



COVER STORY

# Obama extends reach beyond Illinois race

By Debbie Howlett, USA TODAY

CHICAGO — The disparity between the two campaigns for the U.S. Senate here in Illinois is as clear as the difference in the candidates' dinner plans one recent weekend.

Barack Obama hobnobbed with comic Robin Williams and musician Stevie Wonder at the home of Playboy CEO Christie Hefner during a \$2,500-a-plate fundraiser catered by Wolfgang Puck.

Alan Keyes crashed the New Trier Township Republican dinner after organizers refused to invite him to speak.

This could have been a meaningful race. It's the first time two African-Americans have faced off for the Senate; the winner will be only the third to serve since 1881. Instead, it's so one-sided that Obama is spending some of his time campaigning for colleagues out of state.

The half Kenyan, half Kansan Obama was anointed as a future Democratic star, even a possible president, by the media after his speech at the Democratic National Convention in July. (**Related story:** [Kenyan village rallies for favorite U.S. son](#)) Since then, he has become a force in the party, raising more than \$14 million, which would be an impressive sum for an incumbent, much less a state legislator in his first run for the Senate. His lead in the polls is eye-popping: 68% to 17%, according to the *Chicago Tribune* last month.

All of that has allowed Obama to dismiss Keyes — a former long shot Republican presidential candidate from Maryland who was lured into the race by desperate Republicans two months ago — with a pious one-liner in his standard stump speech. "We are not running against somebody," Obama told the Rotary Club here recently. "We are running for something."

That something appears to be more than just a Senate seat.

In the 11 weeks since he delivered the keynote in Boston, Obama has traveled to at least 14 states to raise money and appear with fellow Democrats in close races. He has made appearances from Martha's Vineyard to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., campaigning for a Democratic majority in Congress.

He has raised \$1.2 million for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and other Senate candidates. He has donated \$225,000 from his own campaign cash to the committee and to state Democratic parties in Alaska, Colorado, Florida, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Wisconsin, where Democrats are in close Senate races. On Friday, he will be in Los Angeles for a Senate fundraiser that is expected to net \$1 million for the national party. The next day, he will visit Colorado to stump for John Kerry and Senate candidate Ken Salazar.

"He's a player," says Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus. "He's a national figure. ... People don't want to 'be like Mike' anymore. They want to be like Barack."

With Republicans holding a tenuous 51-48 majority in the Senate, even a gain of one seat by the Democrats will change the political dynamic. Obama and Keyes are vying for a seat left vacant when Republican Sen. Peter Fitzgerald opted to retire after one term. "I've served in the minority, and I've served in the majority," Obama says. "It's a lot more fun to serve in the majority."

### **'Two ships passing in the night'**

When Obama is in Illinois, as he is most of the time, he focuses on reaching out to moderate voters in the suburbs and conservative voters downstate, where towns like Cairo are closer to Little Rock than Chicago. He talks about the economy and foreign policy. He rarely mentions Keyes, whose emphasis has been on social issues such as abortion and gay rights.

"Mr. Keyes' campaign and my campaign seem to be two ships passing in the night," Obama says between campaign stops.

Keyes has often been his own worst enemy. His vitriol has turned off much of the electorate and caused Illinois' GOP leadership to shun him. State Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka, the party chairwoman, declined to talk about the race.

Keyes has even disappointed the party's conservative wing, which lured him here after Republican nominee Jack Ryan dropped out of the race amid a sex scandal. "Many of us would have preferred that he focus on economic issues," Rockford state Sen. Dave Syverson says.

Much of the focus has been on Keyes' sulfuric criticism of Obama for supporting abortion rights—even saying at one point that Jesus wouldn't vote for Obama.

"That's not a distraction from the issues," Keyes says. "It's a fundamental issue of principle. ... The thing that's so different between him and me is he doesn't see these as deep, fundamental issues of principle." Keyes has struggled to win over African-American voters. In Chicago, two separate polls show him with single-digit support among African-Americans. He was even booed when he marched in the parade for Bud Billikin Day, an annual African-American festival.

Obama, on the other hand, has taken on a stature equal to, if not greater than, the longtime civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, whose Rainbow/PUSH organization is headquartered here.

"We're past the point of having one great black hope," says Laura Washington, a DePaul University sociology professor and columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times. She says Obama is more acceptable to the public than Jackson because he is a Harvard-educated lawyer and elected official. His immigrant story, with a father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas, is appealing. "Being biracial helps increase the comfort level," she says.

### **Living up to his billing**

On the campaign trail, Obama likes to roll into his remarks with a humble preface, saying that 18 months ago he was unknown. "People said, 'This guy has no cash, no organization, and nobody can say his name,'" he recalls.

For the most part, that was true.

Obama was one of seven candidates vying for the Democratic nomination. Others were richer or backed by Democratic organizations in Chicago. At one point, polls showed him running fourth. But when the divorce records of Blair Hull, a wealthy, retired commodities trader, were made public days before the election, the accusations of spousal abuse and cocaine use knocked him from the lead. Obama stepped into the breach, winning with 53% of the vote.

Three months later, the unsealing of divorce records also undid Ryan, the GOP nominee, who was trailing in the polls by 20 points. Then Kerry tapped Obama to give the convention's keynote speech.

"No doubt we've experienced some serendipity the last several months. Some call it luck," Obama says. "I just get on my knees every night and ask God to make me worthy of all these blessings."

Obama hedges his words when talking about the future. With a reputation as something of a policy wonk at the state Capitol in Springfield, he says he's eager to dive into the daily grind as one of 100 members of what some call the world's most exclusive club.

David Axelrod, a Democratic consultant and one of Obama's top advisers, says that's what he will need to do, in much the same way New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton did after moving from the White House to the Senate. "He has had a lot of flattering advance billing," Axelrod says. "All of that is meaningless unless he delivers."