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Election Time: Ohio-1

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 14, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): Steve Driehaus is another Democratic congressman who appears to be a one-termer. Driehaus is facing a rematch with former GOP congressman Steve Chabot whom he beat in 2008. Driehaus just won a court battle against the Susan B. Anthony List, regarding ads they were running in the heavily Catholic suburbs of Cincinnati, saying Driehaus had voted in favor of federal funding of abortion because he supported health care reform. An Ohio Elections Board ruled there was probably cause to believe the ads were false, and yesterday, a District Court also agreed to allow the case to proceed. But, it is too late to save Driehaus who is losing by double digits in some polls and both Cook and Real Clear Politics rate the race as Lean Republican. If, for whatever reason, this race is not called soon for Chabot, the national race is going to be closer than anticipated.
ORIGINAL POST: If John Boccieri is in trouble in northeastern Ohio, his fellow first term colleague Steve Driehaus is in just as much trouble in his southwestern, Cincinnati-based district. According to the Five-Thirty Eight blog [1]at the New York Times, both races are deemed ?likely? GOP pickups but RealClear Politics [2] only lists the two races as ?Lean Republican.? I would actually label both as toss-ups, because I don?t trust the polling.

This race differs from the one in OH-16 as well because it is a re-match. In 2008, Driehaus defeated incumbent GOP Rep. Steve Chabot, 155,089 to 140,469. In previous elections, Chabot had survived by racking up huge margins in the suburbs, off-setting the drubbing he got in the inner-city parts of Cincinnati. In 2008, with Obama at the head of the ticket, turnout in Cincinnati was up by 65% over the 2006 midterms while turnout in the suburbs only rose 35% over 2006.

Driehaus, like Boccieri and Perriello in VA-5, are pro-life Democrats who voted in favor of the health care overhaul bill, earning the ire of pro-life groups that opposed the health care bill. No issue invited more misinformation than the health care debate, especially on the particulars of abortion funding. Groups like Catholics United [3]and Democrats for Life [4]are committed to setting the story straight, but other groups such as the Susan B. Anthony list [5] are backing Chabot, specifically citing the health care vote. ?[Chabot] is running in a re-match against freshman Democrat Steve Driehaus, who voted for the pro-abortion health care bill but claimed to be pro-life,? says the Susan B. Anthony List?s website. But there is strong pushback. At an event organized by local Catholics United members in the Cincinnati area, Sr. Monica McGloin, a Dominican Sister of Hope, and a nurse, called out the so-called pro-life groups for distorting the issue, saying ?It saddens me to watch opponents of health care reform use the abortion issue to score political points while overlooking the progress reform makes toward building a culture of life.?

Catholics should be hesitant to attribute too much to the consequences of the debate over abortion funding. In conservative districts, voting for any version of the health care overhaul might prove lethal for Democrats. Cincinnati, which is in southern Ohio and shares many southern cultural affinities with its Kentucky neighbor across the river, might not look kindly on anyone who voted for the much maligned ?Obamacare.? Still, the Cook Political Report awards Ohio?s First Congressional District a partisan rating of +1 Democrat, which makes it less hostile terrain than Boccieri is facing in OH-16.

There is one way the debate about health care and abortion funding might play out to the incumbent?s favor but it represents a huge risk. Instead of avoiding the issue, as their pollsters are no doubt telling them to do, can they instead focus on it and force the press to do the same, such that the misinformation surrounding the issue gets exposed. Voters hate being snookered, and if Driehaus can catch his opponents in an outright lie about the health care bill, that is the kind of thing that turns a race.

The two most recent polls, both done by Republican firms in August, have former Congressman Chabot ahead, one by 2 points and the other by 10 points. But, polling of likely voters has a statistical model for explaining who will and who won?t turn out to vote. And, this race will be decided on turnout. If Driehaus identifies those who flocked to the polls in downtown Cincinnati and motivates them to vote again, he can win. While some Democrats are running away from Obama, Driehaus should invite the President to come and help turnout in the inner city. It is the only way he can win.

Fundraising is running even. Chabot, with extensive Washington contacts, has raised much more PAC money than a ?challenger? normally could. Both candidates had essentially $1 million cash-on-hand at the end of the last FEC reporting period. Driehaus, who is very well liked by the House leadership is going to be showered with DCCC money as well, but Chabot, as a former member, is also going to get plenty of support from the RNCC.

The race in OH-1, like that in OH-16, is going to be affected by the national mood, but it is not going to be determined by it. Every challenger has strengths and weaknesses, and every district has quirks too. On paper, Boccieri?s is a tougher district than Driehaus?, but Driehaus has drawn a tougher challenger.

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[1] http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/10/g-o-p-has-2-in-3-chance-of-taking-house-model-forecasts/
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