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Scott Olson / Getty Images

A sign marks the location of a polling place at the Greenbriar Mobile Home Park in Indianapolis, Indiana. For members of Congress facing tough reelection fights -- in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Florida and in Indiana -- political survival could depend on their choice and on which candidate, Clinton or Obama, leads the ticket in November.

University.

"Can we work together to change the tenor and tone of politics in Washington?" Hill hollered, and the crowd of Obama supporters joined in: "Yes, we can!"

Population	
Indiana:	6.3 million
United States:	301.6 milli
Indiana	
Male:	49.3%
Female:	50.7



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CAMPAIGN '08

Indiana may feel coattail effect in fall

Politicians who endorsed Obama or Clinton have more at stake than the average voter in today's primary balloting.

By Mark Z. Barabak, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
May 6, 2008

ORLEANS, IND. -- When Baron P. Hill, the local congressman, endorsed Barack Obama last week, his surprise announcement was greeted with a roof-raising cheer from more than 12,000 people crowded into the basketball arena at Indiana

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But Donald Bobbitt was puzzled by Hill's decision. The 70-year-old retiree likes Hill and helped elect the Democrat to one of the most competitive congressional seats in the country. Obama, however, is "too much Islamic," Bobbitt said a day after the announcement, as he manned the amateur radio exhibit at the annual Dogwood Festival in Orleans, about 40 miles south of the Bloomington campus. "We don't need that in this country." (Obama actually is a practicing Christian.)

Voters in Indiana and North Carolina go the polls today in the biggest day of balloting left on the waning presidential primary campaign calendar. Most have little at risk.

But for members of Congress, who are among the superdelegates holding the outcome of the Democratic contest in their hands, the stakes are more personal. For those facing tough reelection fights -- in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Florida and here in Indiana -- political survival could depend on their choice and on which candidate, Clinton or Obama, leads the ticket in November.

"It certainly makes a difference" in closely fought districts, said James E. Campbell, political science chairman at the State University of New York at Buffalo and an expert on presidential coattails. He says that a candidate sharing the ballot with a strong presidential nominee can pick up a substantial number of votes. "Somebody unpopular at the top of the ticket can actually cost you votes," Campbell said.

That could be decisive here in southeastern Indiana, where the seat in Hill's 9th Congressional District has gone back and forth -- Democrat, Republican, Democrat -- three times in the last six years.

Starting in the liberal bastion of Bloomington, the district meanders south to the Kentucky border and east to Ohio. Small towns dot its winding roads; some consist of little more than a gas station, a small grocer, some grazing cows and a few scattered homes.

As the rolling countryside opens up, accents flatten and broaden into a soft Southern twang. The feel is much closer to Appalachia than Indianapolis, the state capital, which is less than 100 miles away.

Hill comes from Seymour -- the "small town" John Mellencamp sang about -- near the center of the district. A high school basketball star, former insurance salesman and onetime president of the local Jaycees, Hill faces an election rematch in November against Republican Mike Sodrel. It is the fourth straight time the two have competed.

Sodrel, who founded the Free Enterprise System charter bus company and boasts of grease under his fingernails, intends to make Hill's support of Obama an issue. "This district is 20 counties; more trees per square mile than people," Sodrel said with a drawl as he motored up Interstate 65 to a fundraiser. "It's the rural areas that Sen. Obama talked about in San Francisco. Yeah, they own firearms and go to church. But they don't feel 'bitter.' They just feel that's normal."

Hill conceded that his endorsement was a gamble, especially given the region's conservative tilt. Outside Monroe County, home to the university, the 9th District is overwhelmingly white and working-class. Bobbitt, for one, says he plans to bolt the Democratic Party and vote for Republican John McCain in November.

"If I'd made a political decision, I just would have stayed out of it," Hill said in a telephone interview from Washington. "The endorsement, I think, in the short run probably won't be helpful to me. I'm hopeful in the long run it will be."

Like many, Hill is eager for an end to the party's extended nominating fight. He talks up Obama's promise to shun party labels and work across partisan lines, something Hill has attempted as a member of the centrist Blue Dog Democrats on Capitol Hill. Obama "deals with Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, black and white, like I nobody I have ever seen," Hill said.

Many Democrats also calculate that Obama, more than New York Sen. Clinton, can inspire legions of new voters -- particularly young people -- to turn out in November. They see a greater potential to draw independents and crossover Republicans as well.

That is one reason Obama continues to pick up superdelegate endorsements even after Clinton's victories in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and as controversy flares over the Illinois senator's relationship with the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.

Indiana was central to the Democratic takeover of the House in 2006. The party gained three seats here, including the one held by Hill, who first went to Congress in 1998. He lost in 2004, then beat Sodrel in 2006 to reclaim the seat.

Hill's record reflects the duality of his district, where many voters are culturally conservative but still think of themselves as Democrats. Hill opposes the war in Iraq and voted against a constitutional flag-burning amendment, but has an A rating from the National Rifle Assn. and supports restrictions on abortion. He describes his constituents as "common-sense, hardworking people who have a great deal of faith in Jesus."

Hill's accommodation was evident in his remarks at the Bloomington rally -- "If we can change the tone and work together . . . we can begin solving the problems of this country" -- which Obama echoed after they embraced and linked arms in front of the crowd.

"Baron is working for the kind of change that we need in Washington, because he doesn't stand for rigid partisanship," said Obama, who went to unusual lengths praising Hill. "He's trying to bring Democrats, Republicans, independents together to actually get something done."

Whether the endorsement helps or hurts is unknowable for now. It depends almost entirely on how Obama is perceived in the fall, should he win the nomination.

"If Obama can redefine the party away from its old standard Democratic liberalism, as he's trying to do, it could help Hill some," said Gerald Wright, who teaches political science at Indiana University. "On the other hand, if he gets painted as a black militant . . . that would be real bad."

Given the potential downside, Hill might hope skeptics respond like John Scoggan, 65, a retired tool-and-die maker. He was running errands on a blustery day in Bedford when he paused to consider the presidential candidates.

Scoggan is no Clinton fan and doesn't care much for Sen. McCain of Arizona. But he prefers either to Obama. "I don't like his preacher more than anything," Scoggan said of Wright, who was Obama's pastor for 20 years. "I think if he's been with him that long, he's got the same ideas. He's just trying to hide them now."

Told of Hill's endorsement, Scoggan scrunched his face, then reconsidered. He has voted for Hill in the past and will probably do so again. "He has a right to his opinion and I do mine," Scoggan said. "That's what it's all about."

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