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Election Time: IL-Senate

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Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): Not a lot of movement in this race. It is still rated as a Toss-up at both Real Clear Politics and Cook Political Report. Fivethirtyeight.com gives Republican Mark Kirk a 64% chance of winning the seat once held by President Obama.

Both candidates are, in a sense, running against the national type this year: the Republican Mark Kirk is an experienced member of Congress running as a moderate and Alexi Gianoullias is the former businessman with no DC resume. Charges and counter-charges dominated the debates, but there were no knockouts. The RCP poll average has Kirk up by 2.7 percent, which is within the margin of error. This race will be decided by turnout.

ORIGINAL POST: The Senate race in Illinois has enhanced symbolic importance because the seat was held by Barack Obama until he became President. And, in a different twist from the usually this year, the Republican is the "Washington insider," Congressman Mark Kirk, and the Democrat, Alexi Gianoullias, has no DC experience and has only been in public service since 2006 when he was elected Treasurer of the state. And, unlike the Senate seat in NCR's home state of Missouri, which appears to be turning into a walk for Republican Cong. Roy Blunt, the Illinois race is still very tight.

Kirk is not the kind of Republican getting ink this year. He does not have any demonstrable Tea Party connections. There are no pics of Sarah Palin on his website. He is pro-choice and always has been, although he angered pro-choice groups when he voted for the Stupak Amendment to the health care bill a year ago. His website has this bizarre statement: "In Congress, Congressman Kirk works to advance a suburban agenda that is pro-defense, pro-personal responsibility, pro-environment, and pro-science." I have never seen a candidate describe his or her agenda as "suburban" before; that is the lingo of pollsters, and the bit about being pro-science and pro-environment is there because Kirk's pollster told him suburbanites care about those issue. The fact that the adjective slipped onto the page, however, is

illustrative: Kirk is running on the kind of moderate GOP platform that used to be common but has not survived the GOP primary season, as moderate Republicans fell to Tea Partyers in most of the high-profile races like Nevada, Delaware, Colorado, Kentucky, Florida and Alaska.

Gianoullias was leading in the polls early in the year, until the FDIC seized control of the bank his family owns and of which he was himself the chief loan officer until his 2006 race for state Treasurer. If there is any class of people less popular than Washington insiders in 2010, it is bankers, and especially bankers who have to get bailed out by the federal government. (If you doubt it, ask former New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine.) Giannoulias tanked in the polls and trailed Kirk throughout the summer.

But, the race is now considered a toss-up and I think the way Gianoullias has climbed back into contention is interesting: He is running as an unabashed liberal. He is in favor of comprehensive immigration reform ? and his website begins its discussion of issue by mentioning the candidate?s parents who came from Greece. He is pro-choice on abortion. He is in favor of gay marriage. He supports cap-and-trade legislation. He does not just label himself as advocating a ?suburban? agenda, he lays it out, with a page on the Issues section of his website dedicated to ?Balancing Work and Family? and he is the only candidate I have found anywhere in America with an Issue page on ?Arts & Culture.? There, sadly, Gianoullias loses me, reducing the arts to their utilitarian value: ?Study after study shows that arts education raises test scores in reading, writing and math, and fosters creativity.? This is depressing coming from a Greek: Surely, Gianoullias knows it was a good thing to build the Parthenon no matter what effect it had on test scores because it is beautiful. That said, the ideas he has for teaching arts and culture are pretty good.

I have vowed never to get excited by a pro-choice politician, but Gianoullias?s website, and his willingness to gamble his race on his true beliefs, whether I agree with them all or not, is admirable. Unlike so many Democrats who use weasel words to distance themselves from their own records, their association with President Obama, or from any mention of the ?L? word (liberal), Gianoullias is running as an old-style liberal. In a year when it appears that some liberal lions are headed for an early retirement, it would be nice to see at least one liberal cub make it into the Senate.

The Illinois Senate race also could have an effect on the down ballot races and it could be affected by the race at the top of the ballot. In the Illinois Governor?s race, incumbent Democrat Pat Quinn had the misfortune of running with former-Governor, current-convict Rod Blagoivich four years ago, taking over when the ex-Gov. was impeached. He is running behind Republican challenger Bill Brady in almost every poll. And, Illinois has several competitive house races that could drive turnout one way or the other.

Kirk has a big advantage is money raised and the GOP super-PACs will pour in money because they would love to give the President a black eye by taking his old seat from him. Yesterday?s decision to resume off-shore drilling may also give a boost to the Green Party candidate, votes Gianoullias can?t afford to lose. This will be a squeaker.

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