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Election Time: Wisconsin-Senate

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 1, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

UPDATE (10/25): Unlike the Senate races in Washington state, Pennsylvania and Illinois, the race in Wisconsin has broken decidedly against incumbent Sen. Russ Feingold. The Cook POlitical Report and RCP both rate the race as "lean Republican." Nate Silver gives Sen. Feingold only an 11 percent chance of retaining his seat. This race proves my point that the ideal GOP candidate this year is a totally bland person with no record. GOP businessman Ron Johnson, unlike the Tea Party favs in Nevada, Colorado, Alaska and Delaware, is, as the Italians say, "macaroni senza sal," flavorless. This has allowed him to keep the focus on the three-term incumbent who has appeared increasingly lackluster in the campaign, as if his heart is simply not in the race. Barring a miracle, Feongold is going into an early retirement.
ORIGINAL POST: Two months ago, the Wisconsin Senate race was not on anyone?s radar screen. Incumbent Democrat Senator Russ Feingold was presumed to be holding one of the safer seats this cycle, and all the prognosticators rated the race as ?Lean Dem? or ?Likely Dem.? Then, the general anti-incumbent climate hit Wisconsin hard and Feingold now finds himself trailing his challenger, Republican Ron Johnson, a political neophyte.

There has always been something a bit ?holier-than-thou? about Feingold. Even among the large egos of the Senate, Feingold is capable of great condescension. This almost palpable sense of moral and/or intellectual superiority has, at times, redounded to the good of the nation and to Feingold?s reputation, such as his work across the aisle with Sen. John McCain on campaign finance reform. He was the only Senator to vote against the Patriot Act, which was a courageous thing to do if you are a fan or grandstanding if you are not. He has served three terms and, clearly, he did not see an electoral trainwreck in his future and it is far from clear his campaign will be able to find its footing before November. His campaign website [1] seems oddly ill-attuned to the political currents of the day.

Mr. Johnson was a successful businessman. Regular readers will know that I am suspicious, deeply suspicious, of the view that experience in the world of business is particularly relevant for the world of politics, especially for a legislature. In this case, Johnson?s fetish for pecuniary gain is quite evident from the bio on his website [2] . It starts by talking about hard work, but quickly descends into a recitation of his early paychecks, first for mowing lawns and shoveling driveways. This sentence struck me as an odd way to describe one?s formal entrance into the workforce: ?At the age of 15, Ron started paying taxes when he began working at Walgreen?s Grill.? Is that what he remembers about work, paying taxes? It is especially ironic when, on his website, he calls for legal sanctions against employers who knowingly hire those ineligible to work because of their visa status, or lack thereof. How is that different, morally and legally, from working while underage?

The rest of Mr. Johnson?s website is a mixture of Tea Party nonsense and GOP fiscal stupidity. He wants to repeal the health care bill. Under his discussion of the issue on his website is this quote: ?And in their spare time, contrary to the very vocal wishes of the American public, they passed legislation that will do great harm to the finest health care system in the world. The Health Care Bill is the greatest assault on our freedom in my lifetime. It must be repealed.? His reference to the finest health care system in the world tells us what we already know ? as a successful businessman, he and his family have never lacked health insurance. Those who

have not been able to afford might quibble with the assertions about how great our system is. But, it is the claim that the health care bill infringes liberty, that it is, indeed, the ?greatest assault on our freedom in my lifetime? that suggests the Tea Party kettle is over-heating. Mr. Johnson was born in 1955. Does he really believe that Communism was less of a threat to our freedom than the health care bill? How about Nixon?s illegal, extra-constitutional efforts to sabotage and election and then to cover it up? The attacks of 9/11 and the necessary changes to the nation?s security systems? Less of a threat to our freedoms? Wow. Mr. Johnson must have some health care plan. And, surprise, surprise, he is in favor of tax cuts.

It is unclear whether Johnson will pour some of his own money into the race. As of the last FEC filing, he had not done so and had less than $1 million cash-on-hand. Conversely, Feingold had more than $4 million cash-on-hand, but having raised more than $12 million for the cycle, you have to wonder where the rest of it went? I can tell you. To campaign consultants who did not do a very good job insulating their client from the tsunami that appears to be ready to overwhelm him.

Johnson is now involved in a new controversy. He spoke on behalf of the Diocese of Green Bay when that diocese urged the state legislature not to remove the statute of limitations on the crime of sexual abuse of minors. I do not have to discuss the merits of the law or of Johnson?s position opposing the law, to know that the last thing a candidate wants is his name appearing in the same sentence as the words ?sexual abuse of minors.?

Based on current polling, Nate Silver says [3]there is an 89 percent chance that Feingold will lose. Cook still rates the race as a toss-up. And, this latest curveball about clergy sex abuse is the kind of monkey wrench that can screw up mathematical calculations. Wisconsin, with its once proud tradition of Progressive politics, both GOP and Democratic, should not send a Tea Party businessman to Washington, but that may be the only way some voters think they are tired of progressive politics. After all, Wisconsin once sent Joe McCarthy to the Senate too.

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