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Election Time: CO-Senate

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Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): This race has narrowed since I first looked at it. In fact, the most recent poll from the Denver Post/Survey USA has the race all tied up. Republican Tea Party candidate Ken Buck had a six point lead just a few weeks ago.

This tightening results from two reasons. First, as voters have paid closer attention to the candidates, Mr. Buck and some of his more extreme positions have caused voters to flee him. He has tried to back away from some of those positions, such as his opposition to legalized abortion even in cases of rape and incest, but the flip-flopping only robs him of his credential as a non-politician. The second reason is similar: Buck made a clumsy, and confusing, claim about homosexuality on national television, first saying it was a choice, then suggesting it was like alcoholism. Apparent from being offensive in the extreme, the comments show the kind of general kookieness about the Tea Party's candidates about which moderate voters worry. The Tea Party crowd may have drunk their Kool-Aid and will look the other way regarding such foolishness, but centrist voters who decide elections are a different breed. The race is too close to call but Nate Silver still gives Buck 2-1 odds to win.

Also, please check out this posting about the race from Q & A last week.

ORIGINAL POST:

Colorado's Senate race features an incumbent Democrat, Michael Bennet, who was appointed to the job facing off against Ken Buck, a Tea Party-backed candidate. If polls are accurate, this is one of the closest races in the country and Colorado has been one of the most purplish states in the country in recent elections, backing Obama in 2008 after twice backing George W. Bush.

Bennet was the Superintendent of Schools in Denver when he was appointed to the seat left vacant by Sen. Ken Salazar's becoming Secretary of the Interior. (I worried at the time that Obama was making a mistake putting senators and governors in his Cabinet, and those worries are proving true here as it has already proved true in Arizona and Kansas.) Bennet, therefore, has no experience as a candidate and it

shows. Charisma is not his strong suit and you have the suspicion watching him that he could not inspire a mouse to cheese.

Ken Buck, like the Tea Party movement that has launched him, is all energy and excitement, but not necessarily in a way that will help him win. For example, after a questioner at a campaign event asked a question about President Obama's birth certificate, Buck was caught on tape in July saying, "Would you tell those dumbasses at the tea party to stop asking questions about birth certificates while I'm on the camera?"

Now, I agree heartily with his sentiment, but he backed off it faster that you can say "birther!" And, it did not cost Buck his primary victory against a more mainstream, establishment figure. The question is not if that mistake will cost him; It won't. The question is if he can make it to November without a similar mistake that will cost.

Buck's stance on abortion also illustrates one of the dynamics of this election. Conservatives in the states of the Mountain West tend to be self-proclaimed "libertarians" and libertarian sensibilities have been at the heart of the Tea Party movement. But, libertarianism and social conservatism are not always on the same page. When many religiously motivated conservatives opposed the nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor, Sen. Barry Goldwater said "Every good Christian ought to kick [Moral Majority leader Rev. Jerry] Falwell right in the ass." Goldwater went on to support gay rights as well. This year, the libertarian Tea Party candidates, however, are all pro-life. Given the fact that abortion has become shorthand for support of the social conservative agenda, this pro-life posture has been enough to keep the two opposing instincts "libertarian v. socially conservative" together. Buck, however, went a step further and announced that he was opposed to abortion even in cases of rape or incest. Morally, this position is unexceptionable, but even the USCCB (and Jerry Falwell too!) recognized that as a practical matter, exceptions for rape and incest had to be a part of any legislation restricting abortion.

Buck respects life in the womb, but if you happen to be born south of the border, his respect dries up. He opposes comprehensive immigration reform and believes that every undocumented worker must be deported to their country of origin. This is not only cruel, it is completely impractical. Of course, Tom Tancredo, America's most notorious anti-immigrant bigot, was a congressman from Colorado and is running for Governor of the state as a third party candidate. It goes without saying that Buck is opposed to health care reform and has called for its repeal.

According to their FEC filings, Bennet had \$2.5 million cash-on-hand at the end of June and Buck had only \$664,159. That was before Buck's primary contest further depleted his funds. But the Tea Party has shown the ability to raise money nationwide and the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, breathing more easily about its prospects in states like Ohio and Pennsylvania, will have plenty of resources to dedicate to Buck's race.

What interests me in this race is that none of the polls have been done since Christine O'Donnell won the Delaware Senate primary and emerged as the face of the Tea Party. In no poll this year has either candidate crossed 50 percent, which means many people are still making up their minds. The more people focus on the witchcraft-dabbling O'Donnell (and, like Sarah Palin, it is almost impossible not to watch O'Donnell), the more likely the question of kookiness comes into play. No one objects to the Tea Party's bromides about democracy. It is when they start getting into repealing the 17th Amendment, or problems with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or when they dabble in witchcraft, that the average voter thinks twice. The Tea Partiers have figured out how to give voice to the anger and disappointment many Americans feel at the state of the economy, but they have not passed the sniff test for reasonableness that most voters apply as well. Americans like problem-solvers, not extreme ideologues.

So, keep an eye on the polls in Colorado. Bennet's challenge is to keep the focus on Buck non-stop between now and the election. If he does so, I suspect Buck's poll numbers will flatten out at 46 percent or drop. To the extent that Buck can keep from making any horrendous mistakes, and present a reasonable face to the electorate, he could win this one. Stay tuned.

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