Election decisions could be made in suburbs, downstate
By Dian Sroka
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Chicago long has been a Democratic stronghold whose political influence spans from the lakefront to Springfield, but when it comes to this midterm election, it might be the rest of the state that comes out swinging.

Political experts said sheer population figures and the ideological makeup of voter turnout would determine who wins Tuesday night, and which statewide candidates successfully woo the windy city will be moot.

Consider first the state’s population, said Wayne Steger, a political science professor at DePaul University. Illinois has about 12.5 million residents, half of whom live in greater Chicago.

The city of Chicago has a population of about 3 million.

“You just do a little math there and you realize that ... the city is offset by the rural areas,” Steger said. “The big swing area is those suburbs.”

But it’s not residents that count; it’s registered voters. And on election day, it comes down to how many of these voters make it out to the polls.

Midterm elections typically have lower turnout than general elections. In McHenry County, voter turnout during these races typically ranges between 40 percent and 45 percent, McHenry County Clerk Kathy Shultz said.

And despite the numerous get-out-the-vote efforts that have graced the political landscape in recent years, Shultz didn’t predict a mad rush of new voters or massive turnout this week.

“I hope I’m wrong,” she said.

John Frendreis said what that meant for candidates was they would have to rely on the voter base that already exists.

“The real question is, ‘where do swing voters live?’” said Frendreis, a political science professor at Loyola University Chicago.

Frendreis said it could be downstate Illinoisans, rather than collar county suburbanites, who determine the outcome of key state races.

While Chicago is less populated than the suburbs, it could have an identical or higher voter turnout. If that’s the case, he said, the collar counties and city would nullify each other’s votes and the winner would be selected by the rest of the state.
“What you look at is whether the total coming out of Chicago or Cook County is bigger or smaller than the collar counties total,” Frendreis said.

Regardless of where, geographically, the votes come from, what will be key for the winning candidate is rallying supporters.

Elections are not as much about whose ideas are the best, but which candidate can rally the most supporters, some say.

“Whoever works the hardest stands a good chance of being victorious on election day,” said Michael Bissett, chairman of the McHenry County Democratic Party.

On the right, groups such as Americans for Prosperity also have worked to rally the base.

AFP, a national organization, developed the grassroots November is Coming campaign aimed at reaching free market advocates and independents who normally wouldn’t come out for a midterm election.

“Our goal with November is Coming is to help educate those voters on the value of voting in this election cycle,” said Joe Calomino, state director of AFP-Illinois.

Although there are skeptics who have said voter turnout Tuesday would be just as dismal as in other years, Calomino said he didn’t think so.

“I think what we’re going to see is an increase in the voter pool of people who support fewer taxes, less government and more personal freedoms,” he said. “Those folks are going to show up en masse.”