats consider extending Bush-era tax cuts for everyone else.

But the defining test for Kirk may not come until January when he is sworn in for a full six-year term as part of a GOP minority in the Senate that is large enough to thwart Democratic purposes but not large enough to achieve its own legislative agenda.

"I will be a very independent senator," Kirk vowed Wednesday as he thanked morning rush hour commuters heading into the Loop. "A fiscal conservative, a social moderate and a national security hawk with my main focus right now being the economy: more jobs and higher incomes."

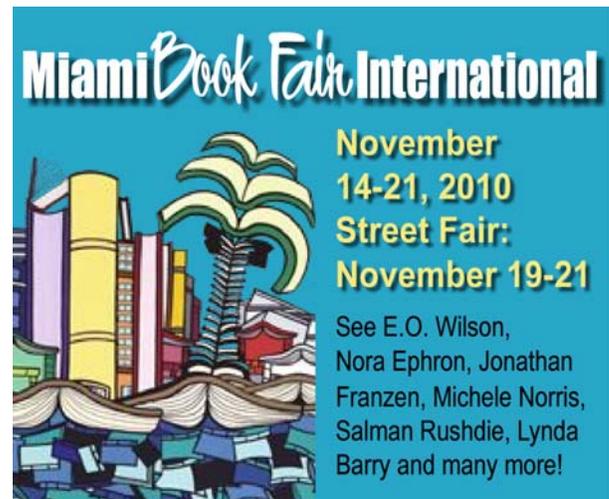
How that self-labeling will play out in the real world remains unclear.

Over his five terms representing a North Shore district in the U.S. House, Kirk often displayed a readiness to buck party orthodoxy on issues like gun control, abortion and the environment and was a relative late-comer to the deficit hawk bandwagon. During the Senate campaign, however, he tilted decidedly to the right on social and fiscal issues dear to conservatives.

The answer may emerge as Kirk settles in for the long haul as a Republican representing the same state that propelled Obama to the White House.

Chris Mooney, a political science professor at the Springfield campus of the University of Illinois, said the generally moderate politics of Illinois dictate that Kirk regain his pragmatic streak if he hopes to stick in the Senate.

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"He will do whatever it takes to be elected from the state of Illinois. That's not an easy task for a Republican in this state," Mooney said. "I do not expect Mark Kirk to veer to the right."

Mooney predicted Kirk will not always be a sure party line vote for Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell. "On average, Kirk will vote Republican because he is a Republican," Mooney said. "On the tough votes, however, I think he'll be up for grabs."

State Republican Party Chairman Pat Brady agreed that Kirk might on occasion upset other Republicans by cooperating with Obama on some issues. What is most important, Brady said, is that Kirk hold firm against excessive taxation and spending.

"The party was united on the fiscal front," Brady said. "That's the unifying theme for us and I think he'll be rock solid on that."

Tuesday's battle between Kirk and Democrat Alexi Giannoulias was unusual because it was really two elections in one. Voters were able to cast two Senate votes, one to pick a senator for the next six years and the other ordered by a federal judge to pick a senator to complete the final weeks of the term to which Obama was originally elected in 2004.

Obama resigned in 2008 following his election as president and was replaced by Roland Burris in a controversial appointment by since ousted Gov. Rod Blagojevich. Under terms of the special Senate election, Burris could be out and Kirk sworn in by Nov. 29, weeks ahead of most other new senators elected in other states, officials said Wednesday.

The election results first must be certified by Gov. Pat Quinn and Secretary of State Jesse White, a process that often does not take place until a month or more after balloting. But White spokesman David Druker said the certification process for the special election will be accelerated "to get the new senator voting."

That timetable means that Obama and his Democratic allies will likely have one less vote to count on when critical tax legislation on Bush era tax cuts comes to a vote either late this month or early next. Without action, those cuts will expire and tax rates will jump for most taxpayers Jan 1.

Democrats want to confine any tax cut extension to households earning \$250,000 or less, arguing that the wealthy can afford to pay more to avoid deepening an already steep deficit. Republicans, Kirk included, say the economic recovery is too fragile right now to raise taxes for anybody.

Minutes after he declared victory early Wednesday, Kirk told reporters his top priority would be to protect tax cuts for all. He also repeated a pledge to repeal and replace health care reform passed by Congress this year.

Even so, Kirk insisted that finding other avenues to cooperate with Democrats would benefit Illinois in the long run, even if he might receive pushback from others in his own party who rode into office on the wave of tea party-generated anger.

"The Senate is a place that rewards people who play well with others. My job now is to go to the Senate, which is nearly equally divided, and move a pro-Illinois agenda. That means cajoling and talking and making sure that people come to our way," Kirk said.

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