

An Outlier in Pennsylvania

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It's no secret. Republicans are running for the proverbial hills as wave after wave of brutal economic news breaks over their political heads. The climate for GOP candidates is bad – bad as it has been for any party in at least a generation, and perhaps longer. It's an environment in which they are likely to lose 30 House seats or more.

Yet, one Pennsylvania Republican – and a challenger at that – is taking on and leading an entrenched 12-term Democratic Congressman. That he is doing it at all offers a glimmer of hope to embattled Republicans across the country; how he is doing it offers a lesson on swimming against a partisan tide that could unleash a political whirlpool upon his party.

The 11th Congressional District is a Democratic-leaning district located in Northeastern Pennsylvania. It is one of the nation's quintessential blue collar working class areas. It includes the cities of Wilkes Barre and Scranton, and is the home of popular US Senator Bob Casey Jr. It is also seemingly the nation's most visited real estate in this presidential election. In 2004 John Kerry beat President Bush by six points in the district and Al Gore walloped Bush there by nine points in 2000. Incumbent Congressman Paul Kanjorski's closest election to date was in 2002 when he beat Barletta 56 percent to 42 percent.

Nevertheless, late in the 2008 race, Kanjorski finds himself among a tiny handful of beleaguered Democratic incumbents. Kanjorski has actually been making somewhat of comeback – he has cut Republican challenger Lou Barletta's lead nearly in half since last month. Even so, Barletta leads Kanjorski by five points (40% to 35%). According to the most recent Franklin & Marshall College Poll, there also remains a large pool of undecided voters (24%) that will potentially play the crucial role in determining the fate of the district.

Barletta is holding his lead despite the dismal economy and voters growing concern about it. In the most recent Franklin & Marshall College Poll the economy is cited as the most important issue in the vote choice for the US House race.

Congressman Kanjorski's vital signs do not augur well for him. The poll reveals that less than two in five (35%) registered adults in the district believe he deserves re-election – a figure unchanged since September. Equally dire, Kanjorski's support among registered Democrats remains weak; only half of Democrats are planning to vote for him. By contrast his opponent Lou Barletta is supported by about two in three Republicans and three in five independent voters.

As unpopular as Kanjorski is at the moment, his condition would actually be worse if it were not for Barack Obama. The Congressman undoubtedly has been helped by a surge of support for Obama – who has increased his lead in the district from three points in mid-September, to nine points now.

Certainly, this is a tight race and could become more so. Still, Barletta has so far found a way to challenge a long-time incumbent in a year that may be as bad for his party as the 1974 post- Watergate era. He has done so

by taking a couple of issues that voters care about almost as much as the economy – disgust with the current coterie of politicians and immigration reform – and parlayed them into an unlikely momentum.

As the most recent Franklin and Marshall College Poll shows, both issues score just below the economy as voter hot spots. Government politicians and immigration are cited as the second and third most important issues in the race.

Barletta seems to be maximizing the natural strength of the GOP base in the region, far outdistancing John McCain in the district and winning among males, (44% to 31%), among whites, (40% to 35%), among veterans, (52% to 29%), and among voters with incomes over \$75,000, (49% to 26%).

The outcome of the Kanjorski-Barletta race remains uncertain. It very well may come down to who makes the voters madder – President Bush or the incumbent Kanjorski.

Certainly voters' critical attitudes about the incumbent's job performance provide an advantage for his popular challenger. More voters than not believe there is need for congressional change and many voters have an unfavorable opinion of Kanjorski. Moreover the unusually large one quarter of voters who are still undecided remains an ominous indicator for a long time incumbent.

Nevertheless the political environment favors Democratic candidates. Concerns about the economy continue to rise and President Bush's job approval ratings continue to fall, both trends apparently helping Kanjorski to overcome his low performance ratings.

Most remarkable of all perhaps is the fact that the Republican remains not only alive but ahead at this point, making this likely to be one of the most watched bellwether races in the nation on election night.

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