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Election Time: IA-1

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Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): This is another district with almost no public polling, which remains listed as "Lean Dem" by both Real Clear Politics and Cook Political Report. The biggest change since I first wrote about it has been the infusion of massive amounts of cash from outside sources. According to the Des Moines Register, the American Future Fund has thrown more than \$1 million into attacks against incumbent, two-term Democrat Bruce Braley. This is one of those groups that does not disclose its donors, so who knows where the money comes from?

In addition to his own funds, Braley is Vice-Chair of the DCCC, so if his internal polls show him in danger, you can bet the DCCC will pump money into this eastern Iowa district.

If this race were in the Eastern Time Zone, it would be watched for indications as to whether the GOP wave is going to become a GOP tsunami. It isn't, but if the outside projections of huge GOP gains in the House come true, Braley will be retired early.

ORIGINAL POST: Iowa's First Congressional District is in the largely Catholic eastern part of the state, centered on Dubuque, one of the first archdioceses erected west of the Mississippi River in the nineteenth century. It is a part of the country that actually looks like the "heartland" you can conjure in your mind's eye, rolling farmland punctuated by small towns and villages, the occasional college town like Grinnell, and, of course, the Great River. The Catholic roots of the region include a strong progressive streak with many Catholics members of Pax Christi and other progressive Catholic groups. (Correction: Grinnell College is not in IA-1, as a reader points out. Cong. Braley was born in Grinnell, and that fact got confused in my notes.)

In 2006, a long-serving GOP congressman stepped down to run for governor and a Democrat, Bruce Braley, won the seat. The 1st District has a +5 Democratic rating on the Cook Partisan Index, so the result was not surprising. In 2008, Braley won re-election with 65 percent of the vote against token opposition.

This year, Braley is being challenged by a mainstream, not a Tea Party, candidate, Ben Lange a lawyer who has no prior political experience and is running as "the outsider." Cook Political Report moved the race from "Solid Democratic" to "Lean Democratic" at the end of last year, citing the general anti-incumbent mood of the nation. Real Clear Politics also lists the race as "Lean Democratic." This is one of those races that if the Democrats lose, it will be a tsunami kinda night. So why the interest?

Some of the usual differences apply here. The incumbent Democrat Braley points to the actual projects the Stimulus Bill has funded in the district; ; the Republican challenger Lange opposes the Stimulus, saying it has failed. Braley supported the health care reform bill; Lange opposes it. Braley is pro-choice; Lange is pro-life, but his website barely mentions social issues and he did not receive an endorsement from Mike Huckabee, who won the Iowa caucuses two years ago and recently visited the state to deliver a host of other endorsements.

But, there are two interesting things about IA-1. It includes the town of Postville, site of an immigration raid that was notorious for the number of families it separated and the disruption to the community. The Archdiocese of Dubuque has an entire page on its website dedicated to helping the victims of the raid. Archbishop Jerome Hanus of Dubuque states on the website, "Our religious and social response is based on the Judeo-Christian scriptures which call believers to welcome the stranger among us, to treat the alien with respect and charity, and to provide pastoral and humanitarian assistance. While we do not condone illegal activity, we do give spiritual and moral support to suffering families. All of us should urgently reiterate the call to our legislators to work for comprehensive reform." Braley supports comprehensive immigration reform and Lange opposes it.

The other interesting thing about IA-1 is the way the race has recently become about?.the mosque near Ground Zero. Huh? That's right. An independent committee run by a staffer to the last republican to hold this seat has run a series of ads attacking Braley for defending the Constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. The Lange campaign notes that it is not paying for the ads, but it is a distinction without a difference. The Archdiocese of Dubuque, understandably, has not issued any statement from Archbishop Hanus on the mosque ? why would he comment about the building of a place of worship by a religion different from his own in a city thousands of miles away? Now, these ads have given him reason to do so. Anti-religious bigotry is ugly no matter where it is peddled and no matter whom it is peddled against.

Braley has a financial advantage but not a stunning one. At the end of the last reporting period in June, Braley had a little more than \$600,000 and Lange had a little more than \$100,000. The only polls reported so far both showed Braley winning by 11 points, a significant but not an insurmountable margin. A few more anti-mosque ads, and that number could close quickly. Or could it? This race seems likely to show just how much Islamophobia can affect a race far from Ground Zero. It is good to remember that the anti-Catholicism of the colonial period in this country came at a time when there were virtually no Catholics here. Hatred is sometimes more virulent when its target lives only in the fevered imagination. And, finally, the race will show how Catholics respond to the vitriol.

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