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NY-26 and the End of the Ryan Budget

Michael Sean Winters | May. 25, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Kathy Hochul won big last night in the special election in NY-26. In such a rock-ribbed Republican district, winning by one vote is big, but winning 48 percent to the GOP candidate's 42 percent is very big. Yes, there was a third party candidate, Jack Davis, but it is unclear which party his votes would have gone to had he not been in the race. (Note to GOP strategists: Tea Partyers get Medicare too.) And before the voting began, the GOP tried to deflect blame for a loss by arguing that if Davis was in double digits, there was no way for the GOP to win. Alas, Davis did not get double digits and the GOP candidate still lost. This despite spending gobs of money.

As I mentioned yesterday, Medicare was the issue that drove the race. Medicare is not just an important issue in its own terms, but it is a kind of shorthand for "government we like." Americans love Medicare. So, while Republicans can often appeal to Independent voters by opposing "big government spending" in the abstract, when the issue is made not abstract, and budgets have a way of doing that, voters discover that they actually like government when it does certain things.

The key for the Democrats now is to make the 2012 election a referendum on this issue: How do we solve the deficit problem. We all agree the budget needs to be balanced and both parties understand that there need to be some cuts in government spending, serious efforts to reduce health care costs, and cuts in the Pentagon budget as well. But, for the rest, should we balance the budget by killing Medicare as the Republicans want or should we balance it by raising taxes on the super-rich and closing tax loopholes for big corporations, loopholes that small businesses do not get because they can't afford the army of lobbyists, lawyers and accountants needed to get the loopholes into the tax code and then harvest them year after year.

Last night, Cong. Steve Israel, head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee kept harping on the tax breaks for big oil, but that issue has a flavor-of-the-month quality to it. The Democrats need not only a win in 2012, they need a mandate. That mandate should be to protect Medicare, raise taxes on the rich, trim government spending and simplify the tax code. Obama needs to be crystal clear on these points in advance of the election, so that he can corral reluctant Congressmen and Senators after the election.

The win in NY-26 is a huge warning sign to the GOP. This is a very Republican district. But, my guess is that they will not immediately back off the Ryan budget. How can they after attacking Newt Gingrich all week for his apostasy in suggesting the Ryan plan went too far too fast. The Republicans are in a pickle and, as the McDonald's ad says, I'm loving it.

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