Chicago mayor's race casts shadow over state races
By Don Babwin
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CHICAGO — The most telling sign yet of how the wide-open race for Chicago mayor has overshadowed everything else this election season was that Rahm Emanuel was all but invisible when his former boss came home.

With President Barack Obama in town this week to stump for Democrats in the key midterm campaigns for U.S. Senate and governor, Emanuel kept a low profile after days of shaking hands and posing for pictures in front of TV cameras. His campaign said the former White House chief of staff did not want to be a distraction.

Less than a month ahead of the November elections, the race to replace Mayor Richard M. Daley has thrown a wild card into the other campaigns. The mayoral vote isn't until February, but candidates already are competing for funds, news coverage and other attention, especially in Chicago's big media market.

Both Democrats and Republicans insist the volatile mayor's contest will energize the electorate for the earlier Senate and governor votes — in favor of their own candidates, of course. Some analysts disagree.

"You have the breath sucked out of the state elections," Alan Gitelson, a Loyola University political scientist said. "Every minute devoted to the Chicago (mayor's) race on television, every minute of radio, every line in print devoted to Chicago instead of the statewide races, all that takes away from the attention that the Senate and gubernatorial candidates want."

The race to lead the country's third-largest city is wide open for the first time in more than two decades thanks to Daley's decision not to seek a seventh term. And some observers believe it could make a difference in two exceedingly close statewide contests: Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn vs. his GOP challenger, State Sen. Bill Brady; and Republican Congressman Mark Kirk vs. Democratic State Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias for the Senate seat vacated by Obama.

The mayor's race does not mean as much to other parts of Illinois, which historically have harbored a fair amount of resentment toward the city. But if political excitement triggers more voting in Chicago it could give the city more sway in statewide races.

At the very least, with no fewer than four congressmen, a sheriff with a national profile, state senators and a former U.S. senator considering a run, it is clear that between now and Nov. 2 the candidates for governor and Senate will have to share the spotlight.

They also may have to share the money. Even as Obama was in Chicago to raise money for Giannoulias' Senate campaign, candidates and potential candidates for mayor are busy trying to line up their own financial support.
"That means there is going to be money taken that might (otherwise) have been available to candidates in the general election," said Charles Wheeler, director of the Public Affairs Reporting graduate program at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Less money means less advertising. And that means campaigns must rely more than ever on news coverage of their campaigns — something anyone paying attention in Chicago knows has been in short supply to anyone but mayoral candidates in recent weeks.

"This hurts them," Kent Redfield, a professor emeritus of politics at the University of Illinois-Springfield, said of the statewide candidates. "It does limit (their) ability to go out and generate the coverage you need."

Not surprisingly, Democrats and Republicans alike insist the mayor's race works in their favor.

For Republicans, the mayor's race will help because it includes Emanuel, said the state party chairman. "Rahm Emanuel is probably the most polarizing figure for our base, the Republican base, in the state,' said Pat Brady, who is no relation to the Republican gubernatorial candidate. "So every time he comes out and starts talking about what he's going to do as mayor it motivates our people to get out."

Democrats disagree. The way they see it, the buzz about the mayor's race, with so many candidates and campaign workers knocking on doors collecting signatures to get on the ballot, will energize residents to vote in November. And in a city as overwhelmingly Democratic as Chicago, that can only help Quinn and Giannoulias.

"We had to wake people up from their political slumber and this is doing it," Sen. Dick Durbin said.

History may be on the Democrats' side.

Political observers point to 1982 when the November election for governor coincided with a similarly wide open Chicago mayoral race in which candidates tried to drum up support for an election months away.

"You had the tribal factions in Chicago, the white ethnics, African Americans, the North Side, the South Side machine all looked at the general election sort of like spring training for the mayoral election" the next year, Wheeler said.

That meant far more Chicago voters turned out than expected, he said, and Democrat Adlai Stevenson came within a just more than 5,000 votes of what would have been a stunning upset after trailing Republican Jim Thompson in the polls by double digits.

Chicago's political machine is not nearly as powerful as in 1982 but Wheeler said the candidates still may want to use the November election as a "dress rehearsal." Democratic committeemen in various city wards will have added incentive to get voters to the polls: Prove to the candidates that they are worth being taken seriously and courted.

"The higher the number the bigger player they will be in the mayoral race," said Scott Cisek, political director for the Cook County Democratic Party.
But even Durbin said everybody is guessing at just what the mayor's race will mean to the statewide races.

"Anybody who tells you they know the answer is just making it up," he said. "This (a wide open mayor's race) happens in Chicago every other generation ... and an off-year election with a president from Chicago, that's never happened before."