

## What's Wrong with Illinois' U.S. Senate Democratic Favorite?

Written by Rich Miller

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Despite winning two consecutive statewide elections by overwhelming margins, Illinois Comptroller Dan Hynes has just 14 percent in the U.S. Senate race, according to the latest Chicago Tribune poll. Even worse, Hynes is tied with two of his opponents, Maria Pappas and Barack Obama.

How can Dan Hynes possibly be polling just 14 percent in this race? And how is it that a relative unknown with a stunningly awful ballot name like Barack Obama is polling even with him?

You might say that because nobody seems to be paying attention to the campaign, low poll numbers are to be expected. But on name recognition alone, Hynes ought to be far ahead of the pack.

Hynes spent more than \$2 million a little over a year ago to win his second comptroller's race. He ran tons of slick ads that painted him as a heroic character who saved education dollars. He went on to defeat his Republican opponent by a two-to-one margin. He is well-liked and -respected by the party regulars. You'd think that all of that ought to be worth a benchmark of at least 20 points.

There has been precious little media coverage of the campaign so far. So maybe when people finally figure out that a Senate race is on the horizon and they're reminded who Dan Hynes is, his numbers will start to rise. But I think there's something missing from his campaign.

Back in 1998, Hynes put together a remarkable, vibrant organization to supplement the one created by his father Tom Hynes, a South Side ward committeeman and former Senate president. Hynes activated hundreds of young people throughout the state. His campaign kickoff at Chicago's Navy Pier attracted thousands of twenty- and thirtysomethings.

But, so far, Hynes has been running this campaign like a cautious old man. In a year when the anger of Democratic primary voters might be eclipsing the rage of Republicans and independents in 1994, Hynes has run an ultra-traditional, low-key campaign based on snaring

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endorsements and issuing predictable policy pronouncements.

And instead of playing up his youth and vitality, the 35-year-old Hynes is trying to run as an experienced statesman. As a consequence, Obama has been able to attract lots of support from Chicago's energetic young professionals.

And the really big problem is still to come. So far, almost nobody knows that Hynes supported the war in Iraq. This is, of course, a huge no-no for most Dem primary voters, who don't want to send yet another yes-man to Washington, D.C. Just take a look at how the pro-war Democrats are doing in the presidential race. Only after they renounced their previous positions did they begin to move up in the polls. Hynes has yet to say he made a mistake by supporting the president.

Hynes has always excelled at the nuts-and-bolts stuff. He's been endorsed by just about every Democratic county chairman in the state, he has the AFL-CIO in his corner, and he'll have a first-rate get-out-the-vote operation.

For decades, strong organizations and voter familiarity have won statewide Democratic primaries in Illinois. But this is no ordinary year, as the angry, sometimes strident tones of the two top Democratic presidential contenders, Howard Dean and Wesley Clark, amply illustrate. The last time a statewide Democratic primary fell in a year that the national party's tectonic plates abruptly shifted was 1992, when an insurgent named Carol Moseley Braun defeated the supposedly unbeatable U.S. Senator Alan Dixon.

The front page of Hynes' campaign Web site includes an open letter to voters, and one sentence crystallizes what has eluded him so far. "Elections," Hynes writes, "are about inspiring people and bringing them together to make a difference." But the only candidate who seems to be inspiring Democratic primary voters these days is Barack Obama – and that might be why he is still in the hunt. Obama has been busily tapping into the energy that Dean and Clark have been mining for months.

And if all that isn't bad enough, the *Trib* poll has anti-war millionaire Blair Hull at 10 percent. You can bet good money that he is taking most of those voters away from Hynes. Hull has so far focused much of his television advertising on Downstate voters, whom Hynes had been expected to sweep.

I happen to like Dan Hynes and think he'd probably be a good U.S. Senator. Most people think he has the best shot at winning the general election. But he has to win the primary first.

*Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at (<http://www.capitolfax.com>).*