

ROLL CALL

Illinois House Primary Worries Democrats

October 25, 2007

By Matthew Murray, Roll Call Staff

GLENVIEW, Ill. — It's enough to keep Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chairman Chris Van Hollen (Md.) awake at night: two well-funded Democratic candidates squaring off for the chance to take on a vulnerable GOP incumbent next year — and fracturing a crucial Democratic voting bloc in the process.

Welcome to Chicago's North Shore.

Speaking on Sunday at a residence in the Windy City's affluent northern suburbs, business consultant Dan Seals (D) hit all the predictable high notes to the crowded room of well-dressed supporters, who sipped white wine and picked at serving trays held by uniformed waiters. President Bush is bad and Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), the four-term incumbent, has only made matters worse.

"This has been one of the most arrogant, incompetent and divisive administrations I can think of," Seals told the crowd. "All I'm saying is when we say goodbye to them in 465 days, is that we should send their friends with them."

For Seals, evicting the GOP incumbent is a well-worn message. Last year, the upstart managed to capture 47 percent of the vote against Kirk, an unfathomable share considering he had scant DCCC support until the election's final hours.

"We ran out of time," Seals said in an interview during the fundraiser. "We had an 11-month campaign as an unknown, first-time candidate. It wasn't as though we got beat or that we had a bad message ... we were gaining votes until the very last day."

Tweaking the DCCC

Seals is not shy about noting the lack of support in the last go-around from the DCCC. The committee, he said, "came in a day late and a dollar short."

And like Larry Kissell, another 2006 DCCC orphan who nearly beat Rep. Robin Hayes (R-N.C.) — and who, too, has been an outspoken critic of the lack of institutional support he received in the previous cycle — Seals has dusted himself off and is taking another shot at the title.

“The difference this time is that we have more experience, a stronger organization and more resources,” Seals said. “And we’ll be able to get our message out to voters in a presidential year that should be very good to us.”

But unlike Kissell, who has been given a pass in the fight for the Democratic nomination in North Carolina, Seals this time must battle for a spot on the Election Day 2008 ballot. Jay Footlik (D), a former White House official during then-President Bill Clinton’s administration, filed his candidacy with the Federal Election Commission early this summer and has raised about \$480,000 through September, compared with Seal’s also impressive \$567,000 haul.

Seals and Footlik both are running as counterpoints to Kirk on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care and other Democratic sound bites familiar in districts throughout the country. But painting Kirk as a doctrinaire conservative Republican isn’t so easy.

Like his predecessor and former boss, Rep. Jon Porter (R-Nev.), Kirk has maintained support in a district that chose both Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and former Vice President Al Gore in presidential elections by amassing a well-disciplined voting record to match the makeup of the district, particularly on foreign policy issues involving Israel and the Middle East.

Since early September alone, Kirk has sponsored two bills involving Iran.

Illinois’ 10th district runs north from Skokie nearly to the Wisconsin state line, taking in the affluent, tree-lined North Shore communities of Highland Park, Glencoe and Winnetka, whose posh suburban landscapes were made famous in the 1980s by John Hughes films like “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” “Sixteen Candles” and “Uncle Buck.”

As portrayed in Hughes’ movies, the majority of district residents are white, well-educated and wealthy. Although the district has blue-collar areas around its fringes, more than 75 percent of the district’s population work white-collar jobs and roughly half have college degrees.

After World War II, many displaced European Jews moved to Skokie, a municipality just south of the Congressional district that once held a large population of Holocaust survivors. Many members of the following generation moved north to more prosperous communities.

Although statistics are unscientific, the district’s Jewish population is pegged at roughly 20 percent; on election day, heavy Jewish turnout is said to push that percentage of voters as high as one-quarter or more. And while Jewish residents hardly vote in lockstep, local politicians are expected to be well-versed in Middle Eastern geo-political minutiae — a reality some experts say recent GOP Congressmen in the district have mastered.

According to Illinois state Sen. Jeff Schoenberg (D), who attended Seals' Sunday fundraiser and represents portions of Kirk's district in Springfield, Republicans such as Kirk and Porter could not have held the district without peeling "off enough [Jewish] votes to fracture the Democratic challenger's base."

Nowadays Schoenberg's main concern in the runup to the Feb. 5 primary is that Footlik's entry into the primary "will effectively do Mark Kirk's work for him in splintering off a traditionally strong segment of the Democratic vote."

"Jay is unwittingly driving a wedge into some solidly Democratic precincts, which are heavily Jewish, by raising unfounded fears about Dan Seals' record on Israel," Schoenberg said.

Differences Are Opaque

On paper Footlik and Seals appear well-matched. Both are young, well-educated and bring solid Democratic credentials to the table.

Seals, who is 36 years old, is a former General Electric executive, the son of Chicago Bears football player and a social worker. He holds an MBA from the University of Chicago and a master's degree from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

Footlik, who is 42 years old, is a former lobbyist and was the liaison to the Jewish community for President Clinton and also for Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign. He received a law degree from the Loyola Law School in Los Angeles.

Both Seals and Footlik were raised by their mothers. Neither candidate has ever held elected office.

But what is decidedly different about the two candidates is more opaque. Seals is black and grew up on the south side of Chicago in Hyde Park, a prosperous and integrated neighborhood home to presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and the University of Chicago. Footlik is Jewish and grew up in Skokie. He is a business partner to the son of slain Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and his wife, who is Israeli, served in the country's Air Force.

In addition, Footlik also has deep national fundraising connections from his White House days, which he already is tapping for his Congressional bid. So far more than 80 percent of contributions to Footlik's campaign have come from outside Illinois, a fact that bothers Schoenberg.

"The circumstances don't lend themselves to someone parachuting in at the last moment, like Jay has, potentially disrupting our ability to capture this House seat," he said.

For Schoenberg and Abner Mikva, a retired federal judge and former Democratic Congressman who represented parts of the 10th district during the 1970s, 2008 represents unfinished Democratic business in the district. Footlik's entry, he said during an interview at Seals' fundraiser, only is mucking up a very delicate situation, and he expressed concerns that Footlik's candidacy could cause Democrats irreparable harm come November.

"I'm not comfortable that [Footlik's] doing anything constructive in this campaign," Mikva said.

For now Seals and Footlik — as well as the DCCC — are avoiding direct confrontation in the potential primary battle. Although the committee is not taking sides, local politicians like Schoenberg and Members like Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D), who attended the Sunday fundraiser, quietly are vouching for Seals on the issues at fundraisers and other campaign events.

"It's especially important for Jewish elected officials like myself, Congresswoman Schakowsky and others to emphasize how Dan Seals would be a strong friend to the state of Israel and its interests," Schoenberg said.

Winning Converts

Although other local Democrats such as former DCCC Chairman Rahm Emanuel (Ill.), who worked with Footlik in the White House, appear to be sitting out this round, Reps. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), Shelley Berkley (D-Nev.) and Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) have written checks to Footlik. Some local politicians, too, are migrating slowly to Footlik's camp.

In the previous cycle Carol Spielman, a Lake County board member who has lived in Highland Park for more than 40 years, supported Seals. This time, however, she plans on voting for Footlik.

Like the growing cadre of converts, Spielman said Footlik's foreign policy experience — particularly with regards to Israel — was a major selling point.

"For me it mattered," she said. "Looking at what's happening on the international political scene, [it] is at best grave. It's not a happy time. I think Jay comes in with a body of knowledge" on foreign policy issues.

Spielman also likes Footlik's humble upbringing — a trait he shares with Seals, and which both candidates likely will use on the campaign trail, particularly in decidedly less prosperous parts of the district.

"He's one of the people," Spielman said. "He's still paying off [student] loans, for crying out loud."

And unlike Schoenberg and Mikva, who were more sanguine on the potential damage Footlik's bid may bring, Spielman said, regardless of the outcome, any bruising in the primary likely will be temporary, especially since it is taking place a full nine months before the general election.

"Once this primary is over there's going to be a coalescence of all Democrats," she said. "The sheer Democratic support for both ... that's not going away."

And the DCCC remains confident that either candidate can carry the banner against Kirk, who Democrats will argue is too aligned with Republican conservatives, even if he has a moderate image at home.

"With two strong challengers constantly calling out Kirk's hypocrisy, there's just no way for Kirk to flip-flop his way out of the anti-Republican/Bush wave in the district," DCCC spokesman Ryan Rudominer said.