

Tea Party Triumvirate

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 1, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Sen. Lisa Murkowski conceded defeat in the GOP primary in Alaska. Tea Party favorite Joe Miller will be the Republican candidate this fall, joining Rand Paul and Sharon Angle as the Tea Party's senatorial triumvirate.

All three states — Alaska, Kentucky and Nevada — look to be easy wins for the GOP on paper. Alaska is not as red a state as some think, but its libertarian streak fits nicely with the generic GOP indictment of Obama as over-reaching. Kentucky is decidedly red, a state Obama did not contest in 2008. And Sen. Harry Reid's numbers were in the tank, buffeted by Nevada's ailing economy. Had more traditional candidates been selected by the GOP primary electorate, we would not see these states on the "toss-up" column, but there they are.

A key question for the midterms, and one we won't know the answer to until election day, is whether or not those moderate Republicans and Independents who would have voted for a more mainstream GOP candidate can be induced to vote for these candidates. Will their more radical positions motivate Democrats to turn out in greater number? Will un-tried candidates survive the scrutiny of the election? For some people, they would vote for anyone who pledges to oppose Obama. But, for others, the choice may be more difficult. Do Nevadans really want someone who talks breezily about "second amendment solutions"? Do Alaskans want someone who thinks Social Security and Medicare should be rolled back? Do Kentuckians want someone who is afraid to be interviewed by the press?

Democrats should be wary of thinking that voters, especially in a low turnout election, will not be motivated to select these firebrands. Before he trounced Jimmy Carter in 1980, Ronald Reagan was dismissed as an extremist by some on the left. Of course, Reagan's sunny optimism and the fact that he had been a largely successful two-term governor of the largest state in the Union helped.

There are two battles to be decided in November. One is for control of Congress but the other, and in some ways the more interesting, is the battle for control of the Republican Party.

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