Opinion
News



The Capitol dome in Washington, D.C. (Wikimedia Commons/Architect of the Capitol)



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Conor "Landslide" Lamb is going to Congress. The telegenic 33-year-old Democrat, a former Marine and former prosecutor, was clinging to a lead of around 700 votes over Republican Rick Saccone with only a few hundred absentee ballots yet to be counted. Those absentee ballots would have to break more than 2-to-1 for Saccone to reverse the margin of victory.

The 18th Congressional District in Pennsylvania went for Donald Trump in 2016 by some 20 points. The special election was called to fill the seat vacated by Rep. Tim Murphy, who resigned in a scandal. Murphy, a pro-life Republican, was accused of encouraging a woman with whom he had an affair to have an abortion when she became pregnant.

Lamb tried to dodge the issue of abortion, invoking the "personally opposed but ..." stance that never made intellectual sense but does capture some of the ambiguity many people feel about the issue. If Lamb had been willing to back the 20-week abortion ban that recently failed to pass Congress, operatives tell me he would have won by a large margin.

Regrettably, there are few Democratic candidates for Congress willing to stand up to the abortion-rights lobby, which functions on the left the way the National Rifle Association functions on the right: Everything is viewed as a zero-sum game, so compromise is considered tantamount to betrayal, and lawmakers challenge them at their peril.

The 20-week ban, like a ban on assault rifles, would simply bring U.S. law closer to the standards of other industrialized nations. Most European countries — where women do not appear oppressed — ban elective abortions after 12 or 14 weeks. The U.S. is one of only seven countries that permit abortion for any reason right up until the moment of birth.

As Catholics, especially as "Vatican II Catholics," we must recognize there is no ambiguity about what the moral issues at stake. "Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes" is what Vatican II stated in *Gaudium et Spes*. We can debate how best to combat this abomination. Merely making abortion illegal would force women to procure unsafe abortions, and there is nothing "pro-life" about that prospect.

Our culture must return to its truest identity as a culture that celebrates life, protects the innocent, and gives voice to the voiceless, but so-called liberals often scoff at that prophetic vision, and conservatives show little interest in the cultural work, hoping that a reversal of *Roe v. Wade* would be a kind of deus ex machina. It wouldn't.

The failure of pro-life conservatives to think through a sensible strategy does not mean the Conor Lambs of the world should get a pass either. I would have voted for the young man to be sure, but I would have found a time and a place to register my profound disappointment in his dodge.

The main issue that tilted this race to Lamb was not abortion; it was labor. The outgoing congressman was a pro-labor Republican. Saccone had a strong anti-union voting record as a state legislator. Organized labor, which is big in this region of Pennsylvania, backed Lamb. Labor contacted 12,279 members and their families by knocking on their doors or calling them by phone. They distributed 38,000 pieces of local union mail and spoke to workers at some 60 worksites.

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"Conor won this race because he proudly stood with unions, shared our agenda and spoke out for our members. He didn't just ask for our support — he earned it by opposing unnecessary 'right to work' laws, backing protections for coal miners' pensions and supporting commonsense trade enforcement," said AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka in a statement after Lamb's win.

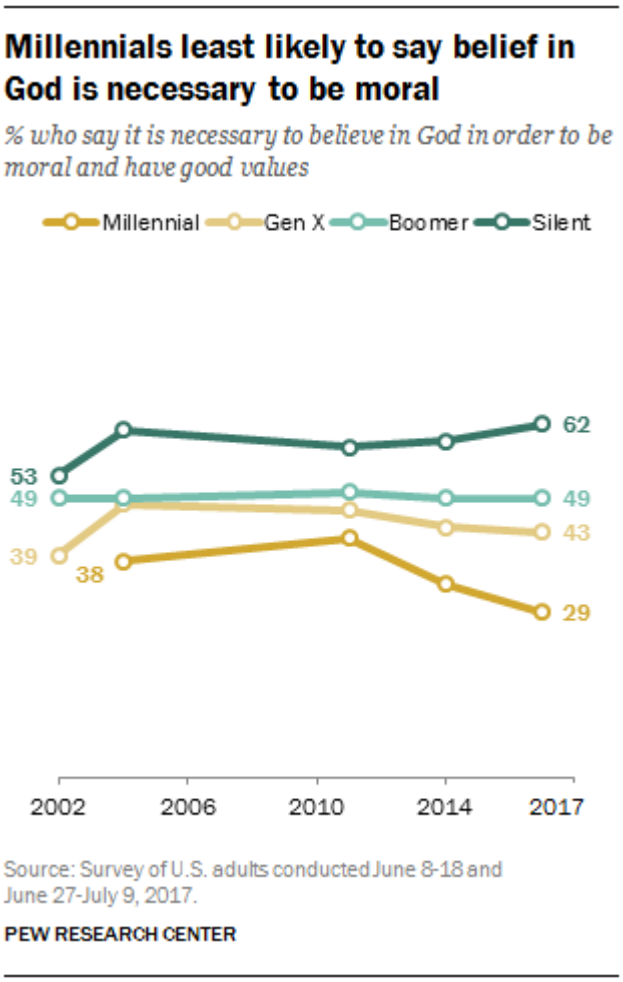
"Tonight's result is a wake-up call for every single politician. Earning the support of working people is a high bar that must be cleared with meaningful words and actions — not blind deference to party operatives or corporate interests," Trumka continued. "Working people are ready to move heaven and earth to help a genuine ally. But we won't waste a dime or a door knock on fair weather friends. If you want working people to rally around you, then you need to rally around us."

It remains to be seen if Democrats will learn the lessons to be drawn here. In this analysis of the race at The Washington Post, watch the video where they talk to Lamb and Saccone supporters. The Democrats are the ones who understand the need to distance themselves from Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi. You get the idea

the Republicans would pay to fly her to districts that are in play. Fairly or not, she has been the target of attack ads for so long, the best thing she could do for the Democrats would be to step aside as leader and focus on fundraising.

Honesty requires that I register the concern that my hopes about the Democratic Party may be different from what is the most likely winning strategy. I want the Democrats to keep reaching out to those white, working-class voters who backed Obama and then flipped for Trump. I think those people are hurting and need government's assistance to reconnect with American life. I think those same people often harbor more humane values than the liberal elites, in large part because they are more likely to be religious.

But as the Pew Research Center numbers recently showed, millennials are so decidedly liberal, so uninterested in religion, and so highly motivated by culture-war issues, I fear the Democrats will continue to run as the party of late-term abortion and transgender bathrooms and it might work — for a while. Millennials will soon start caring more about mortgages and other kitchen-table issues than they do at present.



It also is not clear that Republicans have a winning message or strategy. Democratic challengers like Lamb can more effectively run on local issues, shunning the national party. Republican candidates can't run from Trump without alienating their base, and they can't run with him without energizing more Dems than they energize fellow Republicans.

Trump parachuted into this district the last weekend before the campaign and helped Saccone close the gap by energizing Republicans, but the race was only a contest because of Trump's low numbers. The GOP hoped that by running lots of ads about the tax cuts, the one issue that united all Republicans, they could keep the race competitive. It didn't work.

Republicans are right to be worried. It is true that not every embattled Republican will face a candidate as good as Lamb, but it is also true that there are more than 100 congressional districts that are rated as more competitive than PA-18 was. I hope for the sake of our Constitution that the Democrats reclaim at least one chamber this autumn and, with it, the power to issue subpoenas.

But I worry the Democratic Party likely to rise on the ashes of Trumpism will be a party to which I can't belong. More on these themes as the election season progresses. For now, it is enough to celebrate that fact that the country is one step closer to having a Congress capable and willing to issue subpoenas!

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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