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Tea party shakes up race in New Jersey's 3rd Congressional District

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By JULIET FLETCHER and ROB SPAHR Staff Writers | Posted: Sunday, October 24, 2010

Ocean County has been a longtime bastion of traditional Republican politics. But the county finds itself becoming more politically volatile this year: The growing number and influence of so-called tea party supporters have created a new uncertainty in the county's political landscape.

As more independent-minded voters without party affiliation move into the county, leaving more swing voters for candidates to convince, so attendance at tea party events — each one a melting-pot of grass-roots conservative political philosophy — has skyrocketed in recent months.

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Democrats have been trying since August to tie Jon Runyan to more extreme tea party-backed Republicans nationwide, hoping moderate voters will find it a turn-off.

Then things got murkier: No sooner had tea partiers established themselves as a political force here, in towns along Long Beach Island and inland, than the movement's name became tangled a scandal.

Republicans allege Democrats have put up a tea party plant candidate in the 3rd Congressional District race, where Democratic incumbent John Adler faces former professional football player Runyan in what has become a race that's too close to call, according to a recent poll.

The tussle, say political analysts, shows how the tea party effect can be more disruptive than beneficial for both major parties.

Tuckerton resident Nancy Baptist is just the sort of voter who represents Ocean's political shift — she is becoming more questioning of her elected officials.

A registered Republican, she hasn't actually joined a tea party — although she has had friends try to convince her to get involved. “I had enough of that stuff in the '60s,” she joked Thursday.

But the 62-year-old said she does give a lot of credence to what the tea party is preaching. “When you talk to a candidate, they'll tell you whatever they think you want to hear,” Baptist said. “But it seems like these tea parties really do the research into the issues and all of the candidates so they can tell you what is really going on.”

Bill Haney, who leads the West Jersey Tea Party, which has been active in the area, thinks voters flocked to the movement because it emphasized voting on the facts.

“People started out with an anti-incumbent feeling, but they used that to educate themselves about the candidates,” he said. “That has brought in independents as well as conservatives.”

‘Focus and enthusiasm’

George Gilmore, chairman of the Ocean County Republican Party, meanwhile, said he has urged every Republican group that he has talked with to welcome the tea parties with open arms, not fear them. “I think they've brought a kind of focus and enthusiasm from voters that we haven't seen in years, which I think will see them spur an increase in voting,” he said. “And, especially in Ocean County, the greater turnout they get, the better the Republicans can do,”

Independent thinkers like Baptist are on the rise in the county — and the effects have been surprising.

“Ocean County is a unique creature in the state of New Jersey,” said Sharon Schulman, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College in Galloway Township. After years as a Republican stronghold for congressional candidates, Ocean elected Adler in 2008 — what Schulman called surprising that year, even as Democrats did well on Barack Obama's ticket.

New voter registrations show unaffiliated voter numbers have risen in Ocean, while they fell statewide. Into that mix came groups such as Jersey Shore Tea Party Patriots and the Bayshore Tea Party, who say they welcome voters who share core principles, including reducing government spending.

Those groups initially showed support, if not full endorsement, for Runyan's primary challenger, Justin Murphy. But when Runyan won the nomination, the Democratic National Committee immediately launched a campaign to tie Runyan to candidates such as U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, a Republican from Minnesota, and her national Tea Party Caucus.

Runyan instead followed the lead of Gov. Chris Christie, who has been careful not to get too close

to the tea party or be too critical of it.

Legitimacy questions

Having seen the tea party candidates threaten Republican incumbents during the primary, many moderate Republicans in Ocean County say they are wary of getting too attached to the upstart grassroots movement.

Little Egg Harbor Township resident Dave Jillson is a registered Republican who wonders if the added tea party image helps his party.

“They are very vocal. But as is usually the case, whenever someone is that vocal they can sometimes say things that cast a negative light on the whole group,” said Jillson, 49.

In a poll conducted by the Hughes Center at Stockton and released on Friday, supporters did not appear to be abandoning Adler, who held 37 percent of likely voters polled compared with 38-percent who expressed support last month. But undecideds were flocking to Runyan, who picked up 40 percent of support rather than the 30 percent he commanded in September. A small percentage of those voters were switching away from DeStefano. DeStefano's support was 5 percent. The margin of error in the poll was 4 percentage points.

"The problem with this kind of allegation is it never fully goes away," Schulman said of the rumored "tea party plant." She said that if the tea party casts Adler as a cynical political operator, that would anger their base, who helped carry Christie to a landslide win 12 months ago: "Outrage may be enough to energize them."

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