

Democrats win congressional seat of former House Speaker Hastert

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10 March 2008

In a special election Saturday to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of former House Speaker Dennis Hastert, Democratic candidate Bill Foster defeated Republican Jim Oberweis by a margin of 53 percent to 47 percent. Foster was the first Democrat to win the 14th Congressional District of Illinois in more than 30 years. Hastert himself had held the seat since 1986.

Congressional Quarterly magazine called the result “a stunning defeat and embarrassment to the Republican Party in a race that carried outsized symbolism because it had been held by former GOP Speaker J. Dennis Hastert.” President Bush carried the district by a margin of 55 percent to 44 percent in 2004. Hastert won reelection to his 11th term in 2006 with 60 percent of the vote.

Hastert resigned his seat only a few months after the defeat of the Republicans in the 2006 congressional elections, which cost him his position as Speaker. His resignation, effective at the end of the legislative session in December, forced the special election. Foster now fills out the 10-month balance of Hastert’s term and will face Oberweis again in the general election November 4 for a full two-year term.

The 14th Congressional District extends from the far western suburbs of Chicago across a wide expanse of farmland in north-central Illinois, almost to the Mississippi River. It includes the industrial city of Aurora as well as DeKalb, home to Northern Illinois University, site of the shooting rampage last month by a former student.

Both candidates were millionaires who self-financed their campaigns. Foster worked as a physicist for 22 years at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, but made his fortune as a partner in a family company making theater lighting equipment. Oberweis is a

wealthy dairy farmer and owner of an ice cream manufacturer, well known in the district because of a series of unsuccessful statewide election campaigns.

Foster aligned himself with Barack Obama, the Illinois senator who is slightly ahead in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. His television ads repeatedly linked Foster to Obama and including footage of Obama’s endorsement statement. In his victory statement Saturday night, Foster noted that he would be one more super-delegate vote for Obama at the Democratic National Convention. Oberweis had the backing of the presumptive Republican nominee John McCain, who held a fundraiser for him.

The issues raised by the two candidates prefigured those of the fall presidential campaign. Foster claimed he would be a “good vote in Congress to change President Bush’s policy” in Iraq, while Oberweis campaigned, like McCain, as a supporter of the troop surge in Iraq, which he claimed was working.

Foster called for raising taxes on the top 1 or 2 percent of income earners, which he presented as a measure necessary not for income redistribution but for cutting the federal deficit. The *Chicago Tribune* endorsed Foster in an editorial that cited his promise to “be a Blue Dog Democrat—that is, part of the moderate caucus in the House that puts a high priority on controlling federal spending and returning to a balanced budget.”

Oberweis sought to focus the campaign on demonizing undocumented workers, suggesting repeatedly that the United States in general and northern Illinois in particular were being invaded. Foster’s campaign responded with ads charging Oberweis with hypocrisy, claiming the Republican candidate had illegal immigrants working in his ice cream shops.

Once it became clear that the Hastert seat was in danger, both national parties intervened heavily in the campaign. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and its Republican counterpart each spent more than \$1 million on the race—a much heavier investment for the Republican committee, which used 20 percent of its total resources. The result left the Democratic committee with \$34 million and the Republican committee with only \$5 million in cash on hand for the fall election.

The Illinois contest was seen by both big-business parties as a precursor of the outcome of the November election. There are dozens of marginal seats like Hastert's, mixed urban and rural and held by the Republicans by narrow margins, which are at risk. The disarray in Republican ranks is demonstrated by the decision of more than two dozen incumbents to retire or resign rather than seek reelection, compared to only four Democrats, two of whom are seeking to move up to the Senate.

In Illinois alone, there are two more open Republican seats besides Hastert's. Long-time congressman Ray LaHood is retiring from his Peoria seat, while Jerry Weller, whose 11th District adjoins Hastert's, quit after a series of revelations about questionable relations with right-wing businessmen in Central America.



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