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Election Time: FL-Governor

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 7, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Florida may have turned temporarily blue for the 2008 presidential election, but the state remains decidedly reddish in hue. It has controlled the governor?s mansion in Tallahassee for more than a decade as well as both houses of the legislature. Since 1996, when the GOP took control of the Florida House (it had taken the Senate four years earlier) the number of Democrats serving in Tallahassee continued to plummet, although 2006 saw Democrats re-take some seats, but not enough to win control of either chamber in the state house.

Control in Tallahassee matters especially this year because of the re-districting that will occur once the Census results are in. Currently, Democrats do not have a seat at the table, but if they can win the governorship, they would be able to influence the process. Not only will the congressional lines be redrawn, but Florida is likely to gain two congressional seats so the district maps will be especially important.

The GOP had a brutal primary that mirrored similar contests in other states: A Tea Party backed outsider, Rick Scott, versus an establishment political figure, Republican Attorney General Bill McCollum. Scott won, but the contest grew so bitter that McCollum has declined to endorse his former opponent. But, as I never tire of telling people, endorsements don?t count much anymore and most Republicans are likely to stick with their party?s candidate. If Scott loses, it will be because he scares off Independents.

Scott has never claimed to have dabbled in witchcraft, but he has troubles of his own. Indeed, in this race, more than any other in the country, we will see if popular disgust with the ?establishment? is so great that it trumps another perennial concern of Independent voters, the desire to have non-corrupt politicians in office. Scott may be a non-politician but he has problems with ethical integrity that would, in a normal year, doom his candidacy. A widely used college textbook entitled ?Business Ethics: Ethical Decision Making and Cases [1],? Case # 13 involves Scott?s former company which was sued by the federal government for Medicare fraud and fined $1.7 billion. Yes, billion, with a ?b.? Although Scott was not tagged with any personal malfeasance in the case, he says he accepts responsibility because it happened on his watch. Once again, saying one ?takes responsibility? actually means that one is avoiding it. If Scott did ?take responsibility? what was his penalty? Did he pay the fines out of his personal account? Did he go to jail?

In Florida, with its large population of older voters, Medicare fraud is an especially grievous crime. But, as the numbers indicate, Mr. Scott made a lot of money perpetrating his fraud and he is outspending his opponent 4-1. If seniors watch the ads and not the news, Scott may be able to perpetrate an electoral fraud to match his business one.

Scott?s opponent, Alex Sink [2], is the state?s Chief Financial Officer, an elected post in Florida. After a long career in business, Sink ran and won the post in 2006, which was a good year for Democrats in the state. She has shut down some underperforming programs to save the taxpayers some money and had gotten generally high marks. In an especially deft move, she launched a task force to prevent seniors from being swindled by fraudulent companies. Turns out, people like government to do some things, even in reddish states.

As mentioned, Scott has unlimited resources to spend on the race and he has not been shy about doing so. The

polls, as averaged by RealClearPolitics [3], have Scott leading by 2.9 percent, well within the margin of error of most of the polls, and RCP rates the race a ?Toss-up? as does the Cook Political Report. And the high-profile, three-way Senate race is undoubtedly going to affect both turnout and the composition of the electorate. Still, the central drama of this race is downright scary: Are voters so disillusioned with politicians in general and with the Democrats in particular that they would elect a man whose main rationale for his candidacy is his business experience, even though that experience includes overseeing one of the nation?s most exemplary instances of fraud.

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