

Election Time: DE-Senate

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 15, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE: "I am not a witch" is no way to start a political ad, but there was the inimitable Christine O'Donnell starting her first television ad with just those words. The ad was a Saturday Night Live skit waiting to happen, which of course happened the next weekend. O'Donnell went on to express her conviction that the First Amendment does not dictate the separation of Church and State. Not only has O'Donnell handed the Democrats an easy win in Delaware, but her ads on Philadelphia television have taken a toll on Pennsylvania's GOP Senate candidate Pat Toomey.

Voters may want a change, but they also value sanity. What is especially interesting about O'Donnell is that she is so obviously a flake, I don't see why the Tea Party crowd, which is nothing if not earnest, backed her. Coons has opened up a 17 percent lead in the RCP poll average. The day after the election, Ms. O'Donnell will become a footnote in political history, a hilarious footnote.

ORIGINAL POST: There are many ways a politician gets "introduced" to the rest of the nation. For example, in 2004, a state senator from Illinois was tapped to give the keynote address to the Democratic National Convention and America was introduced to Barack Obama. In 1974, Senator Sam Ervin was well known in Washington and in North Carolina, but his chairmanship of the Senate Committee investigating Watergate introduced Ervin to the nation.

Last night, Christine O'Donnell had a different kind of introduction to the nation. The surprise victor in the GOP Senate primary in Delaware was seen in an old MTV video talking about, well, how to put this in a family newspaper, well, self-pleasure of a sexual sort. O'Donnell spoke several times in the video about the topic. (She is opposed to it.) On CNN, the four news analysts struggled to figure out how to discuss the video until someone finally said the "M" word. The visible discomfort of the panelists is about to be visited upon the good people of Delaware who, like the CNN panel, are not comfortable discussing such matters on camera.

If Democrats are smart, they will lay off GOP House leader John Boehner and make Ms. O'Donnell the face of the resurgent GOP. Why make Delawarrians and CNN analysts squirm when you can make the whole country squirm? The significance of O'Donnell's victory is not only that it makes it that much more difficult for the GOP to have any chance at taking back the U.S. Senate, although that is significant enough. The real value to Democrats is that O'Donnell, who possesses a Palinesque love of the camera, is the train wreck no one can take their eyes off. She is attractive and well-spoken and she is a little bit crazy.

Republicans elsewhere can try and distance themselves from O'Donnell, but the message of last night for them was simple: Take on the Tea Party at your peril. All year, Republicans have been stoking the flames that have now engulfed several of their leading candidates. They have winked at the birthers, they have accused the President of being a socialist, and they have mouthed angry, albeit absurd, rhetoric about threats to the Constitution. Now they must reap what they have sowed. Joe Miller, the Tea Party-backed nominee in Alaska, may have a Yale degree and a West Point diploma, but Democrats must portray him, and Sharron Angle in Nevada, and Rand Paul in Kentucky, and whoever wins the too-close-to call Senate primary in New Hampshire, as O'Donnell's kissin' cousins. If they try to distance themselves from one of their own, they risk alienating the

Tea Party faithful who looked more than a little self-congratulatory last night at their victory party in Dover.

The one downside of O'Donnell's eccentricity is that the distractions will keep the focus away from what is a genuinely important and interesting issue: How will the libertarian impulses of the Tea Party crowd cohere with the social conservatism that animates much of the GOP base? I have long thought that this is a fight brewing beneath the surface of the GOP's primary electorate, but that it will only come into focus during the long presidential nominating process for 2012. In a midterm, the candidates do not ever have the national attention long enough for such philosophic difficulties to enter the media narrative. In this instance, O'Donnell might have been able to expose the ideological fault lines within the GOP base, but not now. This will be a circus not a debate.

When running against incumbents at a time of national dissatisfaction, a challenger wants to keep all the focus on the incumbent. The only hurdle that the challenger must leap is being seen as generally inoffensive, not an embarrassment, different from, not even better than, the incumbent alternative. In 1980, Ronald Reagan kept the focus clearly on Jimmy Carter. In 2008, Barack Obama kept the focus clearly on George W. Bush. Both Reagan and Obama had to prove themselves capable, not an embarrassment, and both did. Voter disgust with the status quo did the rest. This year, the ideal GOP challenger is bland, competent, but bland. With O'Donnell's particular brand of zaniness, Democrats now have a camera-ready target as well. That is how you turn an election from a referendum on the status quo into a choice election.

America, meet Christine O'Donnell. If Democrats are smart, they will make sure that she is the face of the GOP from now until November. You may laugh. You may cry. But, you will think twice before deciding to vote the bums out.

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