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THE BEAT

Tale of Two Special Elections: One Shifts Right, The Other Left

posted by **JOHN NICHOLS** on 11/02/2009 @ 6:40pm

The **Washington Post** positions itself as a "must-read" daily almanac of the political class – a reliable source of information and insight regarding all things electoral.

That goes double for congressional elections, since the Post is the "hometown paper" of the federal government's company town.

As such, the Post can be expected to follow congressional contests with a rigor and clarity that exceeds that of talk-radio and talk-TV, right? Wrong.

On Sunday, **in a report on the certainly significant decision of Republican Dede Scozzafava to suspend her campaign** for the open congressional seat in New York's 23rd district, the Post reported: "With this New York district holding the only congressional election in an off-year cycle, much of the nation's political attention has gravitated here to the state's remote crown, an area so close to the Canadian border that highway signs are in English and French."

That's some fine writing by the Post's political team.

Unfortunately, it's wrong.

The special election in upstate New York is not the only congressional contest that will be decided Tuesday. In fact, it may not even be the most important special election that will be decided on Tuesday.

On the same day that New York 23 votes, a parallel special election will fill an open seat representing California's 10th district.

We all understand that newspapers make mistakes.

But this one by the Post is particularly unsettling – both for what it says about the degeneration of political journalism in the United States and because of the false impression it creates reflects a broader disconnect in the discussion of the November 3 election cycle.

The New York State race has gained outsized coverage for two reasons:

1. Local Republican leaders nominated a moderate candidate to replace Republican congressman John McHugh, who jumped party lines to serve as the Obama administration's Secretary of the Army. That sparked a revolt by conservatives in New York state and nationally, which ultimately forced Scozzafava out of the running. Republican leaders who backed her have now rallied behind Doug Hoffman, a Republican who is running on the Conservative Reporters love insider-the-party fights, and this has been a good one.

2. The Republican infighting might – the key word here is might – tip the 23rd into the Democratic column, which would be remarkable considering that the district has been reliably Republican since the 1870s. Such a result would further erode GOP strength in the northeast, where the party has suffered its most serious decline in recent years. That's also a good story.

But none of this justifies the neglect of the contest for the California seat that came open when moderate Democrat Ellen Tauscher quit to take a top job in the State Department.

In fact, California 10 has seen internal party battling – on the Democratic side – and has a much richer history of political competitiveness than New York 23.

Let's compare:

1. New York 23 has not elected a Democrat in more than a century. If it elects a Republican Tuesday – and, though Hoffman is running on the Conservative Party line, he is now backed by local, state and national GOP leaders and organizations – the district will hold to the pattern it has been on since Ulysses Grant was president. On the other hand, California 10 was represented by a Republican until Tauscher beat him in 1996 – and in the past century, Republicans have represented the core counties of the district more frequently than Democrats. In other words, California 10 is the more historically competitive turf.

2. New York 23 and California 10 both voted for Barack Obama in 2008. New York's McHugh and California's Tauscher both won reelection with the same portion of the vote – 65 percent. But California 10 actually has deeper patterns of partisan shifting and ballot-splitting. Indeed, California 10 voted for Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger for governor in that state's 2003 recall election and backed Schwarzenegger for reelection by a 56-38 margin in the generally Democratic year of 2006.

3. While Republicans wrangled in New York 23, Democrats saw a bitter battle between high-profile elected officials in California 10 – with Tauscher's choice to succeed her losing to Lt. Governor **John Garamendi**. An old-school progressive with an activist bent, Garamendi has been portrayed by some as being too liberal for the suburban district. But Garamendi has not pulled his punches; he has based his populist campaign on his enthusiasm for health care reform and promised to fight for a robust public option in any federal reform measure. And the former California insurance commissioner says he wants to go to Washington to take on the big banks and insurers.

4. Just as Democrats have talked up their prospects for taking New York 23, Republicans have endeavored to create a buzz about California 10. The GOP nominee in the California district, attorney David Harmer, is a solid contender who was a fellow at the Heritage Foundation and

whose book on education reform was published by the Cato Institute. Harmer's ties to local and national conservative leaders and donors have allowed him to raise enough money to fund television commercials that attack Garamendi's support of the public option and other liberal positions.

5. Conservative publications, especially **The National Review**, have in recent days been talking up the California 10 vote as one where the party could make a breakthrough. A National Review Online headline recently declared: "David Harmer Might Be Making the Right Race at the Right Time." While the writer did not say that a Harmer win was in the offering, he wrote that "it feels like the ingredients for one are starting to come together."

Having followed both the New York 23 and California 10 races closely, I am inclined to believe that voting in each district will follow pattern on Tuesday. That argues for a Hoffman win in New York and a Garamendi win in California – and no change to the partisan division in the House. Certainly, New York Democrat Bill Owens is the more likely upset winner. But California Republican Harmer has run an credible campaign that merits at least as much attention as that of fellow conservative Hoffman in New York.

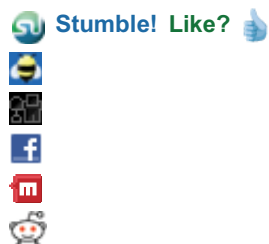
I'm impressed with **the National Review's analysis**. We may disagree ideologically, but the conservative publication's writers recognize that not all California congressional districts are the same.

They also recognize that voters in one California district will elect a congressman on Tuesday – something the Washington Post and most television commentators seem to have forgotten.

Both of Tuesday's House races matter, especially at this volatile political moment nationally. Both should be analyzed with an eye for signals and trends – as should Tuesday's New Jersey and Virginia gubernatorial contests and various mayor races and referendums around the country. There is nothing wrong with trying to draw conclusions from off-year election results. But those conclusions should be based on realities and results – not just those that are cherry-picked by party operatives and pundits who don't get out of Washington much.

And if **John Garamendi** wins the California 10 contest, I can guarantee that he will stir things up in Washington far more aggressively than whoever is elected to represent New York 23.

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