Opinion



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 23, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The victories of Conor Lamb in the special election in Pennsylvania's 18th Congressional District last week, and of pro-life Rep. Dan Lipinski in the Democratic primary in Illinois' 3rd Congressional District this week, raise questions about where the fault lines within the Democratic Party are found and what will be the response of the Democrats to Donald Trump.

Earlier this week, in my links post, I called attention to an article at Politico by Heather Caygle in which she stated, "For the Blue Dogs [the caucus of moderate to conservative Democrats], Lamb's successful center-left campaign is proof that the Democratic Party's 'big tent' mentality is still a winning electoral strategy, despite an aggressive push from liberals for candidates that more closely adhere to the progressive purity made popular by the likes of Sens. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.)."

This report by Aaron Kessler at CNN on Tuesday also suggested that Lipinski's victory was somehow a defeat for the progressive Sanders-Warren wing of the party. Kessler wrote:

> Instead, progressives want Democrats to stake out stronger left-leaning positions of the kind championed by Sens. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts. And they see the Illinois 3rd as the chance to both advance their argument and replace one of the bluest of Blue Dogs with one of their own — progressive activist Marie Newman. Indeed, Sanders himself endorsed Newman, as did Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand of New York. (Nancy Pelosi of California, the top Democrat in the House, endorsed Lipinski.)

It is true that Sanders' organization in Illinois backed Newman, the pro-choice challenger: That organization is run by the cousin of the head of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in Illinois, and the SEIU led the charge against Lipinski. The Chicago Federation of Labor, which represents all unions, stuck with Lipinski who had a 92 percent voting record on labor issues, and that support proved decisive, just as it was labor support for Lamb that put him over the top in Pennsylvania.

There was a major difference between the two contests. The opposition to Lipinski was rooted entirely in his pro-life* stance. NARAL Pro-Choice America and Emily's List poured money into the race to unseat Lipinski for the same reason they castigated Democratic National Committee Chair Tom Perez and Sanders for doing campaign events with Democrat Heath Mello when he ran for mayor of Omaha, Nebraska. They want abortion rights to be a litmus test for all candidates and to drive pro-life Democrats out of the party. In Pennsylvania, Lamb foolishly said he would oppose the 20-week ban on abortion being debated in Congress, but even his "personally opposed to abortion" stance is a red flag to today's abortion-rights fanatics: They argue even that is bad because it might make women feel ashamed if they procure an abortion, or hurt their feelings.

Advertisement

I do not believe Catholic candidates for office should support the 20-week ban because the bishops support it. I believe politicians of all stripes should support the ban because aborting a child after the 20th week of pregnancy is barbaric. Look at the sonograms: That is not tissue, that is a baby. The violence of the act should shock the conscience of anyone not blinded by the euphemisms that have been

erected to obscure what precisely happens during a late-term abortion. The only rationale for opposing a ban on late-term abortions is because one wishes to enshrine the libertarian idea that the only consideration that matters about what can and cannot happen to neo-natal human life is what the mother wants. Even though *Roe* v. *Wade* acknowledged the state's interest in protecting neo-natal life after the first trimester, NARAL today has gone far past that: No one can question the decision to abort whenever and for whatever reason.

Regrettably, NARAL is today to the Democrats what the National Rifle Association is to the Republicans, a powerful and well-financed special interest group that refuses common sense compromise and enforces an extremist orthodoxy on politicians who lack the courage to stand up to them. At least Lipinski refused to cave, and he won. Lamb mostly caved, but not entirely, and he won. Lamb also proved a Democrat can win back Trump voters.

I do not think Lipinski and Lamb are one pole of the party and Sanders and Warren the other. All four talk about solidarity as the principal value in creating the politics that matters most to them. Lipinski, alone among the four, evidences solidarity with the unborn as perhaps his most cherished cause, but all four argue for solidarity in matters of economic justice. As I have suggested before, they may be the end of the horseshoe on social issues, but they are actually closer to one another because of the importance they attach to solidarity than any of the four are to the neo-liberal Gillibrand wing of the party at the top of the horseshoe's curve. Gillibrand's wing embraces libertarian positions on social issues and neo-liberal subservience to Wall Street on economic issues. Hillary Clinton lost with that message, and while she may have been a uniquely bad candidate, is Kirsten Gillibrand that much better?

In the months between now and November, the Democrats need to decide if they are going to be the party of the culture wars, or if they are going to come together around an economic agenda that seeks an alternative to neo-liberal economics. It is easy for me to see how they take back the House if they adopt the latter course, and how they could then go on to win back the White House in 2020. But if they follow the lead that NARAL wants them to take, there are congressional districts where they cannot win, and I fear come 2020, their commitment to late-term abortion is not the kind of message that will appeal to the voters in Scranton, Youngstown, Green Bay or Saginaw that they need if they want to be victorious again.

Too many of us have seen a sonogram. Too many of us know towns where the once vibrant commerce of Main Street has disappeared, crushed by the Wal-Mart on the outside of town. Too many of us know that there is more to being an American than the libertarians will acknowledge.

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

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up to receive free newsletters, and we'll notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.

**An earlier version of this sentence incorrectly labeled Lipinski's position on abortion as "pro-choice."*

A version of this story appeared in the **April 20-May 3, 2018** print issue under the headline: March's Democratic election victories shed light on culture-war campaigning.