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Election Time: Ohio-16

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Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): Congressman Steve Boccieri is facing an uphill battle to retain this seat he won two years ago. His district tilts towards the GOP and his vote in favor of health care has come back to haunt him, not least because he initially voted against the reform bill that passed the House in the fall, and supporting the Senate-passed bill in the springtime.

Still, his opponent, Jim Renacci, is ethically challenged and the race has not blown open: The most recent polls actually showed a bit of tightening. In a state that is always a bellweather, it is clear that Democrats Mary Jo Kilroy and Steve Driehaus are unlikely to win re-election. Boccieri could be the only happy surprise for the Dems in Ohio this year.

ORIGINAL POST: Few races appear as tailor made for a GOP pick-up as Ohio's 16th Congressional District. The Democratic incumbent John Boccieri is completing his first term in Congress, having won the Republican leaning district in 2008 with 55% of the vote. This year, he is challenged by a businessman, Jim Renacci.

When Boccieri won two years ago, he had the benefit of being a veteran of the Iraq War and a former minor league baseball player. The only thing missing was a side business selling apple pies. But, no one talks about the Iraq War anymore and the voters in this Canton-based district, hit hard by unemployment, can be forgiven for still wanting change. One thing Boccieri did not have in 2008 was the endorsement of the Ohio Right-to-Life Committee, despite the fact that they had awarded him a 100% voting record for his time in the state legislature. 100% could not overcome the 'D' next to his name. If you needed evidence that the state right-to-life committees were, for all intents and purposes, an extension of the GOP Party apparatus, their failure to endorse Boccieri two years ago is it.

This year, of course, Boccieri has been targeted by some pro-life groups because of his vote in favor of health care reform but some Catholic groups are pushing back. Boccieri's is one of four races targeted by

the progressive Catholic group, Catholics United. Whether such support will be enough remains to be seen. "Will voters reward politicians who stoke fear and peddle misinformation about historic health care reforms that will save lives and curb insurance company abuses?" asks Jennifer Butler, executive director of the non-partisan group, Faith in Public Life, which does not endorse candidates but is committed to defending the pro-life aspects of the health care bill. Democrats for Life named Boccieri one of the "Whole Life Heroes," and quotes him defending the health care vote, saying "In my opinion, a no vote perpetuates the status quo where insurance company bureaucrats make life and death decisions in the name of a profitable bottom line." That line of argument might work as those who are unemployed, or fear becoming so, recognize that losing their job might also include losing their health care benefits.

Boccieri also is helped by the fact that his opponent's successful business career gives evidence of being ethically challenged. According to the Cook Political Report, Renacci avoided \$1 million in taxes, and while such avoidance was legal, it might not sit well with those who can't afford accountants and lobbyists to manipulate the tax code. As well, he was cited for negligence in the management of his nursing homes, which does not sit well with older voters who are always the most likely to turnout in a midterm election. As the Cook Report states, "Democrats and affiliated groups will make ensure Renacci is a dirty word by October."

The only polling published about the race comes from a Republican firm, and it shows Renacci leading by a margin of 49% to 35%. A word about partisan polls. Sometimes they are accurate, sometimes not. Pollsters can manipulate their questions and their data to skew the results, benefiting their candidate who is also paying their bills. Candidates are known to pick pollsters who can deliver the results they want, knowing that such polls will help the candidate get the support of the national party committees. That said, there is no doubt that the race will be tough for Boccieri.

Renacci also brings another valuable card to the table: cash. As of the last filing with the FEC at the end of June, Renacci had contributed more than \$300,000 of his own money to his campaign war chest although he still trailed Boccieri in cash-on-hand, with \$662,612 to Boccieri's \$1,060,563. If Renacci wishes to keep funding his own campaign, he will be able to match Boccieri. A word about campaign financing. A challenger does not need to outspend an incumbent, but he or she has to have enough money to establish name recognition, run negative ads, and staff a get-out-the-vote effort. Especially in less expensive media markets like Dayton, a challenger can effectively use television ads to cast his opponent in an unfavorable light. (See, correction, here.)

Ohio is a critical state in every election, but this year it will be especially so, as Politics Daily noted today. Republicans appear to have the upper hand in both the governor's race and in the race to succeed retiring GOP Senator George Voinovich. Four of the Democrats for Life's "Whole Life Heroes" are in the state. Boccieri vs. Renacci will take place in a larger political context, one that is demonstrably unfavorable for Democrats this election cycle. Now that President Obama has joined the campaign trail, it will be curious to see if Boccieri's numbers among likely voters go up. To win, Democrats in Ohio must be motivated to turnout in November. So far, they lag behind the GOP in enthusiasm, a gap that could cause a candidate like Boccieri to lose.

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