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Election Time: NH 1 & 2

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Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/26): Carol Shea Porter appears headed for defeat against the former mayor of Manchester, Frank Guinta, the largest city in the state. Independents are breaking heavily for Guinta with some recent polls showing him with a double digit lead, and no recent poll showing him with less than a 5 percent lead. Both Cook and Real Clear Politics list the race as "Lean Republican." Guinta is likely to become New England's only GOP representative in the U.S. House.

In New Hampshire's Second District, the dynamic is different. There, incumbent Cong. Paul Hodes is losing his race for the open Senate seat. Former Congressman Charlie Bass is the GOP candidate, but in a year that favors outsiders, that resume is a mixed blessing. It became more of a curse recently when questions were raised about then-Cong. Bass securing government contracts for a company whose board he later joined. His opponent, Ann McClane Kuster, has run a fiesty campaign and the most recent WMUR/UNH poll has her leading by 7 points. This same polling operation had Bass up by 5 points a few weeks ago, before the negative story about Bass hit the newswires. One caveat: The latest poll was based on a sample of only 363 likely voters, which is a small sample. Cook rates the race as a toss-up but RCP has moved it into the "Lean Dem" column.

ORIGINAL POST: In 2006, New Hampshire two congressional districts flipped from red to blue. Carol Shea-Porter won the seat in the Granite state's First Congressional District and Paul Hodes scooped up the Second District. That same year, the state's Democratic Governor, John Lynch, who first won the office in 2004, skated to victory with 74 percent of the vote. Now, all three are in trouble as Shea-Porter and Lynch seek re-election and Hodes is trying to win the state's Senate seat.

It appears that the state's Attorney General, Kelly Ayotte is going to hold the Senate seat for the GOP: She is holding an average ten point lead in polls over Hodes in her effort to replace Republican Senator Judd Gregg who is retiring. Governor Lynch is being challenged by a Republican who has held a variety of appointed, but no elected, posts, and the race continues to lean Dem according to RealClearPolitics and

Toss-up according to Cook.

But, the congressional races are the most interesting because currently the six states that make up New England send precisely no Republicans to the U.S. Congress. Maine sends two pro-choice Republican senators and Judd Gregg has been representing New Hampshire in the Senate for years. Since January, Scott Brown has been a Senator from Massachusetts. But, no member of the U.S. House has come from the states beyond the Hudson River. That appears about to change in a big way in New Hampshire.

Shea-Porter won re-election in 2008 with only 52% of the vote and she has drawn as her opponent a popular former mayor of Manchester, the state's largest city, Frank Guinta. Shea-Porter has failed to turn one of the principal advantages of incumbency, the ability to raise money, to her advantage. She has raised a little more than \$900k for this cycle and a sliver more than \$600 in the bank at the end of the last quarter. Guinta had raised a little more than \$800k and had more than \$400k cash-on-hand at the end of June. The only two polls conducted in September had Guinta leading by ten points.

In New Hampshire's Second Congressional District, former Congressman Charlie Bass is trying to regain the seat he lost to Hodes in 2006. His opponent is Anne McLane Kuster, a lawyer who has done extensive work helping facilitate adoptions but that experience has not awakened in her any commitment to pro-life causes: She is endorsed by NARAL and her pro-choice stance on abortion is right up front on her website. You look in vain for any mention of the issue on Bass's website.

New Hampshire is a strange state, beautiful but strange. It is conservative in a very libertarian way: Here, whatever puritanical influences lingered from the colonial era were swamped by an Emersonian delight in finding God in the fulfillment of one's desires rather than in adherence to any external authority. The state's motto, emblazoned on its license plates, is the same as that of the Tea Party: Don't Tread on Me. But, that libertarian instinct is an equal opportunity disposition. The state is fiercely anti-tax, and this summer I visited its state capitol building and witnessed the effect of that philosophy. Rarely have I seen a public building that was in shabbier condition. But, New Hampshire conservatives have little in common with mainstream GOP conservatism because up in the White Mountains, they want government out of their bedrooms as well as their pocketbooks. The New Hampshire Right-to-Life Committee denounced both GOP candidates for Congress and the state legislature recently approved gay marriage in the state. So, here at least, the Tea Partiers really are fixated simply on fiscal issues and there is unlikely to be much of a marriage with social conservatives.

It is difficult for me as a progressive Catholic to get very excited about any of these candidates. But, insofar as the GOP candidates who appear likely to win also appear likely to frustrate any narrative that posits a socially conservative tide sweeping the nation, there are worse seats for the Democrats to lose. And, it is also important that Democrats think hard about why their fortunes have changed so swiftly in a state that was clearly tilting blue. New Hampshire backed Obama. The last time it voted Republican at the national level was in 2000, and that should tell Obama something. The more he appears like the slightly condescending professor, that is, the more he appears like Al Gore, the less well he is going to do in a state where people have long political traditions, like town meetings and first in the nation primaries. But, the idea that a state that has recently backed gay marriage is about to see a GOP sweep tells you that there should be no facile explanations of this year's midterms.

Editor's Note: As commenters pointed out, the state motto for New Hampshire is "Live Free or Die," not "Don't Tread on Me." We apologize for the error.

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