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It's Miller Time

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 26, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Joe Miller is the presumptive Republican nominee for U.S. Senate in Alaska. The Palin-backed, Tea Party favorite holds a slim lead of 2,000 votes over incumbent GOP Senator Lisa Murkowski. The result shows that all politics is local. It also shows that the GOP may have a big problem on their hands.

The meta-narrative this year has been that incumbents are in trouble. Of course, the vast majority of incumbents, and their cousins ? the ?establishment candidates? ? have won their races. Sen. John McCain did not lose Tuesday. Sen. Michael Bennet held on in Colorado a fortnight ago. Many senators and congressmen and women did not face opposition. It is true that some prominent incumbents have lost. Sen. Bennett of Utah did lose his party?s nomination. The ?establishment candidate? in the Florida governor?s race lost to a self-funded newcomer. Congresswoman Carolyn Kilpatrick lost her bid for another term, but it was her son?s prison term that seems to have done her in, not an anti-incumbent tsunami. So, while it is true that incumbents like Murkowski might have sailed to re-election in a normal year and are now making retirement plans, many incumbents will survive in November.

The effect of a Palin endorsement remains to be determined. Certainly, in Alaska, where she served as Governor, she is popular with many but unpopular with more. The same is true of the rest of the country. Nor has Palin helped her preferred candidates where they most need it, with fundraising. It would be a stretch to credit McCain?s win in Arizona to Palin?s nod, and the same is probably true in Alaska.

The determining factor in Tuesday?s Alaska election was Measure 2, a proposition that calls for parental notification before a minor can procure an abortion. This common sense measure won with 55% of the vote. But, Measure 2 was not only popular, it brought people to the polls. 134,982 Alaskans cast ballots on Measure 2. Only 92,386 voted in the GOP Senate primary. Some of those voting on Measure 2 cast ballots in the Democratic primary, but it is safe to guess that the majority of Republicans turning out to vote on Measure 2 supported it. Murkowski, who is pro-choice, was hurt by that turnout.

In November, Murkowski was likely to win in a walk. A proven statewide vote getter, she appealed to independents and some Democrats. It is difficult to imagine that Miller will enjoy similar support. He wants to phase out Social Security and Medicare. He is opposed to unemployment benefits because the constitution did not explicitly grant the authority to grant such benefits to the federal government. He has questioned global warming, arguing that the science is inconclusive.

Perhaps Miller can win in Alaska. It is a strange state. Alaska is the largest per capita beneficiary of federal spending in the country, but the citizenry fancy themselves ?as independent and flinty frontiersmen? as the Washington Post observed this morning. The oil revenues from Alaska?s rich reserves have kept taxes low or non-existent. He is pro-life in a state that just voted decisively in favor of parental notification. But, to win, the Republican National Committee and its Senate campaign committee will have to expend resources it had not planned to spend in Alaska. Those resources will not be available for use in Kentucky or Nevada or some of the other states where Tea Party-backed candidates now carry the GOP banner.

There is a side of me that hopes that at least one of these Tea Party candidates wins. I want to see the looks on the faces of Sen. Mitch McConnell and more mainstream Republicans when they take the Senate floor and call for an end to Social Security. And, you can bet that Sen. Miller or Sen. Rand Paul would be favorites on the talking head circuit. Miller is smart and articulate, as is Rand Paul, but their views are so far out of the mainstream, so inflected with crazy nostrums, that they would tar their entire party with an extremist brush. It turns out that the failure of the GOP leadership to confront the wild ideas (if they can be called such) held by many of their most devoted supporters will hurt them in the long run. And, they will have no one to blame but themselves.

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