

*Playing Defense in the Illinois 10th:
Surviving “Obama-mania” in the Shadow of Chicago*

Wayne P. Steger

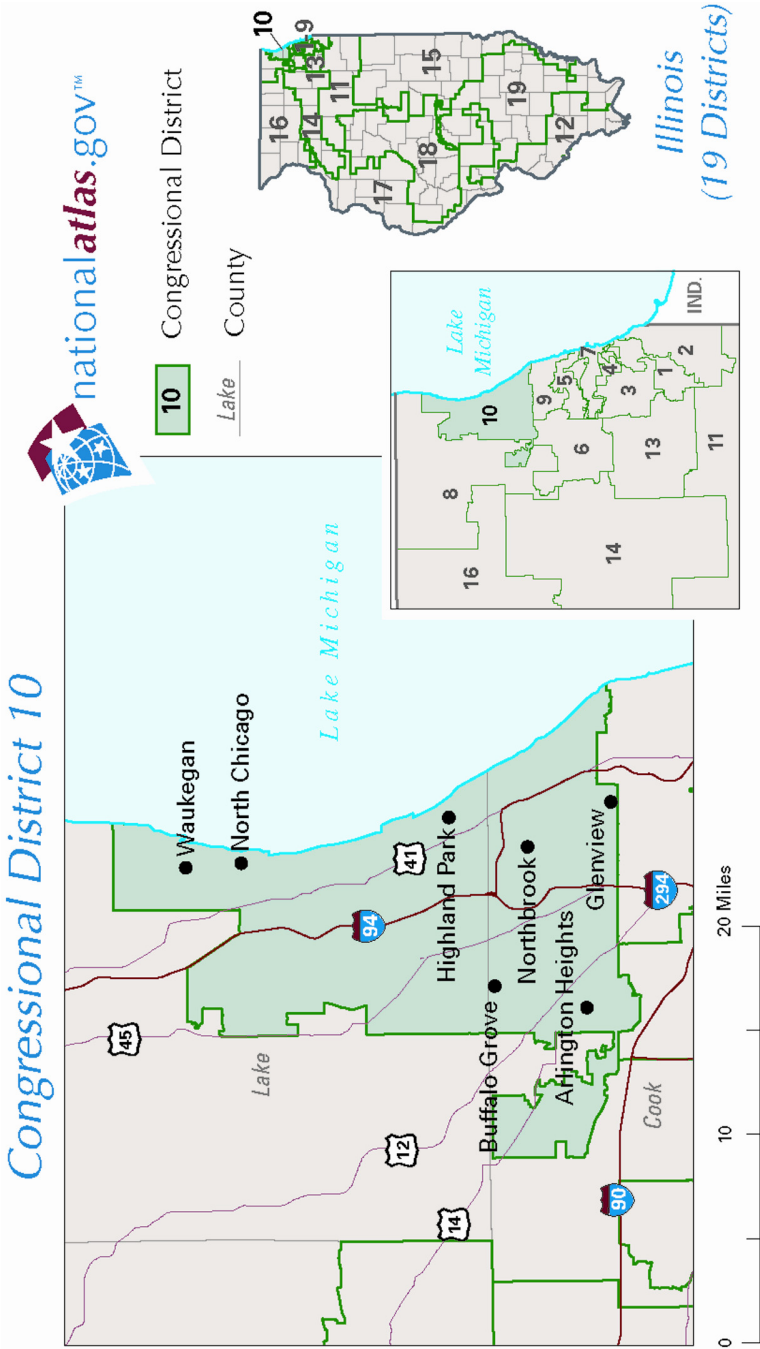
Mark Kirk, Republican Representative for the 10th congressional district of Illinois, faced a daunting reelection challenge in 2008. As noted earlier, national conditions favored the Democrats in 2008 with an unpopular Republican president, increasingly unpopular wars, high energy prices, a looming recession, increasing problems with the health care system, and growing budget deficits that limit solutions. National polls indicated widespread public dissatisfaction with the status quo on a wide range of issues and increasing support for “change.” Further, the Democrats won control of the House and Senate in 2006 and more recent polls indicated a growing Democratic advantage in national partisan identification. Finally, Democrats nominated a charismatic presidential candidate who excited Democratic voters while Republicans nominated one who drew temperate support from segments of the Republican base.¹ Still, Mark Kirk was able to defend his seat and score a reelection win in this difficult environment.

Local level circumstances also favored the Democrats. Illinois has been trending Democratic, with Democrats gaining control of both chambers of the state legislature and all state-wide elected offices. Democrats also were gaining congressional seats in traditional Republican areas in the Chicago suburban and exurban areas.² Charlie Cook’s Partisan Voting Index (PVI), a measure of how strongly a congressional district leans toward one political party compared to the nation as a whole, rated the 10th district as D+4.³ Further, the district lies due north of Chicago, the epicenter of Barak Obama’s political base (Figure 1). That location translated into a substantial advantage in media coverage for the Democratic congressional nominee. “Obama-mania” also translated into relatively healthy fundraising, volunteerism, and voter turnout for Democrats.

Finally, the incumbent, Mark Kirk, was perceived as vulnerable after the 2006 election when he won with only 53 percent of the vote against a relatively unknown challenger. Though not a quality challenger in the usual sense, Dan Seals, went into the 2008 campaign with substantial name

WAYNE P. STEGER is professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at DePaul University.

Figure 1. The Illinois 10th Congressional District



recognition, campaign experience, and organization after having almost upset Kirk in the 2006 election.⁴ Seals also had the financial backing of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), something he lacked in his 2006 campaign. That the DCCC targeted the race is itself a strong indication that Washington handicappers saw this as a seat that could be won. One week before the election, *CQ Politics* declared there was “no clear favorite” and described the district as “a slightly Democratic-leaning swing district.”⁵

Given all the circumstances suggesting a tough race, why did Mark Kirk fare better in 2008 than he had in 2006? Several factors contributed to Kirk’s reelection in the 10th district. Mark Kirk typified an incumbent who was “running scared” in a district that does not fall neatly into the stereotypes of a “Republican” or “Democratic” district. The decentralized, pragmatic nature of American political parties help incumbents like Kirk by enabling them to deviate from national party positions on issues for which local constituency preferences are not aligned with the national party line. Incumbents like Kirk also win because they use their offices effectively to promote constituency interests and preferences.

The 10th Congressional District and the 2008 Elections

Most congressional elections in Illinois did reflect the expected boost for the Democratic Party consistent with national trends. Across all 19 congressional districts in Illinois, Barak Obama averaged more than 6.6 percent more of the presidential vote in 2008 than had Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004. Obama won a majority of the presidential vote in 16 of the 19 Illinois congressional districts, including the 10th district where he received more than 61 percent of the vote. The Democratic surge behind Obama seems to have had some coattails in most congressional districts in Illinois. Across the state, Republican congressional candidates in Republican districts won an average of 87.75 percent of the vote that they had received in 2004. Democrats picked up two open seats on the fringes of the Chicago area that were vacated by retiring Republican incumbents.

Table 1 shows the district-level vote shares of the Republican and Democratic candidates for congressional and presidential elections in the 10th district since 2000. The district has split for the Republican candidate in the congressional elections while voting Democratic at the presidential level. In his first election in 2000, Kirk ran ahead of his party’s presidential candidate by four percentage points in the 10th. In 2004, Kirk ran ahead of George W. Bush by 17 percentage points. In 2008, Kirk ran 17 percentage points ahead of John McCain in the district. Kirk took 55 percent of the congressional vote while Barak Obama took 61 percent of the presidential

Table 1. Congressional and Presidential Vote Sares of Republican Incumbent Mark Kirk, the Democratic Opponent, and the Major Party Presidential Candidates, 2000-2008

Election	Illinois 11th —Congressional Vote—		Illinois 10th —Presidential Vote—		Republican Difference
	Rep. Mark Kirk	Democratic Opponent	Republican Presidential	Democratic Presidential	
2008	55%	45%	38%	61%	+17
2006	53%	47%			
2004	64%	36%	47%	53%	+17
2002	69%	31%			
2000	51%	49%	47%	51%	+ 4

vote in the 10th congressional district. Given the surge in the Democratic vote and the decline in the Republican vote across the state, how did Mark Kirk manage to increase his vote share over 2006 when he nearly lost to Democratic challenger Dan Seals?

The answer begins with understanding that the 10th congressional district does not fall neatly into the dominant stereotypes of a “Republican” or “Democratic” district. The outcome owes in part to the characteristics of the district’s population and the mix of issue positions taken by the incumbent. While split-ticket voting has been declining nationally for more than a decade, the decline owes mainly to increasingly homogenous congressional districts that are more solidly Democratic or Republican. Split-ticket voting remains common in moderate or swing districts like the Illinois 10th.

The 10th district is often characterized as a swing district with “moderate” preferences—right of center on economics but left of center on social or cultural issues. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the district is the 21st ranked congressional district in terms of wealth, with a median household income of \$78,269 (as of 2006). A number of Fortune 500 Companies are headquartered in the district including pharmaceutical, computer, corporate consulting, manufacturing, and food companies. Almost 48 percent of the district’s adult population has a college or graduate degree, and a majority of adults work in management, professional, or office occupations.⁶ It is home to a major training facility at the Great Lakes Naval Station. The district also has substantial immigrant populations, which tend to have weaker ties to either political party. The 10th district is also home to one of the larger Jewish populations in the United States. Taxes, education, the environment, civil liberties, defense, and foreign policy toward Israel and the Middle East are perennially salient issues in 10th congressional elections.

The socio-economic and demographic composition of the district means that neither party has a lock on the loyalties of voters so frequent split-ticket voting is not surprising. Both parties have ownership of issues that appeal to voters in the district and both parties could assemble winning coalitions in the 10th. The incumbent, Mark Kirk, tailored his issue positions to an economically conservative and socially moderate constituency.

Candidate Strategies: Framing the Vote Choice through a National versus Local Lens

Dan Seals adopted a strategy common to many Democratic challengers across the country in 2008. Seals sought to tie his fortune to Obama and a message that emphasized change.⁷ Seals also sought to tie Mark Kirk to the Republican Administration of George W. Bush. Seal's advertisements, mailings, and press releases sought to tie Kirk to Bush, so that a vote for Kirk would be a vote for "more of the same." That strategy, however, did not appear to resonate with a majority of voters in the 10th district. The incumbent had already established a solid reputation as a moderate Republican, and he created even more separation between himself and his party in Washington, DC, between the 2006 and 2008 elections. Further, Kirk sought to tie Seals to widely-perceived corruption of the Illinois Democratic Party, which was headed by a governor rumored to be on the verge of impeachment and who was under investigation by the U.S. Justice Department before the election.⁸ Kirk ran ads criticizing Seals' ethics thereby associating him by common label with other, impugned Democrats in Illinois.

For his part, Mark Kirk had long cultivated an image of a "moderate" Republican with a mixture of economic conservatism and more moderate social positions. Kirk's record, webpage, direct mail, and advertisements emphasized issue positions and priorities that match those of most voters in the 10th district. Kirk supports tax cuts and opposes tax increases, which plays well in one of the most affluent districts in the country. The 10th is home to a naval reserve base and a veterans' hospital, and Kirk consistently supports more spending on defense and veterans' health care. The district has a large number of well-educated, environmentally conscious voters and Kirk has been very active proposing legislation regarding the environmental condition of Lake Michigan. He has backed a mixture of liberal and conservative policies on energy supplies—supporting both alternative energy and expanded drilling, for example. This plays well with an environmentally conscious population that logs a lot of miles in automobiles. He secured federal funding for education and highways, which are both important given the district's population and traffic. Kirk has been an avid supporter of Israel and has taken a hard line on terrorism, Iran, and Iraq in the Middle East,

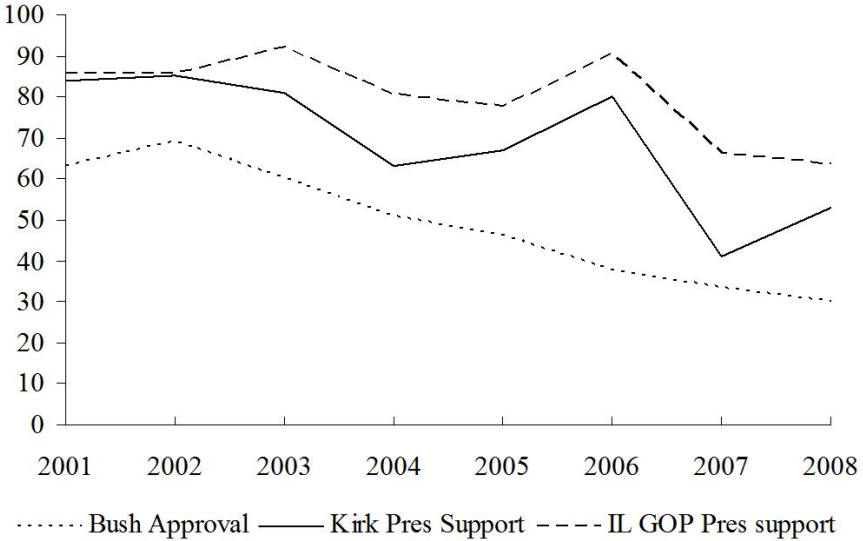
which plays well with the large Jewish population in the district. While being tough on defense abroad, Kirk supported gun control at home. Kirk had developed a centrist position on abortion by supporting rules bringing restrictive bills or amendments to the floor but voting against those measures on roll call votes (see below). Kirk hewed a complex position on the economy, urging FBI investigation of unethical behavior by corporate leaders while supporting a bailout of the financial sector.

Kirk's biggest potential problem in 2008 may have been his support for the Iraq War, which had become unpopular in the district. After supporting the war for several years, Kirk modified his position following his close call in the 2006 election. Kirk was among a group of congressional Republicans who warned President Bush of crumbling public support for the war.⁹ Kirk also broke with his party and president by endorsing a withdrawal of troops, beginning in 2007.¹⁰ This position put him at odds with both President Bush and GOP presidential candidate John McCain who were calling for a troop surge in Iraq. The switch enabled Kirk to mute criticism of his support for the war and visibly reduced his association with an increasingly unpopular president.

More generally, Kirk's voting record in Congress supported the image of a moderate Republican. Kirk repeatedly pointed to his record on a variety of issues to demonstrate his independence from the increasingly unpopular Bush and his own political party. The moderate voting record also made less credible Seal's claims that a vote for Kirk is a vote for "more of the same" or a vote "for Bush." While Seals sought to nationalize the electoral focus, Kirk kept the focus local and emphasized his contributions to his district.¹¹

Since gaining office in 2000, Kirk has had one of lowest party support scores among Illinois Republicans in Congress. Figure 2 shows party unity scores of Mark Kirk, the average of the other Republican Representatives from Illinois, and George W. Bush's presidential approval ratings (averaged by Congress) from 2001 to 2008. Kirk was generally less supportive of his Party's positions than other Republican Representatives from Illinois, which is consistent with his image as independent and reflects the mixture of values held by his constituencies. Kirk's voting record also indicates that he has voted with an eye on voters back home—he became less supportive of Republican Party positions in Congress as his party's president became less popular. This is consistent with Kingdon's (1989) observation that incumbents typically become less supportive of their party's president as the president's approval ratings drop. All of the Illinois Republican Representatives decreased their party support after 2006, but Kirk's support for the Republican position declined further than the others. Kirk began voting less frequently with his party after 2004, when George W. Bush ran poorly in the 10th district. Kirk's loyalty to his party dropped even further after his close

Figure 2. Presidential Support Scores of Mark Kirk, the Average of Illinois Republican Representatives, and Annually Averaged Presidential Approval Ratings, 2001-2008



Source: Congressional Quarterly Party Support Scores, Gallup Polls, various dates.

call in 2006 and the continued decline of public support for George W. Bush. Kirk voted with his party less than 71 percent of the time in the 110th Congress, but that figure belies a shift during the Congress. Kirk voted with his party 79 percent of the time in 2007 but only 66 percent of the time prior to the election in 2008.¹² His support for President Bush dropped even more, going from 80 percent in 2007 to 39 percent in 2008.¹³

Endorsements of Kirk reflected his economically conservative and socially moderate issue positions. Reflecting his positions on economic policy, taxes and balanced budgets, Kirk received endorsements by economically conservative groups like the US Chamber of Commerce and the National Federation of Independent Business. For his positions on defense and veterans' issues, Kirk received the endorsement of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He also received numerous endorsements by environmental groups including the Sierra Club, the Humane Society, League of Conservation Voters, National Wildlife Federation. He was endorsed by a variety of other groups typically associated with liberal causes including Planned Parenthood, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, the Illinois Education Association, the National Education Association, and the Human Rights Campaign. Finally, Kirk was endorsed by Jewish groups for his

positions on Israel and the Middle East.¹⁴ In contrast, his opponent, Dan Seals, received endorsements mainly from liberal groups including numerous unions, the National Organization for Women, and a few others advocating various social welfare programs.¹⁵

The campaign itself largely reinforced the moderate image that Kirk had cultivated and deflected Dan Seal's charges that Kirk represented more of the same (see below). Incumbents like Kirk begin the campaign already having established name recognition, an image, a campaign organization, networks of supporters, and a winning coalition from the prior election. Challengers face the tougher task. They need to establish name-recognition, cultivate a favorable image usually from scratch, and they have to give voters a reason to reject the incumbent. In 2008, Dan Seals sought to give voters several reasons to reject Kirk in two main ways. First and foremost, Seals sought to nationalize the election by associating Kirk with George W. Bush and the Republican Party. Second, Seals sought to attack Kirk on the Iraq War, for which Kirk had been a strong supporter. Kirk, however, successfully distanced himself from both George W. Bush and the Republican Party in Washington by defecting from the party line repeatedly on issues that were salient in the district.

This kind of nuanced candidate-determined position-taking is made possible by the collective nature of Congress and the decentralized, pragmatic character of American political parties. The collective but fragmented structure and processes of Congress make it difficult to attribute credit and blame for national conditions. As Kingdon (1989) and others have demonstrated, the congressional parties prefer their members in Congress to follow the party line but allow partisan members to deviate from the party line when it is electorally advantageous to do so. The Illinois 10th is a district in which the demographic and socio-economic characteristics make it a swing district in which either political party could assemble a winning electoral coalition. While national trends worked against the Republicans and John McCain at the national level, decentralized political parties and the collective authority of Congress enable individual incumbents plenty of opportunities to escape blame for unpopular policies and to take credit selectively for those that are popular with their voters in their districts. The autonomy of individual legislators enables them to tailor their issue positions to local constituencies rather than those of the political party he or she affiliates with. To that end, Kirk's behavior typified a candidate-centered campaign in Washington and in the district. The result was an incumbent largely insulated from national trends adversely affecting the Republican Party. By separating himself from the Republican Party and distancing himself from his party's unpopular president, Kirk avoided becoming collateral damage.

Mark Kirk solidified his support in the 10th district by taking positions on issues that reflected majority sentiments in his district, even if those

positions put him at odds with his own party and president in Washington. His record, press releases and news coverage reinforced an image of a Member of Congress who was opposed to taxes/supportive of tax cuts, pro-defense, pro-Israel, pro-environment, pro-immigrant, pro-education, pro-stem-cell research and pro-choice. While rhetorically advocating free markets, he called for tougher regulations and investigations of crimes by the financial sector. While maintaining a record of strong support for the military and a hard line in foreign policy toward the Middle East, he also supported gradually withdrawing troops from Iraq. By shifting positions on the Iraq War and engaging in populist outrage at high energy costs and malfeasance and greed in the financial sector, Kirk denied his opponent several critical issues. His positioning on issues enabled him to distance himself from the less (locally) popular positions of his political party and president while embracing those that were popular with his constituents (e.g., tax cuts, environmental initiatives, cheap gas, etc.).

Benefits and Services That Only an Incumbent Can Provide

The incumbent in the Illinois 10th congressional district, Mark Kirk, is a classic career politician, having spent most of his adult life in congressional politics—first as a staffer and then chief of staff for former 10th district Representative John Porter. Though other goals matter to career politicians, reelection is an instrumental, intermediary step for the attainment of other goals (e.g., Mayhew 1974). Further, while members seek reelection, they are uncertain about their reelection prospects (Fenno 1978, 36; Mann 1978). Even large electoral margins in a previous election do not imply safety in a volatile electorate loosely anchored by partisan loyalties, such as those in swing districts (e.g., Jacobson 1992). Mark Kirk seems to typify an incumbent whose reelection in 2008 owed in part to his behavior in office. Simply put, he ran scared (e.g., King 1997). Like other incumbents, he won reelection in part by taking care of his constituents—securing benefits and services for constituents, communicating with constituents, and raising money in preparation for a serious electoral challenge (e.g., Jacobson 1992; Herrnsen 1997).

Incumbents have a substantial advantage in gathering information on constituent preferences through their congressional staffs, which operate as efficient and effective intelligence operations generating dual-use information for both legislative and campaign activities (e.g., Steger 1999). Legislators use such information for deciding how to vote on issues, what bills to sponsor, and what services to provide constituents. Knowledge of constituent concerns also informs campaign strategy, messages and images, and identifying and targeting audiences for stylized communications.

Kirk took issue positions that reflect a complex balancing of various, sometimes conflicting preferences of his various constituencies. His voting record on abortion illustrates the point. Kirk supported rules to bring restrictive amendments to the floor, which is important for social conservatives in the Republican Party—a significant minority of Republicans in the district. He also voted against passage, which is apparently preferred by the majority of voters in the district. Similarly, Kirk took a complex mix of positions on energy, balancing competing groups in the district. He supported increasing oil supplies including off-shore drilling but opposed opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to drilling. He also supported increasing fuel efficiency standards and alternative energy sources. On the economy, Kirk supports lower income and capital gains taxes, less spending on social welfare (the 10th district ranked 432 in direct federal payments to individuals), and advocates less government regulation of business. Yet he also voted for the federal bailout of the banking industry while calling for FBI investigations of corporate management.¹⁶ These kinds of mixed positions reflect a nuanced understanding of what will be politically popular in this district.

Incumbents also have advantages in meeting with constituents nearly full time, whereas most challengers do not have this luxury. Congress as an institution accommodates members' desire to visit their constituencies by providing them with ample travel budgets and by scheduling most legislative business between Tuesday and Thursday (Fenno 1978; King 1997). This kind of personal outreach on official business is another dual-function of the office. Legislators like Kirk solicit requests for assistance, listen to complaints, and get constituent input on policy. They also use the opportunity to explain or justify their activities in Washington in order to shore up support among loyalists, consult with their friends and allies, advertise and claim credit for programs for the district or state, cultivate an image of "competence, empathy, and an identification as being 'one of us'" (Fenno 1978, 153). Kirk was clearly active campaigning from the soapbox of the office during 2008. He made numerous public appearances and announcements through the summer and fall of 2008 proclaiming his success in delivering benefits for specific projects (funds for cleaning up a local harbor, Lake Michigan, education, transportation, and the VA hospital in the district). His staff is also recognized for being effective in responding to constituency concerns and requests for help.¹⁷

Bringing home money to the district is also an advantage that incumbents use (e.g., Ferejohn 1974). Levitt and Snyder (1997) found strong evidence that federal spending benefits incumbents in House elections. By all indications, Mark Kirk was a successful procurer of federal funds for his district. While advocating less government and balanced budgets in his

speeches, direct mail and website, he used his position on the House Appropriations Committee to fight for and secure funding for small to massive local projects for education, immigrant programs, environmental clean-up, mass-transit, highway transportation, local monies for Homeland Security at O'Hare airport, and most notably, a massive Department of Defense-Veterans Administration hospital in the district (an expansion worth \$130 million). Each project yielded favorable coverage in local news media (see below). In terms of Federal contracts, the 10th district ranked 126th among congressional districts receiving federal funds in 2008.¹⁸

Finally, Kirk's office is known for effective constituency service and outreach efforts. Members have provided themselves with enough staff support, both in their Washington office and in their district or state offices, to provide services to constituents—services that provide significant electoral benefit for legislators, even though the number of people serviced varies considerably across districts and states (Johannes 1984; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). Though most congressional staffers take care to separate governing and campaign work, congressional offices have an inseparable dual functionality. Efforts to serve constituents have inevitable implications for the campaign and election. Incumbents and their staffs research their constituencies, they create and distribute programs and services tailored to the demands of their constituents, and they advertise themselves to their various constituencies. Kirk's staff is well known for being responsive to constituents and Kirk has been an active presence in the district.¹⁹

Information in the Campaign

While congressional campaign studies often focus on the dissemination of information, that aspect of the campaign was fairly standard for the Kirk campaign. Kirk used the resources of office, such as the franking privilege, his office website, and numerous press releases to explain his activities in Washington, take credit for programs in the district, and offer services to his constituents—stories picked up by the local press. Compared to other Illinois Representatives, Kirk had more appearances on "Chicago Tonight"—a well watched Chicago public television program, local TV and radio news programs, and repeated coverage in the Chicago metro- and suburban newspapers. Kirk's exposure on TV, radio, and print news exceeded that of his opponent, whose coverage was limited to stories on the closeness of the race and for a single campaign event.²⁰

Kirk's campaign used a mixture of heavy direct mail, radio and television advertising—matching the paid advertising of the Democratic challenger and external groups.²¹ Kirk spent \$1.4 million on media expenditures

for the 2008 campaign, or more than five times the amount that was spent by the average House Republican incumbent for their entire campaign.²² Once independent expenditures are taken into account, the Seals campaign roughly matched the media spending by Kirk even though Kirk also spent heavily on campaign communications. With this level of spending, both campaigns had ample opportunity to present their case to voters. However, as noted earlier, the messages in the local news media largely reinforced the image that Kirk sought to portray and generally ran contrary to the message portrayed by the Seals campaign.

Both campaigns emphasized issues that were salient to the constituency. Both candidates' campaign communications sought to portray themselves as supporting policies that would grow the economy while attacking the other for misguided economic policies.²³ Both sides for example, condemned terrorist attacks on Israel, pledged strong support for Israel, and advocated a tough foreign policy toward Iran. Both sides used direct mail and TV ads that related to health care, veterans' health care, energy, education, and the environment. While presidential campaigns tend to emphasize issues owned by their political party (e.g., Petrocik 1996), the congressional campaign in the district featured both campaigns focusing on issues that were important to constituents as well as those owned by their respective political parties. This reflects the mixed issue preferences of voters in the 10th district.

Like other close congressional races, both sides engaged in a mixture of positive and negative advertising during the campaign. All incumbents face potential opponents who will seek to undermine their image with negative advertising. The Seals campaign for example, was highly critical of Kirk's support for the Bush Administration, particularly in regard to the War in Iraq as a misguided, mismanaged and costly mistake. The Seals campaign also criticized Kirk on a range of issues that are "owned" by the Democratic Party. For example, the campaign attacked Kirk for opposing equal pay for women and the extension of unemployment benefits in 2008; and for supporting privatization of social security. The campaign also sought to undermine Kirk's image as environmentally friendly with ads and mailings associating Kirk with Bush and oil companies. The Seals campaign also hit Kirk on issues typically perceived as owned by the Republicans. For example, the Seals campaign ads repeatedly refer to wasteful spending and economic policies that have "hurt the economy." For his part, Kirk essentially tried to link Seals to fears that a Democratic president and Congress would increase taxes. In a move also consistent with the issue ownership theory, the Kirk campaign accused the Democrat of supporting higher taxes, especially capital gains taxes—an important concern given the affluence of the district. Similarly, the Kirk campaign accused Seals of supporting greater regulation

of small businesses, weakening veterans' health benefits, and of gimmickry on energy.

With two campaigns otherwise closely matched in paid media, earned media was a critical factor in this race. The flow of information during the campaign through the news media tended to contradict the Seals' information strategy and reinforced Kirk's message. As an incumbent, Kirk was able to gain repeated favorable exposure in the media for securing federal funds to clean up PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in Lake Michigan, opposing mercury pollution by a British Petroleum refinery in Indiana, and for extending tax credits for alternative energy development and energy conservation.²⁴ His support for legislation on the environment received repeated coverage in suburban newspapers. He received favorable coverage for securing funds for literacy programs for immigrants (who constitute 18 percent of the district's population) and for sponsoring amendments to weaken the No Child Left Behind Act.²⁵ Kirk received favorable news coverage on gun-control for sponsoring legislation to restore the ban on assault weapons.²⁶ He also received local news coverage for his efforts to gain funding for the North Chicago VA Hospital, a joint Department of Defense–VA hospital in the district.²⁷ He also gained coverage for his activities on the House Appropriations Committee where he pushed for more funding for FBI agents to investigate financial crimes, for mass- and highway transit in the district, public education, and homeland security.²⁸ Finally, Kirk received favorable coverage in ethnic and mainstream newspapers for his support for sharing data with Israel from early warning satellites in Europe.²⁹ In short, Kirk consistently received favorable news coverage in the local press, radio, and TV news programs, often for appearances and announcements of programs or projects secured for the district. The incumbent used his position in Congress to secure the exposure and favorable coverage that typically advantages incumbents in congressional elections.

All of the major newspapers for the area endorsed the incumbent, including both major city newspapers and four suburban papers. The Republican-leaning *Chicago Tribune* endorsed Kirk noting that he is, "one of the most thoughtful, independent and effective members of the House. Kirk is a leader on environmental issues, . . . He is a strong advocate for embryonic stem-cell research. He's a workhorse on local concerns, known for having a diligent staff. Voters should look beyond partisanship and embrace their pragmatic, get-it-done congressman."³⁰

The *Chicago Sun Times* called Kirk, "hard working, very knowledgeable, fiercely independent, dedicated to bipartisan action, and an effective contributor to resolving the nation's and his district's problems."³¹ These kinds of newspaper endorsements matched almost perfectly with the image that the incumbent sought to cultivate and the messaging that he used

through the campaign. The challenger, by contrast, received less news coverage and a solitary endorsement by a local paper despite being recognized as a capable candidate in all of the newspapers.³²

A Note on Money: The Mother's Milk of a Campaign?

Conducting a continuous campaign is expensive. While the monetary advantage of incumbents is often identified as a critical factor in explaining the success rates and electoral margins of incumbents (e.g., Jacobson 1992; Herrnson 1997), money is a necessary but not sufficient condition for winning congressional elections. No candidate, however meritorious can win without money, but having a large war chest does not ensure victory. The asymmetry is that money enables candidates to compete for votes by enabling them to make their case before voters, but it cannot ensure that voters will like what they see, hear, or read. Further, the imbalances that we see between incumbent and challenger spending are in large part a consequence of the relative chances of victory for the candidates. Candidates that have the characteristics that make them appealing to voters and likely to win as a result are the candidates who have relatively little difficulty raising money. Candidates who lack either the characteristics that appeal to voters or are perceived as unlikely to win are generally unable to raise much money. The interesting cases are those in which both candidates are well funded, as occurred in the 2008 congressional election in the 10th district.

While Kirk had an advantage in candidate spending, Dan Seals benefited from greater national party support. Overall, there was little difference in the spending and both sides had sufficient financial resources to make their case to voters in the Illinois 10th. Table 2 shows fundraising and spending patterns in the last six elections in the 10th district.

Though based on only six elections, there is a moderate correlation between candidates' campaign spending in the 10th district and candidates' vote shares. What seems to matter is the financial advantage of the incumbent relative to the challenger. The correlation between the ratio of incumbent to challenger spending on one hand and the ratio of incumbent to challenger vote share is $r = .415$. Kirk had a financial advantage in each of his elections, with the advantage being greatest in 2004 when Kirk faced only nominal opposition. Correlations, however, mask important variations. Kirk's spending advantage over his Democratic rival actually decreased from 2006 to 2008. Kirk outspent Dan Seals by a ratio of 1.87 to 1.0 in 2006, but only by a ratio of 1.53 to 1.0 in 2008. Kirk spent 87 percent more than Seals while gaining about 13 percent more of the vote in 2006; while spending 53 percent more than Seals in 2008 while gaining 22.2 percent more of the vote. Just taking into account candidate spending, Kirk's vote

Table 2. Fundraising and Spending by Incumbent Mark Kirk and the Democratic Opponent in Illinois 10th District Congressional Campaigns, 2000-2008

Year	Fundraising		Spending	
	Kirk	Challenger (D)	Kirk	Challenger (D)
2008	\$5,451,604	\$3,532,528	\$5,445,659	\$3,566,123
2006	3,168,367	1,918,167	3,512,971	1,882,795
2004	1,747,924	95,992	1,653,529	88,520
2002	1,705,510	477,584	1,436,056	473,270
2000	2,068,719	1,975,304	2,016,292	1,967,426

Source: Center for Responsive Politics.

share increased even as his financial advantage decreased relative to his challenger. It seems unlikely that we can attribute Kirk’s improved margin to his greater fundraising prowess even though he raised and spent more than two million dollars more in 2008 than he had in 2006.

Further, the difference in spending is even less in 2008 once we take into account independent spending in support or in opposition to the candidates. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the DCCC and other groups spent \$1,030,368 in support of Dan Seal’s candidacy and \$1,033,180 in opposition to Mark Kirk. The National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) and other groups spent only \$198,346 in support of Mark Kirk and nothing in opposition to Dan Seals. If these figures are added to the spending amounts of the candidates, then spending by or in support of Kirk totaled \$5,644,005; while spending by or in support of Seals (or in opposition to Kirk) totaled \$5,629,671. In effect, the amounts of money spent in this campaign were almost identical for the two candidates. While there are no comparable figures available for 2006, neither national committee targeted the race in 2006 which suggests that independent expenditures were negligible in that year.

Thus while campaign spending is important, it does not fully or even marginally explain the rise in vote shares by the incumbent Mark Kirk. That is a remarkable inference when we recall that most of the exogenous factors of the state and national tides favored the Democratic challenger. Certainly money matters, otherwise candidates would not spend so much time and energy raising it. But variations in fundraising and spending do not account for much if any of the change in the vote from 2006 to 2008. Rather, the amounts of money raised do indicate a change in candidate behavior that likely does matter. Kirk raised substantially more funds when he faced a tougher election and reelection campaign (see Table 2).

If we take the 2000 race as a baseline—when the seat was open and most vulnerable to a change in party control, then we can gain insights into the behavior of the incumbent. Kirk raised about two million dollars during his first congressional campaign—much of which was spent in the Republican primary against a well-funded field of politicians eager to replace the retiring John Porter. Kirk raised about \$1.7 million in each of the two next cycles while facing moderately- and poorly funded challengers in the two races, respectively. Kirk raised substantially larger sums in 2006 when he faced a strong challenge by Dan Seals, consistent with the hypotheses that challenger spending drives incumbent spending. Kirk was highly aggressive in raising funds following his close call in 2006, raising \$5,451,604 for his 2008 campaign. Further, Kirk expanded his fundraising extensively going into 2008—raising more funds earlier, raising more funds out-of-state, and raising more funds from political action committees. These patterns indicate an incumbent who anticipated a tough reelection fight in 2008 and who adapted his behavior by engaging in substantial fund-raising efforts. Mark Kirk’s fundraising and spending patterns fit the profile of an incumbent who believed he was safe (from 2000 to 2004) and suddenly faced a tougher race in 2006 and 2008. It seems likely that the increased effort to defend the seat—represented in the financial figures, matters at least as much or more than the actual funds themselves. Mark Kirk became and continued to be an incumbent who runs scared. His actions in office and in the district were critical to his reelection in 2008.

Conclusions

In sum, the 10th district incumbent won the race largely because he did what incumbents do well. He and his staff paid close attention to their constituents and used that information to propose (and take credit for proposing) legislation on issues salient to constituents. He deviated from his political party and president on a few issues salient to his constituents. While always maintaining a more moderate voting record in Congress, he increasingly deviated from his party’s positions in Congress after 2004 and especially after his close call in the 2006 election. He even registered a presidential support score of under 40 percent for the election year itself. He was highly active using his position on House Appropriations to steer money into his district for a range of projects, but especially for the Department of Defense-VA hospital. All of these activities reinforced an image of a hard-working incumbent, in touch with his constituents, and willing to act as an “independent voice” in Washington. These activities also undermined the central claim of the challenger’s campaign—that a vote for Mark Kirk would be a vote for continuation of Republican policies in Washington. The campaign

itself was hard fought over the airwaves, in the media, and on the ground. Both sides spent over \$5 million on the campaign (including independent expenditures in support or opposition to one of the candidates). As a close race, the campaign drew a larger than normal amount of local and national media coverage, the content of which generally reinforced the imaging and messages of the incumbent while tending to undermine that of the challenger.

NOTES

¹The Republican nominee, John McCain was not enthusiastically supported by evangelical Christians in the Republican Party (Steger 2009).

²Democrats won the IL 8th in 2004, which had been represented by a Republican since 1962. Democrats won the IL 14th in a special election in March of 2008 to replace retiring former Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert. Democrats also were poised to win the IL 11th where Republican incumbent, Jerry Weller, was retiring.

³The index for each congressional district is the average of the district vote for the president in the prior two elections compared to the national presidential vote. "Cook Political Report, PVI for the 110th Congress," <http://www.cookpolitical.com/sites/default/files/pvichart.pdf>.

⁴Quality or strong challengers are typically thought to be elected officials with a constituency that overlaps that of the incumbent (e.g., Squire 1992). Seals had never held elected office.

⁵*CQ News Online*, October 27, 2008.

⁶Data derived from the 2000 U. S. Census. http://www.nipic.org/forecasting/GDP-cds/CD_108_DP1234_2000.pdf

⁷*The Associated Press State and Local Wire*, September 29, 2008.

⁸*Chicago Sun Times*, August 31, 2008; *Chicago Daily Herald*, October 6, 2008.

⁹*New York Times*, May 30, 2007.

¹⁰*Chicago Public Radio*, September 12, 2007.

¹¹*Associated Press State and Local News Wire*, November 11, 2008.

¹²*Crain's Chicago Business*. October 15, 2008.

¹³*Crain's Chicago Business*. October 15, 2008.

¹⁴See Kirk website, www.kirkforcongress.com, accessed on January 5, 2009.

¹⁵See Seals' website, www.dansealsforcongress.com, accessed on January 10, 2009.

¹⁶*WGN Radio*, September 22, 2008.

¹⁷*Lake County News Sun*, October 4th 2008.

¹⁸The 10th district exhibits a congressional election cycle in its ranking for Federal contracts. The district ranked 126th in contracts in 2008, 147th in 2007, 80th in 2006, 180th in 2005, and 89th in 2004. <http://www.usaspending.gov/fpds/index.php?reptype=a>.

¹⁹*Lake County News Sun*, October 4, 2008.

²⁰Dan Seals received coverage on local broadcast and print news for an event in which his campaign provided cheap gas to voters. These stories, however, were not all favorable as the event caused a substantial traffic jam (e.g., *Cook Political Report*, September 25, 2008).

²¹The Kirk campaign outspent the Seals campaign on TV advertising, but probably not the combined TV advertising of Seals and ads run by the DCCC and other groups.

²²Source: www.opensecrets.org.

²³The following examples were drawn from the Kirk and Seals' campaign press releases and video streams of the ads run by the two campaigns. <http://dansealsforcongress.com> and <http://www.kirkforcongress.com>.

²⁴*Daily Herald*, October 29, 2008; *Pioneer Press*, October 9, 2008; *ABC 7 Chicago*, August 26, 2008; *WBBM 780 Radio*, July 8, 2008; *CBC 2 Chicago*, June 24, 2008.

²⁵*Daily Herald*, June 9, 2008.

²⁶*Daily Herald*, August 19, 2008; *Pioneer Press*, June 19, 2008.

²⁷*Pioneer Press*, October 9, 2008;

²⁸*New York Times*, October 20, 2008; *Daily Herald*, October 19, 2008; *Crain's Chicago Business*, February 21, 2008.

²⁹*Ha'aretz*, September 27, 2008; *Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 2008.

³⁰*Chicago Tribune*, October 21, 2008.

³¹*Chicago Sun Times*, October 13, 2008.

³²The *Journal and Topics* Newspaper endorsed Seals on October 29th, being critical of Kirk for voting against a bill for equal pay for women and for negative advertising.

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