

# For GOP, 2008 Senate race is wide open

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WASHINGTON -- The 2008 Senate election may seem far away, but the battered Illinois Republican Party already is running late if it plans to challenge Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin.

No Republicans have stepped forward to say they will run against Durbin, and no one seems to be on the sidelines preparing to jump in.

"This is really becoming a problem for us," said Illinois Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson, R-Greenville.

Although the election is 22 months away, that's not a particularly long time in politics; the deadline to qualify for the ballot is less than a year away. When Democrats wanted the Senate seat held by Republican Peter Fitzgerald in 2004, three candidates were in the race 26 months ahead of time.

Fitzgerald, who retired rather than run for a second term, is not optimistic about his party's chances against Durbin, with whom he worked and sometimes clashed at the Capitol for six years.

"I think it would take a riverboat gambler for a Republican to run," he said. "Senator Durbin is a liberal Democrat, but the state as whole is a liberal Democratic state, and Senator Durbin makes few mistakes. He'd be hard to beat."

Fitzgerald also said any challenger would have to be wealthy enough to fund a campaign because the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which spreads its money across the country's high-priority Senate races, would not want to dump money in a state considered Democratic.

Illinois voters just re-elected Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich despite a federal corruption probe of his administration, and chose Democrats for every other statewide office.

Some Republicans suggest a challenger could raise money from outside Illinois because Durbin, the Senate's second-highest ranking Democrat, has become a nationally known

figure. He often appears on television defending his party's positions, sometimes in awkward fashion.

In June 2005, Durbin delivered a Senate floor speech comparing American treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay to the behavior of dictatorships, including the Nazis. Durbin later apologized, teary-eyed, saying he meant no disrespect to U.S. soldiers and simply was interpreting FBI-prepared memos.

State Sen. Kirk Dillard, R-Hinsdale, one of the state's key GOP leaders, said even though the "Nazi" statement would be a factor with some voters, Durbin still is a tough candidate.

"As chairman of the DuPage County Republican Party, I think Senator Durbin is in a stronger position to be re-elected today than a couple of years ago," he said. "His stature has never been higher, and he's probably helped having Barack Obama as his senatorial partner."

State GOP Chairman Andy McKenna said there is no specific timetable for the party to line up a candidate. McKenna, who previously has been a statewide candidate for Senate, said he would focus on being party chairman in 2008.

The closest Republicans may be to having a candidate is state Sen. Bill Brady of McLean County, who has been encouraged to run by some people, spokesman Dan Egler said.

"He is giving it some thought," Egler said of Brady, who lost a 2006 bid for the GOP nomination for governor. "His focus is to someday be governor."

The last thing Republicans want is a replay of 2004, when the GOP Senate nominee dropped out and no one wanted to replace him. The party ended up importing conservative commentator Alan Keyes from Maryland only to see him crushed by Obama.

Ordinarily, the U.S. House would be a natural place to find someone interested in becoming a senator. But almost as fast as a representative's name is mentioned, they remove themselves from consideration.

Rep. Mark Kirk, who won a third term last year representing Chicago's northwest suburbs, has told Durbin he won't run. Rep. Ray LaHood, a six-term congressman from Peoria, says he won't run.

State officials aren't interested either, although Rep. John Shimkus of Collinsville argues that anyone who runs a close race against Durbin -- even a losing one -- would be in a good position to become the GOP nominee for governor in 2010.

State Rep. Jim Durkin of Western Springs, who lost badly to Durbin in 2002, says he has thought "not one second" about challenging Durbin again. State Sen. Christine Radogno

of Lemont, who lost her bid for state treasurer in November, said she is happy where she is.

Jim Oberweis, a wealthy dairy owner from Aurora who spent millions from his personal fortune in three statewide races, said he is interested in running for the seat of Rep. Dennis Hastert, whenever the former GOP House speaker retires.

"I think Durbin is going to be very vulnerable if Republicans can get the right candidate. I doubt that it will be me," Oberweis said, adding: "I don't see a single logical candidate."

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