

Q & A: Mark Rozell on VA-11

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 20, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

We continue our look at more midterm races at Q & A with this submission from Mark Rozell, Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University.

Rozell moderated a panel held last week at the National Press Club on the Catholic vote that was sponsored by Catholic University's Institute for Policy research and Catholic Studies. (Video of the panel can be seen [here](#) [1].)

Mark Rozell: One of the most closely watched races in the Washington, DC region this year is the Virginia 11th congressional district. First term incumbent, Gerry Connolly (Dem.) is seeking reelection in a rematch with his 2008 opponent Keith Fimian (Rep.). The district comprises most of Fairfax County, all of Fairfax City, and parts of Prince William County as well.

In the 2008 race, although Connolly won comfortably with 55% of the vote, he ran behind Democratic presidential nominee Senator Barack Obama's 57% in that district. Prior to Connolly's 2008 victory, the district had been held for seven consecutive terms by a moderate Republican, Tom Davis. The retirement of Davis created an open seat contest that pitted Connolly, the well-known Fairfax County Board of Supervisors' chair against the first-time candidate Fimian. Most observers considered the race a throwaway, and no one believed that the Republican had any realistic chance of winning. Fimian nonetheless spent large sums of his personal wealth in the campaign and established enough of a personal brand-name to be a credible opponent for a rematch in 2010.

It is widely acknowledged that the 11th district is highly competitive and does not lean heavily in favor of either political party. Demographic trends in the northern Virginias suburbs of Washington, DC increasingly have favored Democratic Party candidates. The Democratic-leaning minority communities' populations have swelled in recent years. As a result of its proximity to the nation's capital, the district also is comprised of large numbers of federal government workers and contractors. Consequently, anti-government and anti-Washington, DC themes do not resonate as strongly in that district as throughout much of the county in the 2010 campaign.

Fimian has strong appeal to social conservative activists and tea party enthusiasts. To many observers it is hard to imagine him being a competitive candidate in this district in almost any other election year. Yet the economic downturn combined with widespread discontent with the Obama Administration's policies and with incumbents in Washington and the Democratic Party more generally has made this year's race one of the key contests to watch. Some election polls suggest the race may be close, although there has not been a lot of reliable independent polling in the district. But Fimian clearly is counting on a strong turnout among the conservative activist core of his party and from the tea party movement to pull off a once unthinkable victory for him.

Connolly has spent much of the current campaign distancing himself from some of the policies of the Obama Administration and staking his ground as an independent thinking Democrat. He has opposed the president's plan to levy higher taxes on the wealthiest Americans, for example. Yet his opponent is attempting to capitalize on the congressman's many pro-Obama votes in Congress, particularly on the controversial health care reform

legislation.

As throughout the country, the race is in part a referendum on current policies of the Obama Administration and the Democratic majorities in Congress. During just about any other election cycle it would be hard to imagine Connolly as vulnerable to a candidate such as Fimian who had never held elective office. But 2010 has shaped up to be a very different kind of election year than the norm.

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