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Election Time: KY-Senate

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 9, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): This race just keeps getting nastier and nastier, mostly because Democrat Jack Conway has otherwise been unable to close the gap and has resorted to re-telling some nasty episodes from Rand Paul's past. The centerpiece has been a report in GQ magazine about Paul's college days when he allegedly joined an anti-religious organization and, with some buddies, tied up a woman and made her bow down before an "Aqua Buddha" idol. The story is strange, and Conway's spreading it doesn't seem to have improved his chances. Fivethirtyeight.com gives Paul an 89% chance of holding the seat for the GOP and Nate Silver suspect he is right. But, as I write that sentence, I realize that putting Paul in the Senate is not the same thing as electing a standard issue Republican. His "constitutioanl conservatism" reinforced by the confidence that comes with winning an election virtually guarantees that Mr. Paul will, in the Senate, be a big ole pain in the butt for his fellow Kentuckian, Sen. Mitch McConnell.

ORIGINAL POST: The Kentucky Senate race should be a referendum on President Obama?s leadership but Democrat Jack Conway, the state?s attorney general, is trying to make it a referendum on Republican candidate Dr. Rand Paul, whose Tea Party credentials earned him the GOP nod but are proving a more difficult sale to the statewide electorate.

The Kentucky race is of particular interest to Catholics because Dr. Paul is easily the most articulate spokesman for the Tea Party running for the Senate. Watching Nevada?s Tea Party candidate Sharon Angle, your mind wanders to the horrible thought that her SAT score might have been a two-digit number. Rand Paul is articulate and intelligent and his ideas, however controversial, do not suffer from a lack of coherence. But, being articulate, intelligent and coherent is not the same thing as being right, and the libertarian impulses of the Tea Party movement are directly at odds with the philosophic premises of Catholic social teaching. The hyper-individualism of the Tea Party movement, as well as its venomous attacks on government, are both unknown in the Catholic tradition. ?Will angry Tea Party activists hijack opportunities for a more responsible and civil debate about the proper role of government?? Jennifer Butler, executive director of Faith in Public Life told NCR. In Kentucky the question is slightly different because Dr. Paul does not come across as angry or unstable in the least. He is smart and lucid, handsome and engaging. It is his ideas that cause people to think twice, not his emotions.

Two recent polls in the Kentucky race yielded starkly different results. A Survey USA poll [1]released four days ago had Paul opening up a wide lead over Conway, 55% to 40% among likely voters. But, a new CNN poll [2]of registered voters released yesterday has the race tied at 46% each. Part of the difference between the two results is caused by a difference between a poll among likely and registered voters: Republicans appear to be more highly motivated to vote this year, but that is a movable target, so polls of ?likely voters? show them doing better than polls of all registered voters.

But, the polls also may reflect a recent difficulty that Dr. Paul brought on himself. In an interview, he said that drug abuse was not a ?real pressing issue? in the Senate race. The comment came in response to a question about federal anti-drug programs and it struck a nerve in two different contexts. Paul and his fellow libertarians

like to denounce federal spending, but in one of the key swing regions of the state, Appalachia, federal money is a good thing. The local Appalachian newspapers [3] have called the thought of Paul?s election ?scary.? His comment also did not do much to endear him to social conservatives whose commitment to fighting drug abuse goes back to the mid-1970s.

The New Republic had a great article [4]about some of the regional challenges facing Dr. Paul. The libertarian aversion to government funding also might not play well in Dr. Paul?s hometown of Bowling Green, a conservative part of the state where he needs to rack up large margins. Bowling Green is also home to a General Motors plant, so the standard GOP criticism critique of the bailout of the auto industry does not play so well there. The jobs of those who work at the plant would not be there except for President Obama and the Democrats in Congress.

In terms of fundraising, Paul took in slightly more than Conway during the second quarter, according to FEC reports, but Conway contributed $400,000 of his own money to his campaign and entered the third quarter with a little more than $700,000 cash-on- hand compared to Paul?s $319,000 cash on hand. Overall, both candidates have raised well more than $3 million according to the last FEC filings at the end of June.

The Cook Political Report rates the race a toss-up. Certainly, if the GOP hopes to have any chance of taking control of the Senate, this is a race they must win. But, even that prospect must fill some Republicans with dread: If these Tea Party candidates, like Dr. Paul, defeated more establishment candidates in the primaries, go on to win in November, they will be loose cannons aimed not only at Obama and the left but at GOP centrists. Sen. Mitch McConnell surely wants to be Majority Leader, but pity the man who has both Sharon Angle and Olympia Snowe in his caucus. It is like the Democrats having both Barbara Boxer and Ben Nelson in their caucus ? oops, I guess that is already the case. But, Democrats have long subscribed to a ?big tent? philosophy, and the whole thrust of the Tea Party movement this year has been to create new standards of conservative orthodoxy for GOP candidates to meet.

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