

AFTER STEARNS OUSTED BY YOHO, GAILLOT HAS OPPORTUNITY FOR DEMOCRATIC PICK-UP IN FL3

The biggest national story emanating from the August 14 primaries held in several states was the upset by Tea Party political novice Ted Yoho of Cliff Stearns, a twelve term Republican incumbent. Florida Congressional districts were realigned this year and Cliff Stearns chose to move into Clay County in District 3 after he learned he would face another Republican incumbent if he remained at his long-standing Marion County address. Stearns' move into Clay County was not smooth, as he became embroiled in a scandal in which he was accused of trying to buy off another candidate there. Despite the fact that Stearns had placed himself at the heart of Republican attacks on Barack Obama and liberal causes by staging "hearings" into Solyndra and government funding of Planned Parenthood, he clearly was not seen as conservative enough by the small band of die-hard Tea Partiers in his new district.

Yoho's ousting of Stearns, however, especially when it is coupled with other national trends, does not mean that he will coast to a win in November. First, it should be noted that the new district is dramatically different from the one which Stearns won repeatedly. While Stearns enjoyed large Republican registration advantages during his career, the new District 3 in Florida is almost exactly 50-50 when it comes to Republicans and Democrats. Figures at the close of registration just prior to the primary (pdf) show there were 175,138 Republicans and 176,788 Democrats in the district. There were also 66,082 voters registered with no political affiliation and when all registered voters were counted, the district came to 431,601 voters.

For his surprising victory, Yoho received a total of only 22,273 votes. That was only 34.4% of the Republican votes cast. Yes, because Florida's primaries were structured this year to not have runoffs, Yoho won even though 65.6% of Republicans who voted cast votes against him instead of for him. That also means that only 12.7% of the district's registered Republicans (and only 5.2% of its registered voters) voted for Yoho. It seems possible from at least some of the coverage of this race to believe that the Tea Party Republicans were the most engaged during the primary. If the Tea Party was more engaged than other factions of the Republican party for the primary, then Yoho faces the twin challenges of bringing the other 65% of his party into his favor and stimulating Republican turnout in a district which is evenly split between the major parties.

Larger national trends are likely to have a huge impact on that second question of turnout. When even Dana Milbank is beginning to believe that Republicans' outrageous positions and actions might provoke divine intervention (but Milbank completely missed that Isaac has been predicted to hit Gitmo on the way to the Republican convention in Tampa), the nation seems to be teetering on the edge of realizing just how crazed extreme Republican positions are. Especially important here is the continued candidacy of Todd Akin, who could force national attention onto the depravity of banning abortions even in the case of rape or incest. Also to be factored in is that Yoho now has the added burden of a Sarah Palin endorsement.

Yoho fits perfectly within the crazed realm of Tea Party Republican extremists. On his website he rails against socialism, endorses Ryan's Medicare plan, promotes his anti-abortion position, advocates "Drill, Baby, Drill" even though tourism in the Panhandle has barely recovered from the BP spill and even throws his support to the Fair Tax initiative.

Democratic challenger J.R. Gaillot, while facing

a very large uphill battle on name recognition after Yoho's victory garnered national attention, seems poised to take advantage of some of these factors which could weigh down Republicans in November. His positions are far from extreme: he is pro-choice, favors strengthening Social Security and Medicare and favors reform of Wall Street. He also is a strong advocate for equal opportunities for women and the Lilly Ledbetter Act. Despite these entirely reasonable positions, Gaillot chose to define himself as a "Blue Dog/ Old School Democrat" on Twitter (Gaillot followed me this morning and re-tweeted some of my tweets from election night, and that served to remind me that I had planned to write this post last week). While that won't endear him to me and perhaps many of my 58,619 fellow Democrats here in the more liberal Alachua County which is home to the University of Florida, it may serve him well with the rest of the more rural Democrats and voters with no party affiliation in the rest of the district.

On the surface, Gaillot also seems more suited to a Congressional position, as he is the son of a life-long diplomat and speaks several languages. That seems to have prepared him for Washington a bit better than Yoho's previous profession that required him to wear gloves that go to the shoulder, although it wouldn't surprise me for Yoho to follow his "pigs at the trough" ad with one where he uses those gloves to "clean up" Washington.