

In Illinois, Tammy Duckworth's better funded campaign puts Mark Kirk's Senate seat in a precarious position

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In a state which has tended to elect Democrats in recent years, it may come as no surprise that the incumbent Republican Senator, Mark Kirk, faces a tough reelection fight against Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth. As part of our [series](#) covering key Senate races in the 2016 election [Mara Suttman-Lea](#) gives an overview of the Prairie State's Senate race, commenting that the state's early voting laws give the candidates more time to campaign, an opportunity that may favor the better-funded Duckworth campaign.



This election year, one of Illinois' current US Senators, Republican Mark Kirk, faces a tough reelection bid against US House of Representatives member Tammy Duckworth. In a year when Democrats could retake the Senate, the race between Kirk and Duckworth is one that could [tip the scales](#) in their favor. As of October 2, Duckworth held about a [seven point advantage](#) over Kirk. Though an incumbent, Kirk's position is nevertheless precarious. He won election to his seat in 2010 by a razor thin margin over Democratic candidate Alexi Giannoulias. The last time an incumbent Illinois Republican was up for reelection was in 1984, when Charles Percy lost to Democrat Paul Simon. Illinois' most recent Republican Senator behind Kirk, Peter Fitzgerald, was elected in 1998, but opted to retire after one term.

This year's race is also historic because it [features](#) two physically disabled candidates. Both candidates have made recovery from their injuries a centerpiece of their platform, using it as a part of their campaign speeches and advertisements to highlight the resilience and strength they would bring to the US Senate. Duckworth lost her legs and partial use of her right arm when her Blackhawk helicopter was shot down in Iraq in 2004. In 2012, Kirk suffered a stroke, leaving his left side paralyzed.

Kirk and Duckworth have both have confessed that campaigning with a disability is exhausting. And doing so in Illinois, a state that offers early voting for [40 days](#) before Election Day, makes it all the more difficult. September 29th was the first day during which voters could cast ballots at their county board of elections, board of election commissioners, or at temporary polling locations set up at the discretion of county election authorities. Access to early voting expands on October 24th, when voters can cast early ballots at permanent early voting locations. This lengthier period of campaigning offers both [advantages and disadvantages](#) for candidates, but will likely advantage Duckworth in the long term.



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On the one hand, it means Kirk and Duckworth should theoretically be out on the campaign trail for a longer period of time, a burden made more difficult by their physical disabilities. In states with early voting, at least in the context of competitive races, candidates also tend to air advertisements far earlier than in states without. Sustaining high levels of ad buys leading up to and throughout an early voting period is expensive, though there is some, albeit limited, [evidence](#) suggesting that campaigns have found ways to do more with less in these states. At this stage of the election Duckworth holds a [fundraising advantage](#) over Kirk. Recent figures show her with about \$5.5 million on hand, and Kirk with a little over \$3.1 million.

On the other hand, the lengthier voting period brought on by early voting also brings more opportunities to mobilize voters. Though this can also increase campaign expenses, if the candidates lock up enough support by mobilizing core supporters to vote early before Election Day hits, they can use their remaining resources to target undecided voters who are more likely to wait until the last minute to choose a candidate. This again likely favors Duckworth's better funded campaign, who will have more money on hand for both early voter mobilization and Election Day Get Out the Vote efforts. On October 25th, the day after early voting expands to more locations, Duckworth has plans to hold a [rally](#) after which she'll encourage voters to walk to an early voting location to cast their ballots. Kirk, for his part, has [encouraged](#) supporters to vote early via social media, but it is not clear whether he is planning similar early voter rallies.

Whatever implications early voting may have for Kirk and Duckworth's campaigns, another election law recently passed in the state is receiving much more legal attention may also have consequences for the candidates' success. At the end of September, a federal judge [blocked](#) an Illinois law allowing Election Day voter registration at polling places. The law was struck down under the [equal protection clause](#) of the 14th amendment. Because the law only requires counties that have populations higher than 100,000 to have Election Day registration, opponents argued the law unfairly disadvantaged candidates who draw support from rural populations, while advantaging candidates who draw support from urban voters. However, shortly after the ruling, a federal appeals court judged [stayed](#) the original judge's order, effectively allowing polling places to register voters on Election Day. Without the stay, voters would have only been able to register to vote that day at a limited number of sites. The original ruling could have potentially harmed Duckworth's Election Day Get Out the Vote Efforts. Election Day registration tends to [boost voter turnout](#), and historically, high population counties in Illinois have [supported](#) Democratic candidates.



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Whatever advantage Kirk could have had given this ruling, it may not have outweighed the problems he faces being a Republican candidate in a year when the Republican presidential nominee has historically high unfavorable ratings. Kirk has the unenviable task of distancing himself from a Donald Trump in order to capture more moderate voters without alienating base Republicans, whose support he will also need to win on Election Day. Since rescinding his support for Trump, Kirk has made efforts to [tout](#) his bipartisan credentials through a series of campaign advertisements and by appearing with his Illinois Senate counterpart, Democrat, Dick Durbin. He was also one of the first GOP politicians to openly ask Trump to [step down](#) from his position as the Republican presidential nominee after a controversial tape was released showing the candidate asserting he had impunity to make sexual advances towards women without their consent. Though many Republican donors have been [allocating](#) their resources to states more pivotal to the presidential election than Illinois, the tape has motivated the RNC to [redirect](#) funds to closely contested GOP races for the US House and Senate, a move that could give Kirk a boost in the final weeks before Election Day.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Mara Suttman-Lea is a PhD Candidate in political science at Northwestern University. Her research is situated at the intersection of state and local electoral institutions, campaigns, political participation, and American political development. Her substantive focus is on how the responses of political actors to changes in election laws can have unintended consequences for American political behavior and institutions.



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