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Republicans Put on a Clinic

Republicans are set to do well in the November 3 off-year elections, but a conspicuous exception may be the special House election in New York's 23rd Congressional District, a rural area bordering Canada that covers a quarter of the state's territory. In a wild three-way race, Republican Dede Scozzafava has fallen behind Democrat Bill Owens, largely because Conservative Party candidate Doug Hoffman is pulling 23% of the vote.

The disastrous Scozzafava candidacy was born when local GOP party bosses met in July to pick a candidate (state law does not provide for a primary in special elections). Anxious to hold onto a district that Barack Obama won with 52% of the vote, they went with Ms. Scozzafava, a stockbroker who had won several terms in the state legislature. The second-place finisher was accountant Doug Hoffman, a staunch conservative.

Mr. Hoffman promptly took the Conservative Party nomination and mounted a renegade challenge to the GOP candidate. He had a lot of ammunition. Ms. Scozzafava is easily the most liberal member of the GOP caucus in the state legislature, scoring a 15% rating on the Conservative Party's scorecard. She supports abortion rights and the card-check bill that would do away with secret ballot union elections. She has voted consistently for tax increases and backed the Obama stimulus bill that was opposed by every Republican currently serving in the U.S. House.

The election is less than three weeks away, but Mr. Hoffman may be on track to replicate the 1970 showing of Jim Buckley, who won a U.S. Senate seat in New York by convincing voters that both the GOP candidate and the Democratic candidate were too liberal. At this point in the 1970 race, Mr. Buckley was also considered a third-party irritant but gradually convinced voters he was building enough support to be a possible winner.

Republicans in Washington are furious at this turn of events, pointing out that a new Siena College poll has Democrat Owens at 33% and in the lead. President Obama will hold a fundraiser for Mr. Owens next Tuesday in New York City. GOP leaders are urging House Republicans to back Ms. Scozzafava but so far only about one-tenth of them have

actually made out checks. "It looks like the whole thing is collapsing around her," one GOP member told me yesterday. "I can't explain to my donors why I'm writing such a liberal candidate a check."

The danger for Republicans is that Ms. Scozzafava will continue to lose support (the Siena College poll shows that her TV ads make voters LESS likely to support her) while still collecting enough GOP cash and votes to prevent Mr. Hoffman from completing his Jim Buckley scenario. Today, GOP leaders hauled out former House Speaker Newt Gingrich to endorse Ms. Scozzafava, but his statement was perfunctory and avoided praising her stands on issues.

The GOP civil war in New York may indeed hand the seat to Democrats, but even if Republican voters somehow push her over the top next month, the GOP could end up losing anyway. Democrats acknowledge that they approached her to switch parties and run as their candidate in the special election, and she entertained the idea. Should she win the seat narrowly and face a bruising primary with Mr. Hoffman again next year, she could well pull an Arlen Specter and switch parties -- joining a party whose policies are more simpatico while embarrassing the GOP at the same time.

-- John Fund

The Future of Rangel

Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the Congressional Black Caucus may be sticking with embattled House Ways and Means Chairman Charlie Rangel, but back home in Harlem some are betting the incumbent is serving his last term. The House Ethics Committee has issued hundreds of subpoenas as it investigates allegations that Mr. Rangel failed to pay taxes and dramatically underreported his assets on financial disclosure forms.



Charlie Rangel

Vincent Morgan, a banker and former aide to the 79-year-old lawmaker, has announced he will challenge Mr. Rangel in next year's Democratic primary. "The 15th District deserves good leadership," says Mr. Morgan. "I hope voters will unite and empower me to be their voice in Washington."

Mr. Morgan says he already knows his way around Capitol Hill, having served as a special assistant to Mr. Rangel and as the congressman's campaign director in 2002. In truth, the upstart's chances against Mr. Rangel in a Democratic primary would likely be nil, but Mr. Morgan expects that Mr. Rangel would step down from his seat in Congress if forced to give up the Ways and Means chairmanship. "Sticking around as a mere back-bencher isn't Charlie's style," says Ari Fleischer, the former White House press secretary who also once served as press secretary for the Ways and Means Committee.

-- John Fund

Quote of the Day

"The problem that Democrats have faced from Day One is finally coming to a head. The Left and the health care industry both want universal health insurance coverage. The industry, because universal coverage means massive new government subsidies. The Left, because that's their religion. But universal coverage is so expensive that Congress can't get there without taxing Democrats. Sen. Jay Rockefeller is the biggest opponent of Sen. Max Baucus' tax on expensive health plans because that tax would hit West Virginia coal miners. Unions vigorously oppose that tax because it would hit their members. Moderate Democrats in the House oppose Rep. Charlie Rangel's supposed 'millionaires surtax' because they know it would hit small businesses in their districts. And on and on . . ." -- Michael F. Cannon, the Cato Institute's director of health policy studies, speaking to NationalJournal.com about the late-emerging opposition of health insurers to the Baucus health care reform bill.

The Vote Democrats Don't Want

If you think moderate Democrats are afraid of voting for ObamaCare, you should see how they react to a potential vote on the Countrywide Financial loan scandal.

The House oversight committee was scheduled to meet on Thursday afternoon to mark up several minor pieces of legislation. Days before the meeting, California Republican Darrell Issa notified committee Chairman Edolphus Towns that Mr. Issa would call for a vote to subpoena Countrywide documents from Bank of America, which bought the failed subprime lender last year. Recall that, under the "Friends of Angelo" program, named for former Countrywide CEO Angelo Mozilo, Democratic Senators Chris Dodd and Kent Conrad received sweetheart deals on home mortgages. Mr. Issa wants to uncover the full story on Countrywide's effort to influence Washington policy makers.



Mr. Towns, a New York Democrat who also received mortgages from the unit that processed the VIP loans but claims he received no favors, has opposed such a subpoena. But can he count on his Democratic colleagues to vote it down? Perhaps Mr. Towns would rather not find out. Mr. Issa showed up for the scheduled 2 p.m. markup on Thursday hoping that a few Democrats would vote his way and allow the investigation to proceed. Then a strange thing happened: As Mr. Issa and the GOP members of the committee sat waiting for the meeting to begin, Democrats huddled in a back room without explanation. Thirty-five minutes later, the committee announced that the meeting had been postponed indefinitely.

A committee press release later claimed the postponement was "due to conflicts" with a markup occurring at the same time in the financial services committee. But Mr. Issa's staff videotaped several financial services members leaving the back-room gathering with Mr. Towns at the conclusion of the meeting. If members were there to confab with Chairman Towns, obviously they weren't at any finance committee markup -- suggesting the real "conflict" was between Democrats over whether to keep stonewalling the Countrywide matter.

-- James Freeman



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