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How three midterm races fared

NCR Staff | Nov. 8, 2010

Mike Fitzpatrick arrives to vote at Everitt Elementary School in Levittown, Pa., Nov. 2. (MCT/Philadelphia Inquirer/Charles Fox)

Editor's Note: In the lead up to Nov. 2's midterm elections, *NCR* ran profiles of three congressional races that we thought captured the mood of the electorate this election season and showed the issues and pressures candidates faced. See: **Emotions run high: Anti-incumbent mood imperils Democratic fortunes** [1]. To bring that series to closure, today we report the results of those three campaigns.

Pennsylvania 8th Congressional District
Fitzpatrick vs. Murphy

In a race that epitomized the electorate?s turn from concern about war to worry over the economy, Republican Mike Fitzpatrick easily won what was supposed to be a tossup race against Rep. Patrick Murphy, a Democrat who has represented suburban Philadelphia?s Bucks County for two terms.

In a bitterly fought rematch The Wall Street Journal dubbed ?The Fight of the Irish,? the two Catholic attorneys competed to show voters who would return prosperity to Pennsylvania?s 8th Congressional District.

It was a switch from their 2006 campaign when Murphy, the first Iraq war veteran to serve in Congress, won by less than a percentage point, using his military credentials to argue for a withdrawal of troops from Iraq. Fitzpatrick, who had held the seat for one term, never came up with a convincing response to the Iraq issue.

This time, Fitzpatrick -- who overcame cancer in the interim -- campaigned constantly on the economy and Murphy?s support for the stimulus and bank bailout bills. Murphy argued that he had brought 3,000 jobs to the district -- the result of the stimulus bill. Voters were not impressed, with 54 percent going to Fitzpatrick compared to 46 percent for Murphy.

The candidates hold opposing views on abortion rights -- Fitzpatrick says he is pro-life, and Murphy says he is pro-choice -- but this was scarcely an issue in the race, reflecting another national trend for social issues to take a lower profile this year.

National gay and lesbian groups regretted Murphy?s loss because the former Army captain was a leader in the battle to end the military?s ?Don?t ask, don?t tell? policy.

Fitzpatrick enjoyed tactical support from local tea party groups even though he was considered a moderate during his one term in Congress. Murphy argued that his conservative platform -- he opposed cap-and-trade legislation and supported Arizona?s controversial anti-immigration law -- was tailored for the tea party.

The one-time moderate goes to Washington pledged to the bulk of the tea party agenda.

-- *Paul Moses*

Virginia 5th Congressional District

Hurt vs. Perriello

Congressman Tom Perriello, a one-time Catholic missionary and human rights activist, lost his bid for re-election in Virginia?s 5th Congressional District. Republican Robert Hurt took 51 percent of the vote in the sprawling Virginia district to Perriello?s 47 percent. Perriello was the only member of Congress to have President Obama come to his district to campaign for him, but the election-eve rally in Charlottesville was not enough to generate Democratic enthusiasm at the polls.

The winner, Hurt, is a mainstream Republican, currently a state senator. He fended off a tea party challenger in the primaries but echoed many of their concerns in the general election. He called for limited government, less regulation and reduced spending. Mostly, however, he campaigned as the un-Perriello, tying his opponent to Obama and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi at every turn.

In Congress, Perriello voted for the economic stimulus, health care reform legislation and climate change legislation. Instead of backing away from those votes, he campaigned tirelessly to explain why he believed they were in the best interests of his constituents. But subtle arguments got lost in the race, which saw more than $4 million of outside campaign cash spent mostly on highly negative ads.

In his concession speech, Perriello spoke of the religious motivation behind his politics. ?Judgment Day is more important than Election Day, and it?s more important to do what right than what?s easy,? he said. Perriello?s campaign was assisted by a variety of faith-based groups including Catholics United and the ecumenical Matthew 25 Network.

This congressional district is conservative territory, voting for John McCain two years ago. Perriello won the seat in 2008 by only 727 votes, defeating a long-serving incumbent in a year when the Democrats were carrying the banner for ?change.? With parts of his district suffering from double-digit unemployment, the voters still wanted change in 2010 and, as the incumbent, Perriello felt the lash of the same desire that had propelled him to office two years prior.

-- *Michael Sean Winters*

Missouri 4th Congressional District

Hartzler vs. Skelton

Relying on the support of conservative, faith voters in rural Missouri?s western-central congressional district, Republican Vicky Hartzler ousted Democrat -- and 34-year incumbent -- Ike Skelton Nov. 2.

Hartzler, an educator who had previously served in Missouri?s state house, won the seat with 50.4 percent of the vote compared to Skelton?s 45.1 percent. Skelton had won re-election in 2008 with 66 percent.

During her victory speech late Nov. 2, Hartzler said, ?I?ve told people all along that this district has been fed up and fired up and ready to stand up, and we did.?

In an election that focused primarily on job creation, faith values and military support, one analyst said it was Hartzler?s ability to rally social conservatives interested in faith issues that won her the day.

?Some of the areas that really voted in high numbers for Hartzler were traditionally conservative areas that needed to be mobilized,? said Shari Bax, an associate professor of political science at the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg. ?Hartzler worked very hard to mobilize them.?

Skelton, who was fighting for an 18th term, was known for his fairly conservative stance on several issues. In September he was endorsed by the National Rifle Association?s Political Victory Fund.

As chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Skelton was also known in the district for using his position to support local military installations.

In a year unfavorable to Democrats, some observers had speculated that combination might pull him through. It seems that just wasn?t enough.

Said Bax: ?This is one election that followed what we saw across the country.?

-- *Joshua J. McElwee*

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/20677