

Indiana Insights

Washington Handicapper Looks at Key Hoosier Races

By Nathan L. Gonzales

Not long ago, Indiana without Peyton Manning and Richard Lugar was unthinkable, but come next year that will be part of a new reality. Lugar's loss, coupled with retirements, electoral waves and scandal over the last six years have led to a nearly complete transformation of Indiana's delegation to Washington.

In May, the political world was focused on Indiana as state treasurer Richard Mourdock dethroned Lugar in the Republican primary for the U.S. Senate. The six-term senator failed to comprehend a new GOP electorate that no longer values political longevity and experience, while Mourdock ran a steady race and had help from conservative groups from outside the state in the final weeks.

Democrats are ecstatic to face Mourdock, who they compare to Sharron Angle – last cycle's GOP nominee in Nevada who snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by being too far out of her state's mainstream. But while Mourdock enjoyed tea party support, he's not a fringe candidate. He's a two-term statewide officeholder who had some considerable establishment support, even against Lugar.

Yet in the wake of the primary, the Senate race remains Indiana's marquee contest.

Comparison to 2010

Representative Joe Donnelly, the Democratic nominee, benefited from the GOP primary and used his initial financial advantage over Mourdock to air television ads over the summer before Republicans had the resources to define him. The congressman faces some of the same challenges that then Democrat Rep. Brad Ellsworth faced in the 2010 Senate race, which the latter lost by 15 points.

Donnelly ran a terrific re-election race in 2010, to avoid getting swept out in the Republican wave, by running explicitly against John Boehner and House Republicans as well as leaders of his own party, including Nancy Pelosi and President Obama. But Donnelly started this Senate race virtually unknown statewide and needs to cultivate that independent image with voters outside of his South Bend-area district.

Even though the general election started as a close race, Republicans are confident in their ability to execute the same race against Donnelly that defeated Ellsworth, in part, by pairing Donnelly with President Obama. Like Ellsworth, Donnelly voted for the health care bill, the stimulus bill and the Troubled Asset Relief Program. Donnelly voted against Pelosi for leader this Congress but voted for her to lead their party previously.

Mourdock may not be as flawed as Angle, but he's not perfect either. Democrats will continue to criticize the treasurer's decision to oppose the Chrysler bailout and portray Mourdock as an uncompromising partisan.

Based on the fundamentals of the state and the electoral environment, Mourdock has an advantage in the general election.

Nationwide, Democrats are trying to hold onto their slim majority in the Senate and Indiana is one of five potential pickups for Democrats, along with Massachusetts, Nevada, North Dakota and Arizona. Winning any of those races would dramatically decrease GOP chances for control, but fundamentally this race is tougher for Donnelly. Since 1974, the only Democrats to win an Indiana Senate race have been named Bayh (Evan in 1998 and 2004, and Birch in 1974).



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Governor's office

Democratic odds in the gubernatorial race are decidedly longer.

Mustachioed former state House Speaker John Gregg (D) is a credible challenger, but he comes from the southwestern part of the state and has been out of public office for almost a decade. Gregg is also being dramatically outspent by his Republican opponent, Rep. Mike Pence, making it difficult for the Democrat to cultivate the independent image that he needs in order to win.

Pence tabled his presidential ambitions in order to succeed popular Gov. Mitch Daniels (R), which is probably good for the congressman since James Garfield is the only president to be directly elected from the House, and that was in 1880.

Daniels' tenure has become a blueprint for chief executives in other states. He took on politically unpopular tasks in his first term (Daylight Saving Time, privatizing the Indiana Toll Road and property tax reform) and spent the rest of this time convincing constituents that it was the right thing to do.

Democrats are happy to juxtapose the outgoing governor with Pence in order to brand the congressman as too conservative for the state, but if Gregg is going to be the first Democrat to win a gubernatorial election since Frank O'Bannon's re-election over a decade ago, he's going to need some coattails from the top of the ticket.

While President Obama doesn't need to win Indiana again in order for Donnelly and Gregg to prevail, he likely needs to garner at least 45%. Before 2008, that hadn't been done since Jimmy Carter in 1976, and with mediocre job approval ratings, Obama could struggle to reach that threshold in November.

If other Democrats are going to prevail in Indiana this fall, they will likely need to do it in spite of the president and not because of him.

Bigger picture

With just a couple of competitive congressional races, the fight for the House majority will be decided outside of Indiana. But these two contests could symbolize a nationwide trend.

In order to gain the 25 seats necessary to return Pelosi to the speaker's chair, Democrats need to minimize losses of their own seats (such as Indiana's 2nd District) and win seats where Republicans start the general election with the advantage (such

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as Indiana's 8th District). Obama failed to top 50% in each district at the height of his popularity and isn't likely to fare as well this November.

Much of the congressional action took place in the primaries as Republicans Luke Messer and Susan Brooks prevailed in competitive open seat races and are prohibitive favorites in November.

After this election, only one member, Rep. Pete Visclosky (D-1st District), was a part of the delegation when Manning first donned a Colts uniform. In fact, Visclosky will be the only member elected before 2008.

INFORMATION LINK

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