

Mark Kirk is an outlier among his fellow GOP Senators. His lifetime score from the League of Conservation voters is 57% — compare that with many republicans who are at 3% or lower. His opponent, Tammy Duckworth, is a war hero with a lifetime score of 85%, still comfortably above Kirk's. So there's a difference on environmental issues, though less extreme than in many other Senate races.

Kirk was born in Champaign, Illinois — U of I country (Go Illini!) — and grew up in Kenilworth, a Chicago suburb. He was an intelligence officer in the Naval Reserve — intelligence positions seem to pop up a lot among Republican politicians — who worked for a time at the World Bank. His campaign website barely mentions the environment, except for his sponsorship of a bill to protect the Great Lakes from invasive species, pollution, and toxic contamination. The policy tab on his Senate website doesn't have headings for energy or environment, so apparently those aren't issues he wants to emphasize. He was, however, one of three Republicans to vote against resolutions to block EPA regulation of greenhouse gases. You have to wonder how he ever managed to win the primary.

Duckworth, as I said, is a war hero, having lost both legs and partial use of an arm when her Black Hawk was hit by a rocket grenade. She also served as an Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs under Obama. Her website stresses renewable energy: "Investments in the expansion of renewable energy, such as wind and solar, as well as in the development of new conservation methods, not only preserve our environment for future generations, but can save American families thousands of dollars every year."

This race matters because of the different voting positions of the two candidates on energy and environment, but less so than in other races. But it matters for another reason, because it will help determine who controls the Senate, and how close one side or the other is to being able to beat a filibuster. Thus, as in other key races, a lot is at stake in terms of national environment and energy policy.