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W. Virginia Senate race shifts hard to the right

By Michael Kranish, Globe Staff | October 27, 2010

NEWELL, W. Va. — Governor Joe Manchin is running what seems to be a classic Republican campaign for the US Senate in West Virginia.

He blasts “Obamacare,” files a lawsuit against environmental laws, and — literally — fires a bullet at a mock-up of climate-change legislation. He boasts of his endorsement by the US Chamber of Commerce, his A rating from the libertarian Cato Institute, and his conservative fiscal credentials.

The catch: Manchin is the Democratic nominee. And even this effort to distance himself from President Obama and his own party hasn’t assured him of victory in the Mountain State.

Republican nominee John Raese, meanwhile, is so determined to be seen as the most conservative candidate that he has said he is running to the political right of the Tea Party movement. The businessman and former state party chairman wants to eliminate the minimum wage, calls global warming a myth, and says the health care bill is the worst piece of legislation ever passed by Congress.

While the tight contest here hasn’t received as much publicity as Tea Party-infused races elsewhere, it could be pivotal in the broader bid to control the Senate. A recent CNN/Time poll found the race tied at 44 percent, with a candidate from the liberal Mountain Party, Jesse Johnson, favored by 5 percent, which could take away votes from Manchin.

If Manchin loses the special election for the seat long held by the late Robert C. Byrd, it would mark the first time Democrats have failed to control both of West Virginia’s Senate seats in 50 years. Because it is a special election, the winner will be seated immediately, meaning a Raese victory would boost the GOP during the lame-duck session that could decide the fate of the Bush-era tax cuts.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. Manchin has a 69 percent approval rating based on his six-year performance as governor, and Democrats have a two-to-one advantage over Republicans in party registration. The US Chamber of Commerce was so enamored of his probusiness tax policies that he is the only Democratic Senate candidate backed by the group, which is spending tens of millions of dollars in other states to help elect Republicans.

“He is an incredibly popular governor,” said Neil Birch, associate professor of political science at West Virginia University. But the race, Birch said, has tightened for several reasons: an initial overconfidence by Manchin that he could stay above the fray, effective attacks by Raese, and a lack of enthusiasm among Democrats.

“The campaign is in large part whether he is a West Virginia Democrat or a national Democrat,” Birch said, with the latter a brand held in contempt in many parts of the state.

The backdrop to the race is discontent with the policies of Obama, particularly in coal-rich areas where many fear the White House wants to tax carbon emissions from coal-fired power plants. The president has an approval rating of just 32 percent, and Raese has made this a close contest largely by turning it into a referendum on Obama.

One day last week, a frustrated Manchin appeared before a half-empty luncheon at the Lions Club hall in this town at the northern tip of the state’s panhandle region, urging local Democrats to become as energized as Republicans. “This is the first campaign I’ve ever been in where you aren’t judged on your performance,” Manchin said in an interview. Instead, he said, he is battling against what he calls Raese’s effort to “smear” him as a rubber stamp for Obama’s policies.

The outcome of the race could hinge on whether West Virginians agree with Raese's argument that the state's dependence on billions of federal dollars in earmarked projects — which Byrd championed — is misguided.

On his website, Raese says he would end “pork barrel projects which exist solely to reelect incumbent members of Congress.” Manchin responds that it is ludicrous to think that private enterprise would build roads and erect the kind of facilities, including an FBI annex in Clarksburg, that Byrd brought to West Virginia.

Raese, who has twice run unsuccessfully for the US Senate, is the president of a company that owns limestone and steel operations as well as radio stations and Morgantown's Dominion Post paper. He gained traction in the race after attacking what he called Manchin's support for a variety of Obama policies, including health care legislation.

Manchin responded with a widely aired television advertisement in which he vowed to “repeal the bad parts of Obamacare” — adopting the derisive appellation used by many Republicans — and then fired a bullet at a portrayal of climate-change legislation nailed to a tree.

Manchin subsequently recalibrated his message, stressing that he supports the part of health care legislation that requires insurance companies to cover people with preexisting conditions, including the black lung disease that affects coal miners.

Much of the recent focus in the contest has been on Raese's out-of-state connections. He owns homes in Telluride, Colo., and Palm Beach, where Raese's wife is registered to vote. That led Manchin last week to run an advertisement that mocked Raese for living “in a Palm Beach, Florida, mansion with a pink marble driveway.”

Raese also suffered from backlash over a casting call for an advertisement paid for by the National Republican Senatorial Committee that sought “hicky” actors from the Philadelphia area to play the part of West Virginians who supported Raese's candidacy. Raese disassociated himself from the ad.

One day last week, as Manchin left the meeting with Democrats in Newell, he drove through an economically distressed landscape. A region that once pulsed with steel mills that employed thousands of people has been in steady decline for years as cheaper steel imports led to shutdowns, with a local pottery factory and casino taking up only some of the slack.

South of Newell, the city of Weirton is testament to the difficulties facing the state. In the 1970s, more than 13,000 people worked at the local steel mill; today, the number is 980.

Yet on the day that Manchin visited the region, Weirton had the look of the boom times. The shops on Main Street were newly renovated and residents strolled through downtown. Even the strip joint on Main Street had been converted to a diner. The city of 19,000, strung along the Ohio River and stretching to nearby hills, seemed rejuvenated.

Then the workers from Paramount Pictures arrived to put Weirton back the way it was. It turned out to be the closing day of production for a forthcoming Steven Spielberg movie that had employed 2,500 extras.

Local officials credited Manchin for helping bring the movie to Weirton, noting that he enacted tax breaks specifically designed to lure such Hollywood productions. The impact was significant. While the federal stimulus program provided only about \$100,000 directly to the city, the Spielberg production brought \$14 million in direct spending and another \$7 million in spinoff benefits, according to local and state officials.

“When the steel mill went down, a lot of people lost their hope and pride,” said Mayor Mark Harris, whose fish restaurant, Codfather's, saw a boost in business during Paramount's time in town. “We had a [movie company] come in and it brought back hope into the city. People were so happy and smiling and just very joyful. You don't see that a whole lot anymore.”

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