# Near-defeat for Republicans in safe Ohio congressional seat shows antiwar sentiment

**A reporter**
**5 August 2005**

The August 2 special election in Ohio's Second Congressional District saw a heavily favored Republican candidate eke out a narrow victory over an Iraq war veteran who based his campaign on vocal criticism of the Bush administration's conduct of the war. Jean Schmidt defeated her Democratic opponent, Paul Hackett, by 52 percent to 48 percent in a district where no Republican in two decades has polled worse than 70 percent.

The Second Congressional District includes the affluent eastern part of the Cincinnati area and a half dozen rural counties extending along the Ohio River to the town of Portsmouth. It has been in Republican hands for all but nine years since 1879. The last Democratic victory in the district came in 1974, the year the Watergate scandal drove Nixon from the White House and produced a Democratic landslide in the congressional elections.

The congressional seat fell vacant when the incumbent, Rob Portman, was named US trade representative in March. The ensuing Republican primary, normally the decisive contest in that district, became a blood feud between rival factions in the party.

Pat DeWine, son of US Senator Michael DeWine, a former Cincinnati city councilman and currently a county commissioner in Hamilton County, might under other circumstances have been favored to take the seat. But the June 14 primary took place just as his father was joining the "gang of 14," seven Republicans and seven Democrats, who reached an agreement in the Senate to forestall a Republican plan to suppress the right to filibuster judicial nominations.

While this agreement was essentially a capitulation by the Democrats, who then allowed three ultra-right Bush nominees to be confirmed to federal appeals court positions, some fundamentalist groups objected to the fact that two other nominees were dropped. This became an issue in the primary, with the Christian Right avenging itself on Pat DeWine as a proxy for his father.

DeWine was opposed by a former Republican congressman, Bob McEwen, state representative and anti-tax zealot Tom Brinkman, and former state representative Jean Schmidt, who was able to compete with DeWine's huge campaign war chest with her own personal funds.

The campaign descended to a scurrilous level, with anti-DeWine ads claiming that he had left his pregnant wife and two children for a mistress who worked as a lobbyist. DeWine ran ads attacking McEwen for his role in the House bounced check scandal of the early 1990s, and both men were attacked by their rivals as "carpetbaggers" because they moved into the district to seek the vacant seat. Meanwhile, Brinkman, who campaigned as the most fervent anti-abortion candidate, came under attack because he also opposes capital punishment.

Schmidt, equally conservative on social issues but more "moderate" on public spending, profited from the mutual mudslinging of her three main rivals, while DeWine's campaign collapsed. Schmidt won the primary with 14,232 votes, with McEwen taking 11,565, Brinkman, 9,211 and DeWine only 5,455.

Hackett won the Democratic primary, defeating a perennial candidate, Charles W. Sanders, who had been the sacrificial lamb for the Democrats in the previous four congressional elections, never winning more than 28 percent of the vote. Less than 14,000 people voted in the Democratic primary, barely a quarter of the total in the Republican contest.

But the general election campaign became hotly competitive as Hackett focused on the issue of the war

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in Iraq, speaking as a recently returned veteran of the conflict. He spent seven months as a civil affairs officer in the Marine Reserves, stationed near Ramadi and Fallujah, and only returned to Ohio in March. Hackett described the war as a mistake "that damaged our credibility throughout the world and squandered our political capital."

While Bush won the district with 64 percent of the vote, Hackett made direct personal attacks on the president, saying his taunting of insurgents with the comment "Bring 'em on," was "the most incredibly stupid comment I've ever heard a president of the United States make." Referring to Bush's own enrollment in the National Guard as a means of escaping Vietnam War combat, Hackett described him as a "chicken hawk."

The Democratic campaign also benefited from an ongoing corruption scandal in the state government, long under Republican control. Hackett sought to tie Schmidt both to Republican Governor Bob Taft and US House Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

While the turnout was low, typical of a mid-summer by-election, Hackett increased the Democratic percentage of the vote from 28 percent to 48 percent, a 20-point swing against the Republicans. Schmidt won by only 3,500 votes out of more than 112,000 cast.

Spokesmen for the Republican congressional leadership sought to downplay the vote as the result of unusual local circumstances, but former House Speaker Newt Gingrich told the *Washington Post* that the vote should be a "wake-up call" for the Republican Party. Citing both the war and domestic economic concerns, he added, "There is more energy today on the anti-Iraq, anti-gas-price, anti-changing-Social Security and, I think, anti-Washington [side] ... I think the combination of those four are all redounding to weaken Republicans and help Democrats."

The congressional Democratic leadership essentially ignored the Hackett campaign until a few weeks before the by-election, when a surge of on-line contributions and media publicity made this impossible. The consensus among leading Democrats—most notably Bill and Hillary Clinton—is that the Democrats should avoid any association with antiwar opinion and run in 2006 as advocates of a more aggressive prosecution of the war in Iraq.

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