The Winner is the "Unknown Candidate"

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The Democratic U.S. Senate primary is just about a month away and few voters know anything about the candidates. Six candidates are seeking the Democratic nomination, and the major contenders are Congressman Ron Klink, State Senator Allyson Schwartz, and former state Labor Secretary Tom Foley. Amazingly, the best-known Democratic candidate, Tom Foley, is unknown by two-thirds of the state’s registered Democrats. The least known of the major contenders for the Democratic nomination, Allyson Schwartz, remains unknown by about three out of four state Democrats.

These remarkable polling numbers are evidence of the importance of money in politics. Candidates today must raise significant amounts of money to raise interest and awareness among voters, mostly by running television advertisements. In days gone by, political parties endorsed candidates and delivered those endorsements on primary election day, making individual candidate fundraising much less important. Candidate-centered campaigns have changed that, meaning a candidate must sink or swim on his or her own. These Democratic candidates just aren’t raising and spending enough money to get their messages heard.

If none of the Democratic candidates are able to take to the airwaves, the interplay of five key factors will determine the electoral winner: (1) geography, (2) turnout; (3) organizational support; (4) interest group advocacy; and (5) gender.

1) Geography: Five of the six candidates are essentially Eastern Pennsylvania residents. As the only Western Pennsylvanian, Ron Klink seems to have the clearest regional advantage. The presumption that Klink will do well in Western Pennsylvania is supported by the regional breakdown in the February Keystone Poll. He is the clear favorite in Allegheny and the southwestern counties (currently the only regions in the state where most voters are not undecided). Schwartz and Foley share the small number of decided voters in Philadelphia and the Southeast, as expected. Foley leads among the few decided Democratic voters in the Scranton and Wilkes-Barre region. At this time more than half of the voters in Philadelphia, the Southeast, and Central Pennsylvania are undecided. Worse yet, three out of four voters in the Northeast and Central regions of the state are undecided. If awareness remains this low, turnout will suffer in these regions.

2) Turnout: The geographic strength of each candidate must be matched by favorable turnout numbers, and all regions of the state are not equal. Though Philadelphia and its suburbs have the largest share of registered Democratic voters, in recent elections Democrats have voted in Southwestern Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh in larger numbers than anywhere else in the state. Can any of the eastern candidates win the Democratic primary without a sizeable showing in the southwestern part of the state? Can any of the eastern candidates dominant Philadelphia and its suburbs?

3) Organization Support: The Democratic organization has not endorsed any of the candidates. As an organization, the Democratic Party will play little role in the outcome of the election,
except in those cases where campaigns can tie individual party leaders and activists to a campaign. Instead, individual candidates will rely on support from local leaders in various counties. The candidate who musters the greatest field organization, comprised of local party leaders, activists, and interest group organizations will be advantaged enormously.

4) Interest Group Advocacy: The candidates for the Senate have divided up the normal Democratic interest groups. Foley and Klink have won sizeable support among various organized labor groups, while Schwartz has picked up the endorsement of women’s groups. Given the divisions within the Democratic Party itself, interest groups will play a major role in the outcome of this election. Their monetary support, campaign workers, and strategic and tactical help could play a determinative role in a low turnout, low visibility election. Without sufficient money for a major television campaign, the election may be determined by ground forces.

5) Gender: As Klink seems to be advantaged by geography, Allyson Schwartz is advantaged by her gender, because female voters tend to support female candidates, especially female Democratic candidates. The latest Keystone Poll did not yet identify an advantage for Schwartz among female candidates, but gender always has the potential to play a decisive role.

When information about candidates is scarce, voters rely on whatever cues they can find to help them select a candidate. Unless something changes in the next few weeks, the U.S. Democratic Senate primary outcome will be determined by whatever cues voters have at hand, making it likely that geography, gender, or party and interest group activity will carry the day.

By:

G. Terry Madonna, Director
Center for Politics & Public Affairs
Millersville University

Berwood Yost, Director
Center for Opinion Research
Millersville University