

# The keystone state: unlocking an election essay

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There was little doubt leading into this election cycle that change was on its way; nearly every pundit and political analyst from coast to coast (discounting the usual talking heads) were unanimous in their agreement that the incumbent party had almost no chance of retaining control .

November 8th has, of course, proven them right -not that predicting the overturn was any sort of Nostradamian feat- but the more interesting question is, perhaps, why? The conventional wisdom leading up to the election was that the tipping point would be ' The War, stupid' (and, in fact, this proved to be no small factor); but in the aftermath of the shakeup what we are learning is that all politics are, in fact, local. Case in point:

Pennsylvania's 8th Congressional District. One would be hard pressed to find a more stereotypically ' American' district than Pennsylvania's 8th (the district's largest county -Bucks County- was the setting of: Washington's Delaware River crossing, the second Levittown, and even the movie Signs) , so perhaps something might be gained by examining what, exactly, took place here during the election, and how it might represent a microcosm of America. As early as September 23rd the congressional race in Pennsylvania's 8th district between the Republican incumbent Mike Fitzpatrick and the Democratic challenger Patrick Murphy had become something of a bellwether race -or at least one that was being watched nationally.

The Chicago Tribune devoted 1, 400 words to the race in their September 23rd issue that cast the race as one that would center on the economy. The message being that, at least in Bucks County, good economic numbers don't translate into good economic feelings. But is that all that there is? Certainly

Richard Vallejo -quoted in the Tribune piece- sums up the feelings of a lot of Americans when he says of his fellow Pennsylvanians, " They're afraid of taxes, of whether they're going to have a job next month and the cost of gas. ", but can that account for what happened in Bucks County? And just what was that? What did happen in Bucks County? According to the latest voter registration data Bucks County is made up of 45% registered Republicans and 39% registered Democrats, yet the county has skewed for the Democratic candidate in every presidential election since 1992, with clear majorities for the Republicans during the Reagan/Bush years -but most local government elections skewing Republican . This would seem to be a case of Reagan Republicans rejecting the national and international policies of George W. Bush while still holding onto the smaller government/lower taxes philosophy at the local level. But there are other factors at work.

Mike Fitzpatrick had enjoyed a lead over his Democratic rival, Patrick Murphy from the very early days of the campaign and was the favored candidate. The Hill, the congressional newspaper, reported a six-point lead for Fitzgerald as far out as July of 2006 . The Democratic challenger, Patrick Murphy, seemed to have a hard time gaining traction and name recognition , though he did have something going for him in the seemingly pro-defense enclave of Bucks County: he was a veteran. Patrick Murphy had served in Iraq with no less an organization than the storied 82nd Airborne division; indeed in the same poll published by The Hill in July of 2006 -the one that put him six points behind- he jumped out to a staggering nineteen point lead over the Republican incumbent when his military service was made known . The casualties absorbed by the young men and women of Pennsylvania

during the recent war in Iraq must certainly be a factor in Murphy's Herculean jump in the polls when his service is made known. Only California and Texas have sustained more dead during the war in Iraq than the relatively small state of Pennsylvania: California - 297; Texas - 252; Pennsylvania - 138 . But even the painful losses absorbed by the Keystone State's fighting men and women could seemingly not put Murphy over the top . By as late as October 27th, a mere eleven days before the election, polls published in the Philadelphia Daily News gave Fitzpatrick a relatively comfortable nine point lead.

So what lead to the (admittedly narrow) defeat of the incumbent? Likely the same three local/non-local issues that lead to the defeat of the Republicans nationwide: scandal, Iraq, and economic issues. Mike Fitzpatrick, who had only served two years, had already been touched by the scandal that plagued the Republicans of this congress. As early as January 2006 Mike Fitzpatrick had already been linked to all of the major players in Republican corruption scandals up to that point. As reported by the Bucks County Courier Times Fitzpatrick was linked to fundraising by disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, receiving more than \$200, 000 dollars from Abramoff's political action committees. To make matters worse, Fitzpatrick had also received more than \$20, 000 in donations from PAC's associated with the scandal-ridden Bob Ney, Tom Delay, and the disgraced congressman " Duke" Cunningham .

In a strange twist -and a particularly unfortunate one given Bucks County's history of Reagan boosterism- Fitzpatrick also began to cast himself as the

anti-war candidate. In what was certainly an attempt to distance himself from President Bush's ever more unpopular Iraq policy, Rep. Fitzpatrick began to challenge the Bush strategy in Iraq and call for a timed withdrawal; a puzzling strategy since his stance was not likely to win over any Democrat voters but would certainly serve to alienate the more die-hard in his Republican base. The final nail in Fitzpatrick's coffin may well have been his stance on stem cell research. As reported in the November 2nd, 2006 issue of the Washington Times, Fitzpatrick was attempting to embrace certain types of stem cell research (adult and umbilical) while opposing embryonic stem cell research. While polls show that most Americans support embryonic stem cell research as a social issue, Mr. Fitzpatrick had something else to contend with: the burgeoning biomedical research industry in the greater Philadelphia area. Opposing the fastest growing industry in an economically depressed area may have been a key factor in Fitzgerald's downfall.

That's not to say that his downfall was great –he lost by less than 2, 000 votes– but a trickle is as good as a landslide in politics, and a trickle was good enough to float Patrick Murphy in largely on the merit of not being Mike Fitzpatrick –and in this political season not being the incumbent was often enough. In the broader sense, however, Patrick Murphy won on local issues that had global or national impact: corruption in the Republican Party meant corruption in Bucks County; dead GI's in Iraq meant fresh graves in Bucks County; opposing stem cell research meant an economic pinch for the residents of Bucks County. So goes Pennsylvania, so goes the nation.

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