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Election Time: WA-Senate

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Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): In most close Senate races this year, as election day nears, the races have tightened, a trend that has helped the Democrats who were lagging in the polls. But, in Washington state, this trend has helped Republican candidate Dino Rossi in his effort to unseat Democratic incumbent Patty Murray. The RCP polling average has Murray up by only 2.2 percentage points, well within the margin of error of all the polls that go into that average. Fivethirtyeight.com awards Sen. Murray an 85% chance of retaining her seat, largely because although the margins are small, she holds a consistent lead in all polls. President Obama made a campaign appearance for Sen. Murray, as the Pacific Coast states are among the few places where the President is convincingly popular. And, GOP independent groups have poured money into the race realizing that they need to win Washington state or California if they want to take the Senate. I still rate this race too close to call.

ORIGINAL POST: I had not been paying much attention to the Senate race in Washington state but, yesterday, an intra-conservative kerfuffle erupted over at 'the Corner' on National Review Online that caused me to take a deeper look because that race perfectly exemplifies what the right-wingers are arguing about.

Yesterday, the lead article at National Review was by Dick Morris and Eileen McGann. The burden of their argument was that in the alliance of fiscal conservatives, cold warriors and social conservatives that Reagan cobbled together and has been the core of the Republican Party ever since, the fiscal hawks have taken the clear lead, powered by the Tea Party. As evidence of this trend, the authors claimed that 'no Republican candidate is basing his or her insurgency against an incumbent Democratic congressman, senator, or governor on social issues. There are no ads urging the ouster of a Democrat for his pro-choice policies or backing of gay marriage. All the ads and the rhetoric are devoted to fiscal transgressions like support of the stimulus package, the TARP bailout, or Obamacare.' They argued that pro-lifers' clout is decreasing within the GOP.

Shortly thereafter, Kathryn Jean Lopez replied that Morris and McGann were exactly wrong. But, in arguing that the pro-lifers still have juice within the GOP, the best she could muster by way of evidence was this: "This is why John Boehner gave his first new-majority pitch speech to the National Right to Life Committee? This is why one of the House GOP Pledge items is a universal and permanent Hyde Amendment?" And Lopez noted that Sarah Palin gave her now famous "Mama Grizzly" speech in front of the Susan B. Anthony List's meeting in Washington. But, that does not really answer Morris' and McGann's point: Boehner faces token opposition and Palin is not currently running for anything. Which brings us back to Washington state.

Go ahead and try to find out if GOP candidate Dino Rossi is pro-life? His website talks about his position on the economy, on the health care bill, on national security issues, and on the environment but not a word about his stance on abortion. Even in the discussion of the health care bill, his objections to new law neglect the issue of abortion funding, which many conservatives and pro-lifers mistakenly believe is included in the new health care law. If you go to the Washington state Right-to-Life Committee website, you will find out that they consider Rossi pro-life and are supporting his candidacy.

Curiously, incumbent Democratic Senator Patty Murray does not mention the issue either. Murray won her first election in 1992 campaigning as "just a Mom in tennis shoes," a phrase that had been used by her opponent who was trying to dismiss her as a serious candidate. If you got to the NARAL Pro-Choice America website, you will find that she has been endorsed by the pro-choice organization. And, Murray's website indicates that she is unafraid of one social issue: She has a long list of her positions in favor of various gay rights issues.

The race is rated as a toss-up by both Real Clear Politics and the Cook Political Report. Polls are all within the margin of error. Murray had a big lead in campaign contributions at the end of the last FEC reporting quarter, with \$6.8 million cash-on-hand to Rossi's \$1.3 million, but as these Super PACs, most of them supporting the GOP, pour out of state, and possibly out of country, cash into various races, Rossi may be able to match Murray on the airwaves.

The divergence of opinion on the pages of National Review points to a division within the GOP, and within its opinion-forming class, that is not going away anytime soon. Ms. Lopez, who is always more prolific than she is profound, may be satisfied with one line in a 21-page document about the Hyde Amendment just as she may have been satisfied with the GOP presidents' habit of never leaving their seats in the Oval Office to walk outside and address the March-for-Life in person but phone in their speech to avoid a photo with pro-lifers. Certainly, Lopez is smart enough to realize that a candidate who does not campaign on an issue does not feel obliged to deliver on that issue once elected. Someday Lopez may wake up and realize that the GOP is not, never has been, and probably never will be, a party organized around anything except its business interests and economic theories, not social conservatism. The Tea Party has made this even more the case. Perhaps it is time for right-to-life groups to try a different approach and stop being a mere arm of the GOP establishment but craft a genuine bipartisan approach that might yield better results.

The role of religiously motivated voters, especially Catholics ? in Washington state and elsewhere ? in the upcoming midterms will be the subject of a panel discussion next Wednesday at the National Press Club sponsored by Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies. It is not to be missed.

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