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Candidates talk God, country, jobs

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 14, 2010

RICHMOND, MO. -- In pursuit of a hotly contested rural western-central Missouri congressional seat, the candidates are in a race to out-patriotize, out-pray and out-job-create one another.

Listen to 17-term Democratic incumbent Ike Skelton and you?ll hear all about the importance of saluting the flag and supporting our troops. Listen to Republican challenger Vicky Hartzler and you?ll hear all about praying to God and protecting the Constitution.

Listen to either in the first competitive race in decades for Missouri?s fourth district -- one some analysts are calling a bellwether for the Democratic Party?s hopes to retain a congressional majority -- and you?ll hear about lower taxes and job creation.

At a town hall-style meeting for Hartzler here Oct. 1, the God, country and job themes were visible in abundance.

Walking into a city hall room after attending the town?s lunchtime high school homecoming game parade, Hartzler opened her speech to the crowd of preachers, farmers and military veterans by saying their views and values are not being represented in Washington. Her message: Time for needed change is near.

Later she faced questions mainly focused on her faith and her ability to bring jobs to the hard-hit rural district.

This week, *NCR* is reporting on some of the most hotly contested races of the 2010 midterm election cycle. Our coverage includes:

- Emotions run high [1], by Paul Moses *(On the race for Pennsylvania's 8th district)*
- When politics become frozen [2], by Thomas C. Fox
- Taking the midterm ground game to Virginia's neighborhoods [3], by Michael Sean Winters *(On the race for Virginia's 5th district)*
- Candidates talk God, country, jobs [4], by Joshua J. McElwee *(On the race for Missouri's 4th district)*
- Beyond the days of mimeographed tracts, Book review by Joe Ferullo *(Posted Friday, Oct. 15)*

Hartzler identifies herself as a member of a Christian church. She is known for her 2007 book *Running God?s Way: Step by Step to a Successful Political Campaign*, which her publisher describes as unveiling ?the proven campaign techniques revealed in God?s Word? and a ?must-read for everyone interested in serving God through political involvement.?

The God track seems to have some traction. While published reports indicate that Hartzler hasn?t even raised half of the $1.9 million in Skelton?s campaign chest, news suggests that she is gaining ground quickly.

Early October poll numbers show her only three points behind in the race.

The National Republican Congressional Committee, with fresh hope to take away a longtime Democratic Party seat, announced Sept. 15 that Hartzler was one of their ?young guns? -- a top designation indicating the Republican establishment is devoting serious resources to the campaign.

One father-son team at the town hall meeting particularly encapsulated the issues that are propelling Hartzler forward.

Stephen Mynatt, a Pentecostal deacon from Polo, Mo., asked Hartzler if he could count on her to ?vote the way her faith dictates? on social issues.

Hartzler responded: ?I?m 100 percent pro-life. I will uphold Christian values and beliefs in our country. My faith is first and foremost. I serve God through public service, but I answer first to God.?

Mynatt?s son, Mike, a railroad engineer in his 20s, later commented that he felt that Skelton, by voting for legislation that would allow the Environmental Protection Agency to more closely regulate greenhouse gas emissions, ?voted against my job.?

In response, Hartzler said that she, from her background as the owner of a small business that sells tractors, knows what it?s like ?to create real jobs.?

Standing outside a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new Democratic campaign headquarters at the northern edge of his district the next day, Skelton, who has been in Congress for 34 years, stayed away from policy specifics, focusing on the need to support military families.

Skelton, who chairs the House Armed Services Committee, has made his support of the military a key campaign issue. Television ads, which his campaign ran in the district through the month of September, said the congressman ?has made it his life?s work to fight for our men and women in uniform.?

?If you see a service member in uniform, take a minute to thank them,? Skelton said at the event. ?It is particularly tough on families.?

Age could be a factor in the race. Skelton is 78; Hartzler is 50. As a 17-term incumbent and chair of the Armed Services Committee, Skelton has clout in Washington.

Skelton does not shy from underlining his three-decade-plus service in Congress. He likes to recall that he entered politics as a 14-year-old campaign worker in the 1940s, when one of his jobs was to keep the record player working.

Despite the differences in age and style between the candidates, Skelton the more wooden and formal, Hartzler the more free-flowing and loquacious, political analysts say that on most major issues the candidates? positions are nearly one and the same.

Speaking with NCR Sept. 27, Shari Bax, an associate professor of political science at the University of Central Missouri, said Hartzler has a ?hard sell? trying to portray herself as a breath of fresh air after over three decades of control of the district by Skelton.

?Hartzler?s just not that different from Skelton,? said Bax, explaining that Skelton has voted pro-life and pro-Second Amendment, upholding the right to bear arms. She said that in the past these have been strong Hartzler positions and Skelton?s record has taken some of the wind out of Hartzler?s sails.

Yet Skelton is fighting what some call the most aggressive campaign of his career.

Bax, who is researching the effect of special interest groups to the political process, said the tightness in the race -- and the aggressiveness on Skelton?s part -- may be because of Hartzler?s use of her faith to organize and find support.

?Vicky is a grass-roots candidate. And a lot of her grass roots is built out of a strong church network,? Bax said. ?Although her faith may not be driving the issues at this point in time ? certainly her faith is still a cornerstone of the network she is using to build her support. And it will be a primary support system for her voter mobilization effort.?

Another analyst said that what?s also important to Hartzler?s success is her luck: the fact that she?s running in a year viewed as difficult for Democrats.

Emphasizing what studies show is a nearly 96 percent return rate for incumbents in a normal election year, political science professor Kenneth Warren of St. Louis University told NCR Sept. 28 that Hartzler ?just wouldn?t have gotten anywhere? were it not for the dynamics of this particular political year.

?Americans are very frustrated with the system, no question about that,? said Warren, who also runs The Warren Poll. ?Although people feel very comfortable with Skelton, some just want to ?vote the bums out.? ?

Dave Wasserman, an editor of the online newsletter *The Cook Political Report*, which provides analysis of national and state races, said the contest between Hartzler and Skelton is one to keep an eye on to understand the fate of the Democratic Party nationally.

?Skelton has taken the fight to Vicky Hartzler more than some others who haven?t had to run a real campaign in a long time,? he said, ?but it?s still a very close race.?

[Joshua J. McElwee is an NCR staff writer. His e-mail address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

Politics, faith and Matthew 25

Vicky Hartzler spoke briefly to NCR *about her faith and her understanding of social justice following a town hall meeting Oct. 1. Following is that conversation, slightly edited for space.*

***NCR*: You wrote a book called *Running God?s Way*. How do scripture readings regarding social justice, particularly Matthew 25, motivate you and speak to you?**
Hartzler: It?s important that we look out for those who can?t speak for themselves. And serving in government gives you an opportunity to do that through policy. Right now human trafficking is very upsetting, very concerning. There are women who are being brought to our country in bondage. That is just so wrong. And when you?re in elected office, in Congress, you can shine a light on issues like that and make people aware and pass laws to make sure that people aren?t able to do this.

Issues like human trafficking are sometimes easier to think about because, for most people, they?re so far from home. When you look at issues like health care reform how do you put together those motivations and Republican sentiment?
Well, the Republicans wanted to help people get more health care by making it more affordable. It?s just that we disagree on the way to do it. The way that government-run health care was implemented is going to actually make it more expensive for people and its going to reduce their choices. I think it?s a disagreement on how best to accomplish it, but I know that I want to help people who need health care and can?t access it and we just have a better, a different approach of doing things.

Can you point to a specific policy idea you have to help those most in need?
I think reducing taxes is one of the most important things because people need to keep more of their money. Times are tough. We?ve got people making decisions about whether to buy their kid a new coat this year and it?s because they?re not sure if they may be out of work or if their company can?t afford to give them a raise because of the job situation. I think most importantly if we can help create more jobs than that?s going to help every American family.

-- *Joshua McElwee*

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