

Florida election a test for Obama health care law (Update)

March 11 2014, by Michael J. Mishak



This Nov. 23, 2013 file photo shows Florida Republican Congressional candidate David Jolly, right, speaking in Indian Rocks Beach, Fla. The special election in this stretch of coastal beach towns and retirement communities was expected to be a referendum on President Barack Obama's health care law. Instead, in the waning days of the spirited campaign to replace the late Rep. Bill Young, another issue has roared to the forefront. (AP Photo/Steve Nesius, File)

President Barack Obama's health care overhaul is getting its first test ahead of the 2014 midterm congressional elections Tuesday in a special

Florida election where Democrats and Republicans have spent millions of dollars trying out national strategies for the rest of the year.

The race for the House of Representatives seat has inspired both parties to call in star advocates like former President Bill Clinton and former Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan, in addition to blanketing the Tampa-area district with ads, calls and mailings.

The candidates are Democrat Alex Sink and Republican David Jolly, and their contest to succeed the late Republican Rep. Bill Young is considered a tossup.

The battle for the seat is a prequel of sorts to the national fight this year over who controls Congress in the last two years of Obama's final presidential term. The House is expected to remain under Republican control. But in the Senate, Republicans are hoping to leverage Obama's sliding popularity and his health care overhaul's wobbly start to gain the six seats required to control the 100-member chamber.

That makes the race in Florida a pricey proving ground for both parties.

More than \$11 million has been spent on the race, according to the Sunlight Foundation, a nonprofit group that tracks government information. More than one in four registered voters in the district is older than 65, a population that could account for more than half of those casting ballots. As of Monday, 27 percent of registered voters had cast ballots through absentee or early voting, with Election Day turnout increasing throughout the afternoon.



This Nov. 23, 2013 file photo shows Florida Democratic Congressional candidate, Alex Sink, center, speaking at her campaign office in Clearwater, Fla. The special election in this stretch of coastal beach towns and retirement communities was expected to be a referendum on President Barack Obama's health care law. Instead, in the waning days of the spirited campaign to replace the late Rep. Bill Young, another issue has roared to the forefront. (AP Photo/Steve Nesius, File)

The 3-year-old health care law, Obama's signature domestic policy achievement, aims to extend coverage for uninsured Americans, in part by offering government-subsidized private plans. It also prohibits insurers from turning away people with health problems.

Republicans oppose the initiative, especially a requirement that nearly all Americans have health coverage or risk fines.

Jolly, backed by Republicans and outside groups, says Sink would

undermine Medicare—the federal health care program for the elderly—because of Democratic-passed cuts to programs under "Obamacare."

Sink and her allies, meanwhile, paint Jolly as a Washington lobbyist and an extremist who wants to privatize the Social Security pension system and gut Medicare.

The attack has put Jolly on the defensive in recent weeks, and some voters cited concern about Republican cuts to programs for the elderly. More than one in four registered voters in the district is older than 65.

Last week, Bill Clinton recorded a phone call seeking local volunteers to help with Sink's campaign, and a half dozen House Democrats emailed fundraising appeals to their own supporters on her behalf.

Meanwhile, Ryan joined Jolly on a conference call with voters. More than a third of Jolly's campaign contributions came from members of Congress.

While Republicans held the congressional seat for four decades until Young's death last year, the district's voters favored Obama in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. The district is 37 percent Republican, 35 percent Democrat and 24 percent independent.

Sink has outspent Jolly by more than 3 to 1 on television advertising, though Republican-aligned outside groups have helped narrow the overall Democratic advantage.

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