

Splitting Headache For N. Shore Dems

PRIMARY ELECTION | Intra-party battle could pave the way for Republican to win

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We already know Illinois is going to be pivotal in the battle for Congress. Republican Rep. J. Dennis Hastert of Plano is resigning; Democrat Melissa Bean of Barrington still has a target on her back.

But will Democrats sabotage their own chances in at least one of six defining Illinois races, five of which are now controlled by Republicans?

I'm talking about the 10th Congressional District and the seat held by four-term incumbent Rep. Mark Kirk of Kenilworth, a moderate Republican.

Two years ago, a rookie Democratic candidate by the name of Dan Seals waged one of the most impressive insurgent campaigns the North Shore had seen in a long time. In just 11 months, Seals, a 36-year-old African-American business consultant from Wilmette, gathered 2,600 volunteers, almost \$2 million in contributions and, when all was said and done, got an impressive 47 percent of the vote in the general election. It was not enough to defeat Kirk, but Seals certainly gave him a sizable scare.

The 2006 election shook the socks off the entire Republican Party as Democrats took majorities in both houses, largely off electoral discontent about the war in Iraq.

Now comes the 2008 race.

And Seals is back in with stronger name recognition and aided by even greater voter discontent with this Republican-led war. But Seals these days has significant company on the primary ballot.

Jay Footlik, a 42-year-old Skokie-born special assistant to former President Bill Clinton on Jewish affairs, has jumped in.

State Sen. Jeffrey Schoenberg, a prominent Illinois Democrat and Jewish leader, is not thrilled with the development.

"I've known Jay Footlik for a number of years. He did a fine job as the Jewish liaison in the Clinton White House, but Dan Seals has clearly demonstrated an ability to make a strong case for his legislative agenda, including his unshakable support for the state of Israel."

The issue here, at least one of them, is whether the battle between Seals and Footlik will splinter Jewish voters, sap each campaign of cash and strength in the primary, and give Kirk the advantage he needs to capture a fifth term.

Richard Baehr, who is both Jewish and conservative, tends to think so. Baehr has written extensively about the demographics of the American electorate on his American Thinker Web site.

"A majority of Jews don't vote Republican and the 10th is 20 percent Jewish," Baehr told me. And though he regards both Seals and Footlik as good candidates, he says Kirk, whom he favors, "will be in better shape because Democrats are going to run against each other."

Baehr does not believe support for Israel will be the defining issue. Schoenberg thinks it may be.

All three candidates, it should be noted, have expressed strong and abiding support for Israel.

Another factor in this Democratic primary, however, will be the inside-outside nature of campaign donors.

Seals, as of the Oct. 15 federal campaign reporting period, had raised half a million dollars, almost all of it from Illinois contributors, including Chicago attorney Phil Corboy. Footlik had raised just under half a million, almost all of it from people outside the state, folks like Hollywood producer Norman Lear and former U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke.

Make no mistake: Seals and Footlik are two very good candidates. Each has spent time in Washington. Each is sophisticated, well-educated and thoughtful. Each will take Kirk on with regard to the prosecution of the Iraq war, not to mention a host of domestic issues.

But right now Mark Kirk is sitting on \$1.5 million in cash on hand, three times what the other two have. And he's got to be counting on these two Democrats dividing an electorate, and in so doing, paving the road to victory for him.