

Republicans lose House seat in special election

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The Republican Party lost a seat in the US House of Representatives from western New York state it has held for more than four decades, in a special election May 24 that turned largely on plans to phase out the Medicare program and put the elderly in the clutches of private insurers.

Democrat Kathy Hochul defeated Republican Jane Corwin by 47 percent to 43 percent, with independent multi-millionaire Jack Davis receiving 9 percent and a Green Party candidate 1 percent. Some 25 percent of registered voters went to the polls, only half the number who voted in 2010, but high for a special election.

The election was called to fill the vacancy after incumbent Republican Christopher Lee resigned February 9. A media furor erupted over the married congressman e-mailing a shirtless photograph of himself to a woman he had met on Craigslist. The incident, minor in itself, discredited the congressman with right-wing Christian fundamentalist elements.

Lee was pressured to step down by Republican Party leaders who assumed that the conservative district (Lee won reelection last November with 74 percent of the vote) would rubber-stamp their choice as his successor.

The Republican Party has held the 26th district, which stretches from the Buffalo suburbs through four rural counties to the outskirts of Rochester, for at least four decades. The congressman for many years was Jack Kemp, a leading right-wing figure and the Republican vice presidential candidate in 1996.

Hochul is the clerk of Erie County, an elected local government position, and does not even live in the district. She was selected by the Democratic Party in what was expected to be a low-key and inevitably losing effort.

The campaign only became the focus of national efforts by both parties after the Republican majority in the House of Representatives voted April 15 for the plan, drafted by Budget Committee chairman Paul

Ryan, to phase out Medicare and replace it with private insurance, leaving the elderly to pick up an increasing portion of the costs of health care.

Hochul began making appeals to older voters, who make up a large proportion of the electorate in the district, and several polls showed support for the Republican candidate Corwin plunging. Two weeks ago, polls showed Hochul taking a narrow lead, which increased still further in the actual voting.

Corwin poured in several million dollars of her own money, backed by a similar sum from Republican Party and ultra-right groups. A New York state legislator, Corwin is worth an estimated \$150 million from her share of a family business, the Talking Phone Book, purchased by Hearst Corporation for \$400 million.

Another multimillionaire, Jack Davis, ran as an independent for the seat after he was denied the Republican nomination by party leaders. He was an unsuccessful Democratic candidate for the same seat in 2004 and 2006, running a Perot-style campaign focused on budget-cutting and protectionist trade policies.

This year, Davis billed himself as the Tea Party candidate and poured nearly \$3 million of his fortune into the race. All told, some \$10 million were spent on an election in which barely 100,000 people participated—a staggering \$100 per vote cast (at that rate, the 2012 presidential election would approach \$15 billion in campaign spending).

Republican Party officials complained that Davis was not a genuine Tea Party candidate—an ironic charge, since the Tea Party is itself largely artificial, the byproduct of ultra-right media outlets and multi-millionaires like the Koch brothers.

Republican spokesmen blamed Corwin's defeat on the "splitting" of the conservative vote by Davis, although polls showed Hochul would have won even in a head-to-head contest. Their main goal was to deny the evident repudiation of the Ryan plan to abolish

Medicare by voters even in a heavily Republican district.

According to polling conducted by Siena College, 21 percent of voters cited Medicare as the single most important issue in the race, more than any other, and of these, 74 percent supported Hochul. The second most important issue, cited by 20 percent, was jobs, and those voters went heavily for Davis, who cited foreign trade as the main reason for the collapse of Buffalo's industrial base.

Hochul also appealed to chauvinist sentiment. As clerk of Erie County, overseeing the bureau that issues driver's licenses, she made a name for herself by vocally opposing the plan by former governor Eliot Spitzer to issue driving permits to undocumented immigrants.

National Democratic Party leaders hailed the outcome of the New York vote as a clear signal that they would be able to recapture control of the House of Representatives in 2012 by identifying Republican candidates with the Ryan plan. All but four of the 239 House Republicans voted for the proposal.

Steve Israel, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, declared, "Today, the Republican plan to end Medicare cost Republicans \$3.4 million and a seat in Congress. And this is only the first seat."

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi issued a statement, saying, "Kathy Hochul's victory tonight is a tribute to Democrats' commitment to preserve and strengthen Medicare, create jobs, and grow our economy. And it sends a clear message that will echo nationwide: Republicans will be held accountable for their vote to end Medicare."

Such rhetoric is entirely bogus, since the congressional Democrats supported huge cuts in Medicare last year, as part of the Obama health care program, an issue that was used against them by the Republicans in their 2010 election rout. Today, both big business parties support cuts that would effectively destroy this critical entitlement program, while seeking to disguise their real intentions from the voters with demagogic declarations of their determination to "preserve and protect" Medicare.

Significantly, President Barack Obama, in his congratulatory message to Hochul, made no mention of defending Medicare. The administration is currently

negotiating with congressional Republicans on a deal that would impose major cuts in the program, albeit short of the full-scale privatization envisioned in the Ryan plan.

Former president Bill Clinton, speaking Wednesday at a summit on fiscal policy sponsored by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, a right-wing think-tank devoted to promoting austerity budgeting, said the outcome of the Buffalo special election showed that the Republican plan was unpopular, but added that Democrats should offer alternative cuts rather than opposing any cuts at all.

"You shouldn't look at the New York race and think that nobody can do anything to slow Medicare costs," Clinton said. In any case, he continued, political leaders "can't be paralyzed" by what voters think. Referring to his elimination of welfare and cuts in other social programs, he said, "A lot of the most important things I did were unpopular."



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