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Election Time: IN-2

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 30, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/26): Cook Political Report changed its rating on this race six days ago, moving it from "Lean Dem" to "Toss-up." The district is centered on South Bend, and Joe Donnelly is playing the role of a fightin' Irishman. There is only one October poll and it shows Donnelly leading by nine points, but Indiana, like Arizona, is a state that is looking terribly red this year. In the Indiana Senate race, former Republican Senator Dan Coats is headed to an overwhelming victory, leading his opponent Brad Ellsworth by an average of 18 points so Donnelly will not get any help from hte top of the ticket.
Donnelly's opponent, Jackie Walorski, is a social conservative running in a year when the GOP is downplaying social conservative issues.
Indiana's polls close early, so if this race is called early, we will have a sense of how the winds are blowing.

ORIGINAL POST: Indiana?s Second Congressional District has been represented by Joe Donnelly since 2006 when he rode the Democratic wave that carried the Democrats to control of the lower house of Congress. But, this year, Donnelly and other Democratic members of the classes of 2006 and 2008, who won swing districts, are worried that the swing will go the other way. Indiana is a swing state generally and it swung towards Obama in 2008, and Donnelly has the advantage of being from a district that voted for Obama, an advantage that his colleague Cong. Baron Hill in Indiana-9 does not enjoy.

Donnelly also enjoys another advantage, one he shares with Hill but which differentiates him from some other Democratic congressmen running in swing districts. He is pro-life. And in IN-2 that matters not least because smack in the middle of his district is the University of Notre Dame. I suspect that most of the people who are affiliated with or employed at Notre Dame were a bit turned off by the anti-Obama hysteria that accompanied last year?s graduation exercises and it would not be that much of a stretch to further suppose that their reaction to that event had an effect similar to a flu shot: Their early-2009 taste of Obama-hatred anaesthetized them to the more virulent strains that have appeared in 2010.

If so, the voters may need a booster shot because some pro-life groups, such as the Susan B. Anthony List [1], have targeted Donnelly for defeat, precisely because of his vote in favor of health care reform. Unsurprisingly, Democrats for Life has hit back, naming Donnelly as one of their ?Whole Life Heroes [2]? and praising him for his vote for health care reform as well as his earlier support for SCHIP, the children?s health insurance initiative. Donnelly has also been a champion of progressive housing legislation and support for homeowners whose lifetime investments have been threatened by Wall Street?s dabbling in derivatives while a certain Senate candidate was dabbling in witchcraft.

Donnelly has drawn as his opponent a state representative, Jackie Walorski, whose resume includes a stint in Romania running a clinic for poor children. A favorite of the Tea Party crowd, Walorski?s homepage boasts a photo of Sarah Palin and the ex-governor?s endorsement statement. That played well in the GOP primary, which was a very low turnout affair, but it remains to be seen how it will play in a general election.

This is Walorski?s first attempt at federal office but she has been a sound, if not prolific, fundraiser, netting $564, 766 by the end of the last FEC reporting period, compared to $1.2 million for Donnelly. Walorski waltzed

through the primary in May, spending little, and she still had $300,000 on hand at the end of June. Throw in some money from the National Republican Campaign Committee, and this race will not be decided by money.

A Republican poll [3]in July had Donnelly ahead by 17 points but an August poll, conducted by a different Republican firm, had Donnelly ahead by only two points, well within the margin of error. The deteriorating economy in the region is certainly providing some wind to Walorski?s sails, and it is not clear if the race would have a different flavor even if there had never been a controversy over abortion funding in health care. And, in the event, to most voters, that debate has an ?angels on the head of a pin? quality to it. Both candidates are conservative on social issues. I also am sure that if the unemployment rate had dropped to 6 percent over the summer months, Donnelly would be cruising to his third term.

Although the Cook Partisan Voting Index rates the district at R+2, they also list the race as ?Lean Dem? and RealClearPolitics rates it the same. Nate Silver at Fivethirtyeight.com puts IN-2 in his ?Takeover Possible? column. On election night, if Donnelly goes down, you know the GOP tsunami is about to hit the shore.

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Links:
[1] http://www.sba-list.org/site/c.ddJBKJNsFqG/b.5907153/k.8881/Susan_B_Anthony_List_Candidate_Fund_2010_Endorsed_Candidates.l
[2] http://www.wholelifeheroes.org/category/heroes/page/2/
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