

CHAPTER FIVE

The 2010 Republican Nomination Contest

In early spring of 2010, six Republicans announced their intention to compete for the congressional seat occupied by Jim Himes. The plethora of Republican candidates suggested a wide open nominating contest within the GOP. It was apparent that no Republican candidate would be anointed as their party's nominee. The candidate who won the Republican nomination would have to do so through sheer determination and skillful strategizing.

The Nominating Process

Connecticut has a rather unusual, perhaps archaic, system of nominating candidates for public office. The congressional nominating process begins with a nominating convention in May. The convention is attended by delegates selected from the district's towns and cities. With regard to the Republican Party, the number of delegates apportioned to each local community is based on a formula outlined in Article III, Section 2 of the Republican by-laws. Towns are awarded one delegate per 750 votes cast for governor in the preceding gubernatorial contest. A bonus delegate is also awarded to towns in which a plurality of voters supported the Republican gubernatorial candidate in the preceding contest. Towns in which the local government is under the control of the Republican Party are awarded additional delegates depending on the population of the town. The Republicans in 2010 also sent

“superdelegates” to their nominating convention. Superdelegates are those Republicans who hold state or federal elected office in Connecticut, serve on the Connecticut Republican State Central Committee, or serve on the Republican National Committee from Connecticut. A community’s support for Republican gubernatorial candidates is thus a prime consideration in the Republican apportionment formula, as well as the community’s support for local Republican office holders, such as town councilors, mayors, and selectmen. This explains why a city such as Bridgeport, which routinely votes for Democratic gubernatorial candidates, has fewer delegates at a Republican state nominating convention compared to some of the less populated suburban communities within the district, such as Fairfield or Greenwich. Convention delegates are chosen in local caucuses, which are largely dominated by the town committees within the district. The party organization therefore controls to a large extent, although not entirely, who the delegates will be at the party’s nominating convention.

Not surprisingly, candidates will spend many hours courting members of town committees and meeting with the chairs of the party in order to cultivate support of convention delegates. In some instances, delegates will pledge their support to candidates prior to the convention, although there is always a number of delegates who withhold their support and attend the convention unpledged to any candidate. Roll calls are taken at the convention, with spokespersons from each community within the district announcing the number of delegates awarded to each candidate. The candidate who wins a majority of the convention delegates is designated as the party-endorsed candidate. But this by no means secures the nomination, as Connecticut law allows any candidate who wins at least 15 percent of the convention delegates to force a primary election in August. This is known as a “challenge primary.” At one time in the not-too-distant past, winning a minimum of 15 percent of the delegates at the convention was the only way in which a challenger to the party-endorsed candidate could wage a primary. But due to popular pressure, election reformers modified the primary law by allowing candidates who fail to meet the 15 percent threshold to

force a primary by petitioning their way onto a primary ballot. Thus, irrespective of the convention vote, a candidate can still wage a challenge primary. Compared to previous decades, the nominating process is now more fluid and less under the control of the formal party organization. Indeed, in some instances candidates will forego the convention and decide from the very start that they will force a primary by way of petition.

The six Republican candidates who sought their party's nomination and who had intended to challenge Congressman Himes were quite diverse with respect to age, ideological orientation, and political experience. Several of the candidates also had a base of support from which to launch a competitive congressional campaign. In alphabetical order, the six candidates who decided to challenge Congressman Jim Himes included Dan Debicella, Will Gregory, Tom Herrmann, Rob Merkle, Rob Russo, and Rick Torres. Informative and colorful websites were constructed by each candidate, fundraising commenced, and the candidates began the challenging task of securing convention delegates and/or petition signatures. The biographical information that follows was gleaned from the websites posted by the individual candidates.

Dan Debicella

Dan Debicella was a businessman and two term state senator. Debicella held the senate seat that had been represented by the legendary George "Doc" Gunther, who represented the district from 1966 to 2006. Gunther's legislative service was the longest in Connecticut history.

Debicella was a graduate of the very prestigious Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. He also earned an MBA at Harvard. He worked for a Fortune 500 company, served as a business consultant, and managed his own private business. In the state senate, he served as the ranking Republican on the Appropriations Committee. He was known at the state Capitol as having impressive expertise on finance and budgetary matters. He was also considered by political insiders to be a rising star within the Republican Party. Prior to the nominating convention, Debicella

had received numerous endorsements and pledges of support from state lawmakers and convention delegates. His connections within the Republican Party immediately positioned him as one of the frontrunners for his party's nomination.

Pundits predicted that Debicella would likely win the endorsement of his party at the nominating convention. He identified himself as a fiscal conservative but very moderate with regard to social and moral issues. He was pro-choice on the abortion issue and supported state funding for stem cell research. In some respects, Debicella reflected the values of the traditional New England Republican; fiscally conservative, but moderate and tolerant with respect to social and moral policy. However, Debicella's position on social issues, it should be noted, seemed to become more moderate as he entertained the prospect of a congressional candidacy. During his days as a state senator, he was endorsed by the conservative Family Institute of Connecticut for his voting record on social issues.

Will Gregory

The first impression one might have had upon meeting Will Gregory was that he was an intern for one of the other congressional candidates. Gregory, after all, was twenty-four years old when he launched his campaign. When queried about his age, he was quick to note that he would be twenty-five, the legal requirement to serve in Congress, at the time of his swearing in. Gregory's youthful persona exuded energy and enthusiasm, and one could not help but admire his unbridled passion to enter the political arena. At public functions, he distributed small candy bars wrapped in gold with his name on the wrapper. This was an interesting and effective gimmick which seemed to amuse those persons he greeted. Gregory received his bachelor's degree from Gettysburg College where he was elected and reelected as class president and class senator. He also received a Master's degree in Global Governance and Diplomacy from Oxford University. Gregory was an educated young man who subscribed to a very fixed set of conservative principles. His professional

background included working as a non-profit executive. His political resume identified a stint in the “War Room” as a campaign aide for Senator John McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign. Gregory’s conservative platform included support for free enterprise and limited government.

Tom Herrmann

Tom Herrmann was a late entry into the nominating contest, but there was reason to believe that Herrmann’s campaign could quickly gain traction. He was the second term First Selectman of Easton. His expertise was in the areas of finance, taxes, and budgeting. His resume suggested that as the First Selectman he was able to hold taxes to the lowest level in all of Fairfield County. He was known in Republican circles as a fiscal conservative, but moderate on social issues. Herrmann was also an exceptionally wealthy individual who had made a fortune in the private sector. His extensive business and investment background combined with his public sector experience quickly elevated Herrmann to the top tier of viable candidates. Like many Republican candidates, Herrmann suggested that his experience in the private sector would prove to be a major asset once he was elected to Congress. He would apply business principles to public policy making. Herrmann’s fundraising ability quickly outpaced the other Republican candidates, which further served to elevate his status as a frontrunner for the nomination. Herrmann earned a bachelor’s degree in Accounting from the University of Massachusetts and his MBA from Harvard. In May, Herrmann released a public opinion poll of 400 likely Republican voters within the fourth district. The poll indicated that Herrmann had the highest name recognition compared to the other candidates and that he was the preferred candidate of his party’s rank and file. The poll was conducted by the Republican polling firm of Wilson Research Strategies. Herrmann used the results of this poll to underscore his viability and to cast doubt on Debicella’s electability. Herrmann’s opponents questioned the objectivity of the polling results.

Rob Merkle

Rob Merkle was clearly the most conservative among the six Republican challengers. He was formally endorsed by the Tea Party Patriots and Right Principles. Both organizations were very active factions of Connecticut's growing Tea Party movement. Both organizations were based in Fairfield County. A review of Merkle's platform revealed a conservative stance on practically every policy issue. Like many conservative Republican candidates across the country, Merkle identified himself as a "Ronald Reagan conservative." In addition to his blunt, no-nonsense speaking style, Merkle's candidacy attracted considerable media attention due to the fact that his candidacy would serve as the first true test of the Tea Party's influence within the context of congressional politics in the state of Connecticut. Similar to Tea Party candidates across the land, Merkle called upon voters to "take our country back." Merkle received his bachelor's degree in Finance from the University of Notre Dame. He also played linebacker on the University's football team as a walk-on, which is unusual for a team of Notre Dame's caliber. His professional background, like several Republican candidates, was in the private sector. He was the founder and owner of an executive search firm based in Westport. Like his competitors for the nomination, Merkle emphasized the virtues of free enterprise and how his experience in the private sector would contribute to effective law making. But unlike several of his Republican competitors, Merkle's views on social and moral issues were far to the right. In one interview with a reporter from the *Norwalk Hour*, Merkle unabashedly described himself as "pro-life, pro-gun, and pro-family." Rob Merkle was not a typical New England Republican.

Rob Russo

When Rob Russo declared his candidacy for Congress, there were those who quickly considered him the likely nominee. Russo had served as Deputy Chief of Staff for Congressman Chris Shays. He also had served as Director of Governor M. Jodi Rell's Fairfield

County Office. He was intimately familiar with the politics and personalities of the seventeen communities within the fourth congressional district. Indeed, Russo's knowledge of the district's voting trends and political personalities within the district seemed encyclopedic. In 2008, Russo had been elected to the state senate in a special election. For several months, before losing his seat in the regularly scheduled general election, he had represented constituents from Trumbull, Monroe, and Bridgeport at the state Capitol. He had run, albeit unsuccessfully, for the state senate in 2004 and 2006. He had excellent name recognition within the fourth district and was well-liked among many Republican town committee members. Moreover, according to most accounts, Russo had a deep reservoir of family money that would prove beneficial for funding a congressional campaign. Russo received his bachelor's degree from Georgetown University and his law degree from Fordham University. As an attorney, he specialized in real estate, land use, small business, and aviation law. He was also a licensed pilot. In the early stages of the campaign, it appeared that the nominating contest would be between Debicella and Russo. Both had served together in the state senate, both had strong political connections within the fourth district, both were highly educated, and both were young and energetic. And both were good friends.

Rick Torres

Perhaps one of the more unique political figures among those battling for the Republican Party's nomination was Bridgeport native Rick Torres. Torres had once run for mayor of the beleaguered city in a race which drew national attention. He was also known as an outspoken critic of the Democratic Party and the Democratic administration's management of city affairs. He was also a former chairperson of the Republican Party in Bridgeport. Torres owned and operated Harborview Market in the Black Rock area of Bridgeport. He was visible, had name recognition, was controversial, and had a base of support. His personal background was intriguing. Although born in Bridgeport, he lived in Cuba

during his youth. His website indicates that after Castro came to power it took his father five years to leave Cuba and return to the United States. Torres's experience with Castro's communist regime, like many Cuban-Americans who fled Cuba after the communist revolution, deeply influenced his views on politics and government. Torres, not surprisingly, was opposed to big government and centralized power. He described his congressional candidacy as the "third choice" within the context of the highly contentious nominating contest. In Torres's view, he was the clear alternative to both the establishment Republicans and the candidate favored by the Tea Party. Nevertheless, despite his position as the "third choice" for voters, Torres's campaign rhetoric still seemed very similar to the rhetoric espoused by Merkle. For example, Torres's website proclaimed that "in this election the very fabric of our freedoms are under direct assault" and that "it is time to send an authentic American conservative to Washington." The headline on his website advocated "Restoring Liberty and Prosperity by Shrinking Government." Torres's conservative credentials earned him a formal endorsement by the recently formed Conservative Party of Connecticut. He was also endorsed by the Libertarian Party of Connecticut, the Independent Caucus, as well as Peter Schiff, the Libertarian Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate. Torres was an excellent athlete and popular student at Bullard Havens Technical high school in Bridgeport. He attended Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where he graduated with a degree in biology, studied Biochemistry at the UConn Health Center, and at one point had plans to become a medical doctor. He was initially a Democrat, but changed his party affiliation to Republican after becoming disillusioned with the Democratic Party's liberal agenda and support for government programs.

Chris Shays Redux

As the nominating contest was beginning to take shape, former Congressman Chris Shays attended a fundraiser and roast in his honor. The event was held in Fairfield County. It was at this event that Shays suggested, much to everyone's surprise, that he would

like to once again become involved in Connecticut politics. Shays indicated interest in running for governor in light of what he perceived as a weak field of Republican candidates. At the same time, pundits and journalists began speculating that Shays might even consider running for his old congressional seat, particularly since 2010 was a mid-term election without Barack Obama at the top of the ticket. To add fuel to the gossip and speculation, Russo released a surprising poll which showed Shays defeating Jim Himes in a rematch by 19 points. The speculation continued when Shays, who had moved to Maryland, placed a down payment on a condominium in Bridgeport. Shays's reputation as an unpredictable political maverick led one to believe that a political comeback was a distinct possibility. But in the end, Shays chose not to seek the governorship or his former congressional seat. From all indications, he did not want to engage once again in the arduous task of fundraising and experience the stress associated with a gubernatorial or congressional campaign. Following his defeat in 2008, Shays was appointed by President Obama as the Chairperson of the Government Wartime Contracting Commission, which oversees military contracts. Shays has apparently enjoyed his new job and both he and his wife enjoy their new residence in Maryland. He briefly probed the possibility of reentering politics, weighed the pros and cons, and decided against it. It is doubtful if Chris Shays will ever again pursue elected office, although one can never predict what this political maverick will do from one year to the next.

And Then There Were Four

As the nominating contest progressed and the convention scheduled for May 21-22 drew near, it became increasingly clear that Dan Debicella was gaining the necessary momentum required to win his party's endorsement at the convention. As noted, a number of state lawmakers had endorsed him and the evidence suggested growing support among the town committees. As a result of Debicella's momentum, on April 29 Russo abandoned his bid for the nomination. Shortly thereafter, on May 13, Will Gregory also withdrew his

candidacy. Russo would likely have crossed the 15 percent threshold at the convention, yet saw no point in waging a fractious primary against his friend and former senate colleague. In his press conference announcing his decision to withdraw, Russo graciously acknowledged that Debicella had emerged as the strongest and best candidate in the race. He also stated that Debicella had the best chance among Republicans to unseat Himes in the general election. He then publicly endorsed Debicella for Congress. According to data recorded by the Center for Responsive Politics, Russo's last financial report revealed that he had raised \$94,674. Of this amount, only \$2,960 remained. Ninety-eight percent of Russo's campaign money was raised through individual contributions.

Gregory did not have anywhere near the required 15 percent of delegates necessary to qualify for a primary election, nor was he interested in gaining access to the ballot by way of petition. In his e-mail announcing his decision to withdraw, Gregory cited the financial advantage of his Republican opponents, but stopped short of endorsing any one particular candidate. As reported by the Center for Responsive Politics, Gregory had raised only \$19,008, of which \$8,298 remained. Individual contributions accounted for 99 percent of his campaign funds.

The Nominating Convention

The Republican nominating convention was conducted at the Hartford Convention Center on May 21-22, 2010. Unlike previous nominating conventions for Congress, the Republicans nominated all of their congressional candidates at the state convention, rather than conduct five separate district conventions. With respect to the fourth district nomination, the delegate tally from the seventeen communities within the district was overwhelmingly in favor of Debicella. Debicella, whose name was placed in nomination by state senator John McKinney, the son of the late Congressman Stewart B. McKinney, won a majority of delegates on the first ballot from fourteen of the district's towns, resulting in 78 percent of the delegate vote. Neither Herrmann,

Merkle, nor Torres won the necessary 15 percent to automatically qualify for a primary. The delegate vote by each community is shown in table 14.

Table 14
Republican Delegate Tally for Fourth District Nomination

Town	Debicella	Herrmann	Merkle	Torres
Bridgeport	6	0	0	9
Darien	14	1	0	0
Easton	0	6	0	0
Fairfield	24	1	1	0
Greenwich	27	0	1	0
Monroe	10	0	0	1
New Canaan	6	2	4	0
Norwalk	18	2	4	0
Oxford	7	0	0	0
Redding	6	0	0	0
Ridgefield	4	1	8	0
Shelton	16	0	0	0
Stamford	32	2	0	0
Trumbull	17	0	2	0
Weston	6	0	0	0
Westport	8	0	5	0
Wilton	3	0	9	0
Total Number	204	14	34	10
Total Percent	78	5	13	4

Source: Thomas Lambert, “Inside the 4th District Congressional Caucus,” May 21, 2010. Available online at <http://blog.ctnews.com/election2010/2010/05/21>.

Although Debicella had dominated the convention, Herrmann, Merkle, and Torres each indicated that they would petition their way onto the primary ballot. It was clear that the fourth district nominating contest was far from over. Immediately after the convention, the petitions were in circulation and a four-way primary

contest was underway. Primary day for both parties and for all offices was scheduled for Tuesday, August 10. State election law required candidates to collect 1,988 petition signatures by June 8 in order to gain access to the fourth district Republican primary ballot. This number represented 1 percent of the votes cast in the previous fourth district election. The required percentage of signatures is prescribed by state election law.

And Then There Were Three

Approximately two weeks after the May convention, the field of contenders for the fourth district nomination was unexpectedly reduced from four candidates to three. Easton's First Selectman Tom Herrmann, who was the leader in fundraising and, if one accepts the validity of the poll that he released, in voter support, abruptly withdrew from the race due to a controversy involving forged petition signatures in the city of Norwalk. Upon checking the validity of Herrmann's petition signatures, Norwalk's Republican Registrar of Voters Karen Doyle Lyons noticed the name of Patricia Risely. Risely was the wife of Norwalk's Republican Town Committee chairperson, Art Scialabba. The signature itself was described as illegible, the printed name barely legible, the date of birth incorrect, and the street address inaccurate.¹ Lyons noted that additional signatures on Herrmann's petition also raised "red flags." Risely emphatically stated that she never signed Herrmann's petition. Her husband immediately filed a complaint with the state Election Enforcement Commission charging the Herrmann campaign with fraud.

Initially the Herrmann campaign went into a defensive mode, noting that the campaign had collected approximately 2500 signatures, which was well beyond the number required for ballot access. It was suggested that a few aberrant signatures, although unfortunate, were inconsequential. It soon became clear however, that while on average 83 percent of Herrmann's signatures were verified in most of the towns within the district, the verification rate was considerably lower in Norwalk. Thus, the verification rate in

Norwalk, combined with discrepancies in surrounding towns, called into question whether or not Herrmann did in fact have enough valid signatures to qualify for the August primary.² Due to the controversy which cast aspersions on his candidacy for Congress, and rather than wait for final verification of his petition signatures which could be time consuming, Herrmann saw no reason to continue what had now become a tarnished candidacy for Congress. On June 16, Herrmann announced that he was withdrawing from the congressional contest. Herrmann's statement to the media was clear, forthright, and very cognizant of what had transpired in Norwalk: "Despite the hard work of dedicated volunteers and other staff throughout the district, it appears that we will not be able to satisfy the procedural requirement to be on the Republican primary ballot. Although we collected well over 1,988 signatures required from qualified Republican voters, we do not believe enough will be validated to meet the threshold."³ Herrmann's once-promising candidacy was now over due to the reckless conduct of a campaign worker. At the time of his departure from the race, the Center for Responsive Politics reported that Herrmann had raised a total of \$571,294, with \$496,362 still on hand. Seventy percent of his reported money was his own, with 29 percent from individual contributions. Herrmann had by far the most money in his war chest compared to the other candidates. He subsequently endorsed Debicella for Congress.

Thus, by the third week of June, the field of Republican congressional candidates had been cut in half. The contest was now between Debicella, who clearly had the support of the Republican establishment, outsider Rob Merkle, a very conservative candidate formally backed by the Tea Party, and Rick Torres, also a conservative who perceived himself as the "third choice" among Republican primary voters. Moreover, a three-way primary seemed certain in light of the fact that both Merkle and Torres had each secured enough validated signatures to appear on the primary ballot in August. Although Debicella had easily dominated the convention and was still regarded as the frontrunner for the nomination, there was still reason for the state senator to be concerned. After all, both

Merkle and Torres had acquired enough signatures for the primary ballot with relative ease, and there appeared to be a respectable amount of support among conservative Republicans within the district for both candidates. At the same time, although he was not a congressional incumbent, DeBicella was a state senator and thus depicted by his opponents as part of the “political “establishment.” In election year 2010, voters, particularly Republican voters, were restless, angry, and hardly enamored with establishment politicians. Would such a pervasive attitude affect the outcome of the fourth district nominating contest?

Despite the misgivings some voters had towards establishment politicians, DeBicella was clearly in the strongest position as the campaign moved closer to primary day. As reported by the Center for Responsive Politics, DeBicella’s fund raising report as of July 21, 2010, less than three weeks prior to the August 10 primary, recorded that he had raised \$819,617 with \$492,572 cash on hand. One hundred percent of DeBicella’s funds had been raised through individual contributions. Neither Merkle nor Torres were remotely close to DeBicella with regards to fundraising. Merkle’s report indicated that he had raised \$81,044 with \$4,351 cash on hand. Ninety-five percent of Merkle’s campaign money had been raised through individual contributions, with 2 percent raised from PACs. Torres had raised only \$54,021 and had \$3,041 cash on hand. One hundred percent of his campaign money had been raised from individual contributions.

As primary day approached, the federal campaign finance reports of the three candidates suggested a tremendous advantage for DeBicella. In addition to his fundraising advantage, another advantage for DeBicella was that both Merkle and Torres were essentially fighting for the same slice of the Republican primary electorate. Merkle and Torres were both endorsed by conservative organizations and in many ways were almost identical to one another on key issues. Thus, it was quite likely that both candidates would be dividing what potentially could be a decisive conservative voting block on primary day. With voter turnout likely to be low on August 10, the turnout among energized conservatives could sway

the primary outcome. But the potential of the conservative vote would likely be neutralized with two strident and controversial conservatives in the race.

Despite ominous prognostications for Merkle and Torres, both candidates continued to express optimism regarding their prospects for victory. Both candidates were confident that an upset was in the making that would likely stun the Republican establishment and political pundits. Approximately one month prior to the primary, Torres, in a personal phone interview with this author, believed that debates could be the key to his success in the primary election.⁴ However, as of mid-July, only one debate among the three candidates had taken place. The debate held in Danbury was aired on Comcast. Torres felt that more “facetime” as he put it, would demonstrate to primary voters that he was the most knowledgeable candidate. Moreover, Torres felt that more televised debates would demonstrate that he, rather than Rob Merkle, was the only true conservative in the race.

It was apparent that Merkle was banking on the support of an energized Tea Party movement in the fourth district. This was clearly Merkle’s base of support, and it was well understood that his chances of winning the Republican primary depended heavily on the extent to which Tea Party activists could be mobilized. Merkle was confident that Tea Party voters would put him over the top in the primary election. Merkle also stated that he had a “virtual” organization in each of the district’s seventeen communities. In an interview with AP reporter Pat Eaton-Robb, Merkle put it this way: “There are 3,000 to 5,000 Tea Party members in the fourth district alone. These are passionate volunteers that are willing to be organized and go out there and do the heavy lifting and the retail politics.”⁵ It was clear that the August 10 primary would be the first major and visible test of the Tea Party’s strength in the fourth congressional district. There was, however, a minor test of the movement’s strength prior to the Republican primary which deserves comment. This contest, which was largely conducted under the radar of the mass media, provided a glimpse into the emerging influence of the Tea Party within Fairfield County. A concise summary of this “under the radar” contest follows.

The Republican Nominating Contest for the 132nd Legislative District

In 2010, two candidates competed for the Republican Party's nomination for the 132nd state legislative district. This district, like all house districts in Connecticut, consists of approximately 30,000 residents. The 132nd district is contained within a portion of the town of Fairfield. The two Republican candidates competing for their party's nomination were Brenda Kupchick and Christopher DeSanctis. Kupchick had been a constituent service representative on Congressman Shays's district staff, a businesswoman for many years, an elected member of Fairfield's Representative Town Meeting (RTM), and a member of several committees and commissions in the town of Fairfield. At the time of her candidacy she was a constituent service representative for state senator John McKinney. Like Shays and McKinney, Kupchick was known as a moderate and centrist Republican. Her candidacy was endorsed by a number of moderate Republicans, including Shays and McKinney, the former Republican first selectman of Fairfield, and several former state representatives also from Fairfield.

DeSanctis was a former Communications Aide to the former mayor of Jersey City, New Jersey. He had also been appointed by Connecticut Governor M. Jodi Rell to a transportation council and by the state house minority leader Lawrence Cafero to a property tax commission. He was an adjunct political science professor at Sacred Heart University and worked as a development and communications professional for private schools and other non-profit organizations. DeSanctis was an evangelical Christian and known in Republican circles as a very principled conservative. He was the Republican Party's nominee for the 132nd district in 2006, but lost the election to Democratic incumbent Tom Drew.

Although the 2010 nominating contest was between two Republicans, there was nevertheless a fairly stark contrast between the two candidates with respect to ideology. What also made this race different from many other state legislative primaries in Connecticut was that the Tea Party was making its voice known by

formally endorsing DeSanctis. The Tea Party at this point in time was active primarily in national politics, but within the context of Connecticut politics, it had yet to make its presence felt. DeSanctis was endorsed by two Tea Party organizations, Right Principles, headed by the controversial and outspoken Fairfield resident Bob MacGuffie, as well as the Fairfield Tea Party. MacGuffie was one of the central figures of the Tea Party movement in the United States and had authored the statement of principles subscribed to by many Tea Party groups across the country. Thus, at the risk of oversimplification, it seemed as if the Republican nominating contest for the 132nd district would serve as the first serious test of the Tea Party's electoral influence within the confines of Fairfield County. Because any registered Republican within the 132nd district was allowed to participate in the caucus, there was reason to believe that Tea Party activists would make a concerted effort to dominate the caucus proceedings. The caucus was scheduled, for May 18, 2010.

The Caucus Results

As the Republican nominating caucus for the 132nd legislative district concluded, it was evident that the Tea Party's presence had been pronounced, although not enough to overcome the establishment's support for Kupchick. The final caucus vote was 206 for Kupchick and 178 for DeSanctis. There were five polling places within the district where registered Republicans were allowed to vote. In some respects, the Fairfield caucuses had the appearance of a primary election. Five polling places which provided opportunities for any registered Republican to participate seemed a far cry from the more typical closed caucuses dominated by party organization officials. There was a certain robustness to the caucuses, unlike caucus contests in many other communities. The ballots were officially counted at the Roger Sherman School, which also served as one of the five polling places. Although there were no exit polls conducted, it was evident that Tea Party activists did participate in the caucus proceedings and were very attracted to DeSanctis's

conservative message. As DeSanctis noted in an interview with this author, “Going up against such a strong and experienced candidate with tremendous establishment support, such as Brenda, and yet coming so close to winning, was almost seen as a victory of sorts.”⁶ In a conversation between DeSanctis and state senator McKinney following the caucus, McKinney noted how “shocked” he was when the final votes were tallied. He did not expect the contest to be as competitive as it was. Despite encouragement from Tea Party activists and other supporters for DeSanctis to wage a primary, he chose not to do so. Rather than contest the nomination, he instead published a letter in which he thanked his supporters and endorsed Kupchick’s candidacy.

As noted, few journalists devoted much coverage to the dynamics of this Republican nominating contest. This was understandable, as state legislative nominating caucuses are not the subject of prime time newscasts. Nevertheless, this seemingly low profile nominating contest did provide insight into the rising power of the Tea Party movement in Fairfield County. An important question was thus raised. Did the Republican nominating caucus for the 132nd state legislative district help prepare and motivate the Tea Parties for the forthcoming congressional primary scheduled for August 10? The results of the congressional primary would shed more light on the Tea Party’s influence.

The Blogosphere and a Minor Brushfire

In the days prior to the August 10 primary, the so-called “blogosphere,” not surprisingly, was home to myriad posts concerning the three Republican candidates. Supporters of the candidates would post and, of course, there would be the usual rebuttals. Political scientists have yet to empirically gauge the effect of blogs on voting behavior, and there will be no attempt to do so in this study. It was unlikely that bloggers, right or left, were in any way structuring the outcome of the Republican congressional nominating contest. There was, however, one rather tawdry episode that arose from a YouTube clip entitled “Reefer Rob” which deserves

mention. This rather distasteful clip resulted in a story published in the *Connecticut Post* on July 18, 2010. The article was penned by *Post* reporter Rob Varnon and entitled “Reefer Madness Grips GOP Congressional Race.”⁷ The story involved Rob Merkle’s arrest in Florida in 2001 for possession of a marijuana joint. He was charged with a misdemeanor and his punishment involved participation in a first time offender program, along with a stint of community service. The video clip, which gave rise to Varnon’s story, was clearly intended to cast aspersions on Merkle’s character.

The video, which contained an assortment of disparaging images of Merkle set to the tune of Afroman’s “Because I Got High,” appeared to be the handiwork of an individual whose pseudonym was “harryrockwell88.” An attempt by reporter Varnon to reach the producer of the clip for comment was unsuccessful. Merkle informed Varnon that the video, at least in his view, skated very close to libel. Merkle also suggested that Torres was likely behind the video, although he admitted that he lacked proof of Torres’s involvement. Torres denied involvement in the video, although he did tell Varnon that “Everything is fair game” and that “people want to know the character of a person.” Torres admitted to Varnon that he too had once smoked marijuana, but at a much younger age than when Merkle was arrested. The article further noted that the two candidates disagreed over the issue of legalizing marijuana. Merkle was opposed to the legalization of marijuana and believed that marijuana users should be prosecuted. Torres favored the legalization of marijuana, which is the position supported by libertarians.

In the article, Torres accused Merkle of being hypocritical on this issue, given his arrest record and lenient treatment by the court.⁸ But what made this political skirmish particularly fascinating, at least in this author’s view, was how the subject of marijuana could actually surface as a point of contention between two conservative and very principled candidates for the United States Congress. State senator Debicella probably read the *Post’s* article with much amusement and likely enjoyed watching his two primary opponents collide over such an arcane and inconsequential issue. The “reefer” issue was hardly the high water mark of the Republican nominating contest.

With respect to DeBicella, it was apparent that in the days just prior to the August 10 primary, the Republican frontrunner, rather than criticize his primary opponents, was looking ahead to the general election. He began running ads on television two weeks prior to the August primary in which he presented himself as a fiscal conservative. Not surprisingly, DeBicella criticized Jim Himes as a free-spending, big government Democrat. Neither Merkle or Torres were running television ads due to their shallow war chests. DeBicella also issued a controversial press release critical of Himes's support of signs along various Connecticut highway construction sites that had been funded by federal stimulus money. The signs read *Putting America To Work: Project Funded By The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act*. DeBicella accused Himes of wasting federal dollars on the signs that had been funded by stimulus tax dollars and costing in the vicinity of \$125,000. DeBicella further criticized Himes for his support of the stimulus plan itself:

These signs are just one example of how the stimulus has been an absolute failure in Fairfield County. Congress and Jim Himes are wasting taxpayer dollars, while doing nothing to help create jobs. Every Fairfield County family has been saddled with another \$10,000 in debt as a result of Jim Himes's vote in favor of the stimulus – yet our unemployment still hovers around 10 percent.⁹

The Himes campaign immediately responded to DeBicella's press release by referring to him as a "hypocrite" who routinely took credit for publicly funded projects in his state senatorial district. It was evident that the general election campaign for both candidates had begun well before the August 10 primary.

The August 10 Primary: And Then There Was One

As expected, DeBicella won the Republican primary with relative ease. He won 16,493 votes, which accounted for 60 percent of total votes cast. Merkle won 6,578 votes, which comprised 24

percent of the vote. Torres received 4,464 votes, which was 16 percent of votes cast. Such figures included 100 percent of reported precincts.¹⁰ Table 15 presents the town-by-town results.

Table 15
2010 Republican Primary Election Results
for the Fourth Congressional District

Town	Debicella	Torres	Merkle
Bridgeport	342	448	138
Darien	1216	139	300
Easton	214	180	55
Fairfield	1,549	680	455
Greenwich	2,254	315	769
Monroe	655	160	102
New Canaan	899	251	532
Norwalk	1,171	196	704
Oxford	352	213	79
Redding	353	72	212
Ridgefield	775	190	615
Shelton (Part)	1,243	110	184
Stamford	2,607	422	233
Trumbull	1,084	684	233
Weston	333	62	83
Westport	1,001	204	241
Wilton	445	138	643
Total	16,493 (60%)	4,464 (16%)	6,578 (24%)

Source: Office of Secretary of State, Hartford, Connecticut.

Debicella's war chest in comparison to Merkle's and Torres's, his name recognition as a state senator, the support he received from party organizations in the various towns throughout the district, as well as his moderate brand of Republicanism which characterizes the majority of registered Republicans in the fourth district, contributed to Debicella's overwhelming primary victory. The state senator won fifteen of the seventeen communities within the district.

Torres won Bridgeport, which was his home town, and Merkle carried Wilton. In many of the communities, as the data show, Debicella received landslide victories.

Whether or not Merkle's and Torres's supporters within the fourth congressional district would rally behind Debicella in the general election was a legitimate question. Like the two candidates, supporters of Merkle and Torres, many of whom were associated with, or at least sympathetic to, the Tea Party, were "hard core" conservatives who placed principles ahead of politics. A moderate Republican willing to compromise in the interest of winning moderate voters, and hence the general election, was not the type of politician favored by supporters of Merkle or Torres. Thus, there was reason to believe that Merkle's and Torres's supporters might be inclined to stay at home on election day, rather than vote for a moderate Republican. This had to be a serious concern for the Debicella campaign, particularly since Merkle and Torres together collected 40 percent of the Republican primary vote.

However, the notion that Tea Party supporters in the fourth congressional district would stay at home on election day was not a view that was necessarily shared by Tea Party spokesperson MacGuffie. In an interview with this author, MacGuffie indicated that while Tea Party supporters were less than enamored with Debicella, it was still likely that they would support the state senator on election day simply because of their opposition to Congressman Himes. MacGuffie described the somewhat conflicted situation in these terms:

The grassroots in the 4th believe that Debicella generally buys into the big government model to some degree. Both his voting record and public statements are mixed as to whether he holds, or would fight for any conservative beliefs. While he may deliver a critical vote or two for us, e.g., repealing healthcare, he does not exude the spirit of one who will vigorously fight for conservative beliefs – he believes in compromise rather than confrontation with

failed Liberal ideology. We therefore believe he is not tough or tenacious enough to go on a relentless offensive in the campaign against Himes. The citizens need to see that Himes's philosophy, guiding stars, and voting record are all wrong for both his district and the nation. . . . We will continue to oppose Himes at his every public appearance (as we have for the past year) and weaken him in the public eye. A realistic take on the 4th district grassroots is that many will continue to protest Himes, some may take actions on behalf of Debicella's campaign, but none will stay home on Election Day. There is far too much at stake for the Republic.¹¹

The general election campaign between Himes and Debicella was destined to be a bruising political battle. It was evident from the very beginning that attack ads and negative campaigning would be employed with regularity in order to define one's opponent. This became obvious shortly after Debicella gave his primary election victory speech at the Norwalk Inn. On the very night of Debicella's victory speech, in which he proclaimed that the forthcoming election would be about "putting America back on track" and preserving "the future of our country," the Himes campaign circulated a strongly worded and caustic global e-mail that criticized the voting record of the state senator.¹² The attack e-mail, if that's what it can be called, was distributed by Mark Henson, the campaign manager for Congressman Himes. The e-mail described Debicella as "radical," due to his record of supporting insurance companies over the medical needs of children and cancer patients, "reckless," for having the worst environmental record of any Connecticut state senator, and "wrong," for being one of three senators to vote against a bill that would have required hospitals in Connecticut to provide emergency contraception for women who were raped. The extremely disparaging statements from the Himes campaign on the very night of the primary suggested rather clearly that the Congressman viewed Debicella as a formidable opponent.