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Election Time: PA-3

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 8, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE: This race looked like a nail biter when I wrote about it last month. At the beginning of October, however, both the Cook Political Report and Real Clear Politics moved PA-3 from the "Toss-up" column to "Lean Republican." Incumbent Democrat Kathy Dahlkemper has trailed in every poll, and the most recent survey from Mercyhurst College has her down by 7 points.
The race has also become a focus of a duel between Catholic groups with Catholics United challenging the veracity of ads put out by pro-life organizations which claim Dahlkemper's vote for health care was a vote for federal funding of abortion. Catholics United had a press call on the issue featuring pro-life Catholics in PA-3 defending Dahlkemper. I wrote about the call here [1]. The decision yesterday, in federal court, to allow the case against the Susan B. Anthony List's ads to proceed in Ohio does not have a direct impact on the race in Pennsylvania, but the local press in Erie is covering the story.
Still, it is difficult to see how Dahlkemper holds on to the seat. Irrespective of the issue of abortion, a vote for health care might be enough to sink her campaign in this Republican leaning district.
ORIGINAL POST:Democratic incumbent Kathy Dahlkemper?s race against Republican challenger Mike Kelly in Pennsylvania?s Third Congressional District is shaping up to be another nail biter. Dahlkemper won election to the seat two years ago, when Barack Obama was losing the district vote to John McCain. In fact, Kelly?s home county of Butler broke for McCain by the eye-popping margin of 63% to 36%. Like the situation in VA-5 we examined yesterday [2], this will be a tough win for the Dems.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is shaping up to be one of the most critical battlegrounds in the November midterms. The GOP appears likely to take the Governor?s mansion, an especially important win in a state that is expected to lose a congressional district after the new census results come in, guaranteeing the Republicans a seat at the re-districting table. In the Senate race, Republican Pat Toomey is holding an eight point lead over Democrat Joe Sestak: When will Pennsylvania Democrats learn that pro-choice Dems don?t win in Pennsylvania. (The last pro-choice Dem to win election to the Senate was Harris Wofford twenty years ago.) So, unlike 2008, Dahlkemper can?t expect much help from the top of the ticket.

A key part of Dahlkemper?s 2008 appeal to the many working class Catholics in the district that stretches from Erie to the Pittsburgh suburbs was her pro-life stance. In addition to being opposed to abortion, Dahlkemper also opposes embryonic stem cell research. But, because she voted for the health care bill that some pro-life groups believe permits federal funding of abortion, Dahlkemper has been targeted for defeat by the Susan B. Anthony List, [3] a conservative anti-abortion group. ?Dahlkemper?s once pro-life record is forever tarnished by an inexcusable vote for health care reform that included taxpayer-funded abortion,? the group?s website states. They have already had an anti-Dahlkemper bus tour ? the ?Votes Have Consequences? tour - through the district, calling attention to her vote in favor of the health care bill.
Some pro-life Democrats are pushing back, however. The group Democrats for Life placed Dahlkemper on their list of ?Whole Life Heroes [4],? which applauds the vote in favor of health care on pro-life grounds. On their website, the group characterizes Dahlkemper?s pro-life stance a bit differently from the way the folks at Susan B. Anthony do: ?While Dahlkemper recognized the serious need for healthcare reform, she also recognized that such reform without protection for the unborn was a contradiction in terms. She never wavered in efforts to

prevent abortion funding and was instrumental in the passage of the Executive Order, which prevented such funding. Instead of playing politics with the issue of life, Dahlkemper has consistently worked to protect and save innocent human lives.?

At the end of the second quarter, according the Federal Election Commission fundraising reports, Dahlkemper has raised more than $1.5 million and still had more than $1 million on hand. Kelly self-financed his primary campaign, donating more than $400,000 of his own money to the effort. He had a little more than $100,000 cash on hand at the end of June according to the FEC reports. Erie, Pennsylvania is a very inexpensive media market, although the campaigns must also reach into the more expensive Pittsburgh market. Nonetheless, the cash advantage means that Dahlkemper is already up on television with ads touting her efforts to bring jobs to northwestern Pennsylvania.

The polling picture is murky. Two Republican pollsters went into the field at the end of July, attaining starkly different results. One poll had Kelly beating Dahlkemper by 52% to 38% but the other poll had Dahlkemper beating Kelly by a margin of 46% to 42%. The latter poll was conducted among registered voters while the poll that had the Republican Kelly winning handily only polled likely voters, which could account for some of the difference. As many analysts have noted, GOP voters are highly motivated this year compared to Democrats. Still, until we get a public poll, it is difficult to guess the lay of the land.

The Cook Political Report lists the race as a toss-up and assigns the Third District a Partisan Voter Index of +3 Republican. That cannot bode well for Dahlkemper at this stage of the campaign. Her opponent?s lack of political experience might be a serious liability in most years but not necessarily in this year when voter anger at the status quo is so high.

The race?s subplot - the Susan B. Anthony List vs. the Democrats for Life ? may not be decisive, but if the race is close, and if other races where pro-life Dems who voted for health care reform are close, the issue could make the difference. I was alarmed when I learned the name of the Susan B. Anthony List?s bus tour. The phrase ? ?votes have consequences? ? was reminiscent of some of the things being said in Catholic hierarchic circles immediately after the health care vote last spring. There was a sense of betrayal and anger in the way it was said then, directed mostly at Sister Carol Keehan and the other religious sisters who supported the final bill. Time has healed some of the sharpest edges of that debate within the Church, but the Susan B. bus tour is designed to re-sharpen those edges in time for November. The policy differences between the position endorsed by pro-life groups and the final bill are too narrow a difference to permit it to re-poison the political debate. Republicans may or may not have good reasons to oppose the health care bill, but its abortion language is really not one of them. Nonetheless, the issue of abortion still packs an emotional wallop in the Keystone State and Republicans hope to ride it to a victory in PA-3.

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