

Poll: Runyan gaining momentum down home stretch

By JANE ROH • STAFF WRITER • October 22, 2010

Republican Jon Runyan is gaining ground among undecided voters in the final stretch of the tight congressional matchup with Democratic Rep. John Adler, according to a Richard Stockton College/Zogby poll released Friday.

Support for Runyan among likely voters jumped 10 points, to 40 percent, since a September survey. Adler, meanwhile, is stuck in neutral — he's lost a point and is now down to 37 percent. That puts the 3rd congressional district opponents in a statistical dead heat.

Stockton/Zogby pollsters queried 600 likely voters between Oct. 18 and 22; the margin of error was plus or minus 4.1 percent.

Peter DeStefano, the enigmatic candidate running on the "NJ Tea Party" line, was the choice of 4.9 percent of the respondents, compared with 7.6 percent last month.

When respondents who backed DeStefano were informed he might have been placed on the ballot by Democrats to draw votes from Runyan, they changed their minds and picked Runyan, said Sharon Schulman, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton.

Pollsters got the same result when respondents who initially picked DeStefano were informed the North Jersey Tea Party had endorsed Runyan and not DeStefano.

The number of undecided voters shrunk from 23 percent to 16 percent. Adler, who has four times the campaign cash reserves of Runyan, can be expected to blitz the airwaves with advertising between now and Nov. 2. But being stuck below 40 percent in a poll generally does not bode well for incumbents.

"We just don't find any groups that are truly breaking for John Adler right now," Schulman said.

On Oct. 8, the Courier-Post of Cherry Hill reported that Adler's campaign manager, Geoff Mackler, and campaign consultant Steve Ayscue sought

volunteers to collect signatures to get DeStefano on the ballot. Democratic operatives with knowledge of the Adler campaign and the Camden County Democratic organization said the plan was designed to reduce Runyan's share of votes on election day by 5 percent.

"Although Tea Party candidate DeStefano's support is dropping, nearly 5 percent in a close race could be important to the outcome of this close election," Schulman said.

The Runyan campaign saw the poll results as a sign that even if the plan is working, it won't be enough to send Adler back to Washington.

"The sleazy Tea Party plant scandal has shined a light on who Congressman John Adler really is — a desperate and dishonest career politician who will literally say or do anything to get re-elected," said campaign advisor Chris Russell.

"Jon Runyan has all the momentum right now."

The Adler campaign has largely declined to discuss the issue, and campaign spokeswoman Carol Gaskill could not be reached for comment Friday.

However, in a recent debate, Adler said of the circumstances of the DeStefano candidacy, "As far as I know, we have nothing to do with it."

And during an Asbury Park Press editorial board meeting, Adler said, "I know nothing about it, I knew nothing about it. When I first read stories about it, I made sure that my people had nothing to do with it."



Cherry Hill is a Democratic stronghold and Adler's backyard, but it's just 15 percent of the district. Ocean County, which helped deliver a decisive victory for Gov. Chris Christie last fall, is also leaning strongly toward Runyan, Schulman said. The real battle will be in conservative-leaning Burlington County, where Adler and Runyan are running even, Schulman said.

"We're seeing people going back and forth between parties and the candidates," Schulman said. "I'm not sure issues will be the big drivers."

One surprise in the survey: about 88 percent of voters reached said they were likely to vote.

"For a non-big-year election that's fairly high," Schulman said.

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