

## Election Time: AZ-8

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 16, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/26): When I first wrote about this race in September, Real Clear Politics rated it as a "Toss-up" but the Cook Political report still rated it as "Lean Dem." No more. Cook moved it to the toss-up column at the beginning of October. There have not been any public polls in this race, so Cook's decision is doubtlessly based on the fact that Arizona is looking very red this year. The federal government's decision to sue the state has not helped with white working class voters who already had plenty of anxiety about Washington on account of the unemployment rate and concerns about the health care reforms. Even four-term Congressman Raul Grijalva in the neighboring Seventh District has seen his race go into the Toss-up column after a late September poll showed him leading by only 2 points. The GOP wave begins in Arizona this year, and it may well overwhelm incumbent congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

ORIGINAL POST: Arizona's 8th Congressional District features a race that is different from the competitive races in Ohio and Virginia we looked at earlier because of the geographic fact that the district includes three counties that border Mexico. Immigration is a different kind of issue in Arizona than it is in the Northeast or the upper South and it has dominated the political landscape of Arizona all year. But, depending on which expert you listen to, the Tuscon-based district is viewed as a steeper climb for a GOP takeover. What's going on?

Incumbent Democrat Gabrielle Giffords won this seat in 2006, replacing retiring longtime Republican Congressman Jim Kolbe, the only openly gay Republican in Congress. So, the district is not exactly a hotbed of social conservatism. But, Giffords also wagered that support for comprehensive immigration reform would benefit her electoral chances. She was right and cruised to victory in 2006 and handily defeated a well-funded challenger in 2008, winning 55 percent of the vote. Giffords has earned the reputation as a hard-working pragmatist in Congress but, this year, it is the prepositional phrase "in Congress" not the "pragmatic reputation" that might prove more of a burden for incumbents.

This year, Giffords has drawn an Iraq war veteran and political newcomer as her challenger, Jesse Kelly. (For a good synopsis of the race from the local press, click [here](#) [1].) In the GOP primary, Kelly ran as the "outsider" candidate and knocked of a state Senator by ten percentage points. A typical difficulty for such challengers? Kelly had only \$159,885 cash-on-hand according to his latest FEC report, filed at the end of June, before his primary! Giffords, on the other hand, had a war chest of \$2.2 million at the end of June. Money does not insulate an incumbent, but it is not clear Kelly will have the money to compete effectively.

[Kelly's website](#) [2] trumpets the endorsement of his campaign by such anti-immigrant heroes as former Congressman Tom Tancredo, Sheriff Joe Arpaio and Congressman Duncan Hunter. These men are to anti-immigrant racism what Bull Conner was to anti-black racism, epitomizing the basest human instincts of fear of the other. But, fear has been selling in Arizona this year. Remember the "beheaded corpses" falsely said to be found along the border? Remember watching Sen. John McCain backpeddle from his once heroic stance on behalf of immigration reform? Of course, Latinos vote in the general election even if, understandably, they did not turn out for the GOP primaries this year.

Giffords also has to defend her vote for the stimulus bill, health care reform and for cap-and-trade legislation.

Of course, the stimulus bill kept the nation from sliding into a Depression, but that is not the 'received' version of the bill, which has been painted as a failure by Republicans and, undefended, as an orphan by the Democrats. Giffords' opponent says he would vote to repeal Obamacare, and Giffords defends her vote. The abortion issue is not focused on the health care vote especially: Giffords is unapologetically pro-choice and Kelly is unapologetically pro-life, so their differences on abortion run deeper than any parsing of the health care bill. The cap-and-trade vote was a hat trick of courage in a district that has a partisan voting index from Cook of +4 GOP.

The Cook Political Report has the race listed as 'Lean Democratic' but [Real Clear Politics](#) [3] has it listed as a 'Toss-Up.' The only poll in the race was done by a GOP firm and it showed the race tied as of late August. I am inclined to side with Real Clear Politics on this one: Given the national mood, and specifically the anxiety over immigration in Arizona, the race looks like a toss-up to me. But, if Giffords holds on, it will prove that even in Arizona, in a Republican leaning district, a pro-immigration reform candidate can win.

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[2] <http://www.votejessekelly.com/issues>

[3] [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2010/house/az/arizona\\_8th\\_district\\_kelly\\_vs\\_giffords-1287.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2010/house/az/arizona_8th_district_kelly_vs_giffords-1287.html)