Down Goes Texas Drug Warrior

Craig D. Schlesinger | May 30, 2012

Good news out of Texas last night [h/t Eric Sterling]:

Former El Paso, TX city council member Beto O'Rourke has defeated U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes, an eight term Democratic congressman, for the Democratic nomination for the new 23rd District (now the 16th District) of Texas.

While on the city council O'Rourke became alarmed by the hideous violence in Ciudad Juarez, the large city in Mexico directly across the Rio Grande from El Paso. A resolution of the city council that he drafted in early 2009 included a call to study the war on drugs. This became an unmentionable.

Rep. Reyes pressured El Paso's Mayor to veto the resolution and the other members of the council not to over-ride the veto.

O'Rourke's primary victory is being labeled a victory for drug policy reformers by DPA and in Huffington Post.

Reason senior editor Jacob Sullum touts the Democrat's primary victory on two fronts:

1. Reyes, backed by President Obama and former President Bill Clinton, is a hack who was targeted for defeat by the Campaign for Primary Accountability, a super PAC funded by wealthy Texans that promotes challenges to complacent, long-serving incumbents of both parties. *Mother Jones* described the race as "a classic case of an up-and-coming insurgent taking on the machine." Although O'Rourke told *Mother Jones* that *Citizens United v. FEC*, the 2010 Supreme Court ruling that made super PACs possible, was "a terrible decision," his victory is yet another piece of evidence that lifting restraints on "outside groups" has shaken things up and made elections more competitive.

2. O'Rourke is a critic of the war on drugs who co-wrote a book decrying prohibition-related violence and advocating marijuana legalization, while Reyes, who served in the U.S. Border Patrol for 26 years, is an unreconstructed drug warrior. During the campaign O'Rourke called the war on drugs "a failure," while Reyes accused him of encouraging drug use by children. O'Rourke won 50.5 percent of the vote in the five-way race, compared to 44.4 percent for Reyes. "O'Rourke's victory demonstrates that support for drug policy reform, and even for legalizing marijuana, is no detriment to electoral success—in fact, it was a key

asset in his triumph," says Ethan Nadelmann, executive director of Drug Policy Action. "Reyes' surprising defeat, meanwhile, shows that knee-jerk support for persisting with failed drug war tactics can hurt politicians at the ballot box."

Here's O'Rourke last November at the Cato Institute's conference "Ending the Global War on Drugs" [h/t David Boaz]: