

CHAPTER SEVEN

The 2010 Election Results

Congressman Jim Himes won the 2010 congressional election and was reelected to Congress. He received 53 percent of the popular vote, while Debicella won 47 percent of the vote.¹ Himes, along with his fellow Democrats from Connecticut, bucked the massive “red” wave that swept the nation on election day. All five of the Democratic congressional incumbents in Connecticut were reelected, and a Democrat was once again elected to the U.S. Senate. Moreover, for the first time in twenty years, Connecticut voters elected a Democratic governor and lieutenant governor. The four constitutional offices, which include the secretary of state, state treasurer, attorney general, and state comptroller, were also won by Democrats. Additionally, a large majority of Democrats were reelected to both chambers of the Connecticut General Assembly, further ensuring Democratic hegemony for at least another two years. With legislative redistricting scheduled for 2011, it is likely that the Democrats will rule the state for at least another decade.

The national political scene, however, was quite unlike that which occurred in Connecticut. After losing the House of Representatives to the Democrats in 2006, the Republicans were able to once again win a majority of seats. Political analysts such as Charlie Cook and Stuart Rothenberg were correct in their forecasts. Both analysts predicted large Republican gains in the House, similar to what happened in 1994 when the Republicans won an additional

52 seats. Prior to the 2010 election, the Democrats controlled 255 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Republicans 178 seats. There were two vacancies in the House. As a result of the 2010 election, the House of Representatives underwent a sea change with respect to partisan composition. The Republicans gained 63 additional seats, resulting in 242 seats under the control of the GOP, and 192 seats occupied by Democrats. By every measure, the election of 2010 was a stunning loss for the Democratic Party and President Obama. Republican Congressman John Boehner, the former House Minority Leader, replaced Nancy Pelosi as the Speaker of the House, and the chairmanships of every standing and subcommittee in the House of Representatives were now controlled by Republicans. Elections have consequences.

The red wave was also evident in Senate elections, although the Democrats were still able to retain their majority status. Prior to the 2010 election, the Democrats controlled 59 seats in the Senate (including the two seats held by Connecticut's Independent-Democrat Senator Joseph Lieberman and Vermont's Independent Senator Bernard Sanders, both of whom caucus with the Democrats), while the Republicans occupied 41 seats. The 2010 election resulted in a gain of 6 seats for the Republicans. Democrats now occupied 53 seats and the Republicans 47 seats. The two Senate seats in Connecticut, however, remained in the hands of the Democrats. Democrat Dick Blumenthal, the state's attorney general, defeated Republican Linda McMahon, a wealthy businesswoman and former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment in a widely-reported contest for the seat vacated by retiring Democratic senator Christopher Dodd. McMahon had spent close to \$50 million of her own money during the campaign, the most money that had ever been spent by a candidate for public office in Connecticut.

Also on the national scene, the Republicans made impressive gains in the 2010 gubernatorial contests. Prior to the election, 26 governorships were under the control of Democrats and 24 were controlled by Republicans. The election of 2010 resulted in 29 governorships in the hands of Republicans and 20 under the control of Democrats. The Rhode Island governorship was won by an

Independent. In Connecticut, Dan Malloy, the former mayor of Stamford, defeated businessman Tom Foley in what was a hotly-contested and close gubernatorial contest.

The Fourth District Contest

Congressman Himes had a very strong showing in Bridgeport, Norwalk and Stamford. The three cities are at the core of Himes's base and were highly instrumental in returning him to Congress. An impressive urban vote, certainly facilitated by President Obama's visit to Bridgeport only three days prior to the election, made an important difference with respect to the election outcome. In the previous mid-term election of 2006, Democrat Diane Farrell received 13,351 votes in Bridgeport. In the 2010 mid-term election, Congressman Himes won 17,644 votes in the city of Bridgeport. Himes also won more votes in Norwalk and Stamford compared to Farrell in 2006.

In addition to Obama's Bridgeport visit, which most certainly resonated with urban voters throughout Fairfield County, one must also consider President Bill Clinton's eleventh hour visit to Norwalk on behalf of Democratic candidates. Like Obama's visit to Bridgeport, the former President's rally in Norwalk further motivated the Democratic Party's urban base. In 2006, Farrell won 11,794 votes in Norwalk and 16,589 votes in Stamford. In 2010, Himes won 14,639 votes in Norwalk and 20,281 votes in Stamford. If we compare the differences in vote totals between Himes and Farrell in the three cities, we see that Himes won a total of 10,830 more votes in 2010 than Farrell in 2006.

It is clear that President Obama's visit to Bridgeport, along with President Clinton's visit to Norwalk, energized the district's urban vote, much to the benefit of Congressman Himes. Reflecting on Himes's victory, Debicella also emphasized the significance of the urban vote in the fourth district:

Jim Himes won because of the turnout of his Democratic base in the cities. . . . Unlike other areas of the country, urban Democrats turned out to vote in Fairfield County. For example, Norwalk had 59 percent turnout, higher than many of the suburbs.²

Debicella elaborated on the reasons behind the impressive urban turnout:

I believe there were two underlying drivers helping Himes in the cities. First, he had President Obama and President Clinton visit the district on his behalf in the final 72 hours of the campaign (Bridgeport and Norwalk respectively). Second, Dan Malloy and the public employee unions organized an intense get-out-the-vote effort in his hometown of Stamford and the neighboring town of Norwalk. While this effort was focused on the gubernatorial race, Himes and other down-ticket Democrats benefited from it.

Himes's margin of victory over Debicella was more than 13,000 votes. He received a total of 115,351 votes while Debicella won 102,030 votes. Himes was also cross-endorsed by the left-leaning Working Families Party, which delivered 4,605 votes to his reelection effort. This figure is included in his vote total. Connecticut election law allows for candidates to be endorsed by multiple parties. The result is that a candidate's name can appear on more than one line on the election ballot. The cross-endorsement was helpful, but not critical to Himes's reelection. In addition to handily winning the three cities, Himes also carried Fairfield (by only two votes), Redding, Weston, and Westport.

Debicella's support was clearly in the suburbs. The state senator won ten of the district's suburban communities, including Darien, Easton, Greenwich, Monroe, New Canaan, Oxford, Ridgefield, part of Shelton, Trumbull, and Wilton. His strategy was to offset the urban vote by winning the suburban communities by large margins. In some communities, this strategy was successful, but not in all of them. In several of the communities won by Debicella, his margin of victory over Himes was not vast. The state senator won Greenwich by 10 points, Ridgefield by 8 points, Wilton by 8 points, and Trumbull by only 6 points. Thus, somewhat less than impressive margins of victory in several traditional Republican suburbs, combined with losing four suburban communities, in addition to very heavy losses in the three cities, accounted for Himes's 13,000 vote margin. The Debicella

campaign was less than successful in convincing suburban voters to support his candidacy. Although it is difficult to ascertain due to the absence of exit polls, one can surmise that the electoral impact of Tea Party organizations within the district was rather minimal. Despite their strong opposition to Himes, there is reason to believe that a number of Tea Party activists, who, as previously noted, favored Merkle over Debicella in the Republican primary, chose not to vote on election day.

Table 16 shows the percentage of votes gained by the two candidates in each of the communities within the district. For comparative and tracking purposes, the results of the 2008 and 2006 congressional elections are also included.

Table 16
Congressional Election Results in the Fourth District
D=Democratic; R=Republican

	2006		2008		2010	
	D	R	D	R	D	R
Bridgeport	68	32	80	20	84	16
Darien	32	68	30	70	33	67
Easton	43	57	40	60	42	58
Fairfield	46	54	46	54	50	50
Greenwich	44	56	44	56	45	55
Monroe	41	59	44	56	42	58
New Canaan	35	65	31	69	35	65
Norwalk	52	48	60	40	61	39
Oxford	41	59	47	53	41	59
Redding	49	51	46	54	52	48
Ridgefield	48	52	38	62	46	54
Shelton (part)	41	59	48	52	35	65
Stamford	54	46	58	42	61	39
Trumbull	42	58	45	55	47	53
Weston	53	47	45	55	53	47
Westport	53	47	47	53	56	44
Wilton	44	56	41	59	46	54

Source: Statement of the Vote, Office of Secretary of State, Hartford, Connecticut.

The Bridgeport Debacle

As the 2010 election was unfolding, an extremely distressing news flash appeared indicating that the city of Bridgeport had, quite incredibly, run out of ballots. Hundreds of voters were left standing in line with no opportunity to vote. It was quickly learned that the city had printed only 29,000 ballots, which proved far less than what was needed to accommodate the throngs of voters who were motivated to vote due to President Obama's eleventh hour rally at Bridgeport's Harbor Yard Arena. The shortage was perplexing in light of the fact that approximately 67,000 individuals are registered as voters in Bridgeport, and that virtually every election official expected a large turnout due to President Obama's dynamic rally.³ How the city of Bridgeport could have miscalculated the number of potential voters was a mystery to say the least. The shortage of ballots prompted election officials to issue a formal request to a judge to keep the polls open in Bridgeport for an additional two hours. The request, which was processed by Secretary of State Susan Bysiewicz, was formally granted and the polls were allowed to remain open until 10:00 P.M.

According to the *Connecticut Post* most of the city's twenty-five voting precincts had run short of ballots by the middle of the afternoon.⁴ Needless to say, voters were angry and accusations of fraud and corruption swirled about. In order to alleviate the problem, poll workers frantically began handing out photocopied ballots to people waiting in line, which further fueled the controversy. The photocopied ballots could not be fed into the voting machine like optical scan ballots and thus had to be counted by hand. Many Republicans, including the combative Republican state chairman Christopher Healy, immediately questioned the validity of the photocopied and hand-counted ballots. Unfortunately, many voters, rather than wait in line, returned home without voting. It was later reported that approximately 500 or so voters cast their ballots between 8:00 and 10:00 P.M. If this wasn't enough to stir suspicion and charges of fraud, the day after the election a mysterious bag containing 355 uncounted ballots was found at one of the polling precincts.⁵

Although it is likely that the shortage of ballots in Bridgeport adversely affected the vote total for Himes rather than Debicella, the Republicans nevertheless cried foul and once again questioned the legitimacy of the election results. But despite the embarrassing controversy that unfolded in Bridgeport, the city's vote was eventually tallied, albeit later than other communities, and the election results were formally announced. Quite frankly, despite legitimate questions concerning ethics and potential corruption, what happened in the city of Bridgeport likely made little difference with respect to the fourth district contest, nor for that matter, the election results in the statewide contests.

It was difficult to assign blame to specific individuals for the Bridgeport fiasco. Moreover, it was almost humorous to watch election officials point fingers at one another. The city's Registrars of Voters, the Secretary of State, political party officials, and the city's mayor were all in one form or another blamed for the problem. Precisely who was responsible for the shortage of ballots has never been fully explained. Due to the controversy, the *Connecticut Post* commissioned an unofficial recount of Bridgeport's ballots. The recount, which was vaguely reminiscent of the Florida recount in the presidential election of 2000, was conducted during the week of November 28. The ballot recount largely confirmed the initial results.

Congressman Himes and the Suburban Vote

Although it is evident that the urban vote helped propel Congressman Himes to victory, it is important nevertheless to examine his performance in the suburban communities and to analyze why he did better than expected in these white, well-to-do, and moderately conservative towns. Several hypotheses can be advanced with respect to Himes's suburban performance.

First, Himes's strategy to portray himself as New England's "most independent" Democrat apparently resonated with moderate Republican and independent voters in the suburban communities. Suburban voters in the fourth district have for many years favored candidates and members of Congress who identify themselves as

independent-minded “mavericks” not beholden to special interests or a party platform. While one can, and should, debate Himes’s claim of “independence,” it is apparent that his ads which portrayed himself in this particular light effectively connected with suburban voters, many of whom normally vote Republican.

Second, one can hypothesize that Himes did better than expected in the district’s suburbs because of his support for the Bush tax cuts. The Bush tax cuts included cuts for middle income as well as individuals who made over \$250,000. Himes’s support for extending the cuts to the wealthy undoubtedly generated an element of support among wealthy voters in several of the district’s high income communities. As previously noted, Himes was opposed to the Bush tax cuts in 2008, but openly favored them in 2010. His election year conversion, which seemed transparent, apparently paid dividends in terms of voter support. Many voters in the fourth congressional district have benefited from the tax cuts and it was obvious that Congressman Himes was cognizant of this fact.

A third contributing factor behind Himes’s respectable showing in the suburbs, which further suppressed DeBicella’s suburban vote, pertains to his district staff’s constituent service. The Congressman’s district staff located in Bridgeport, along with his satellite staff in Stamford, had been effectively solving constituent problems since Himes took office in January 2009. The Congressman’s staff is attentive to constituent complaints and is comprised of individuals who are both knowledgeable of constituent needs and who know many of the key political figures and policy makers in the district’s seventeen communities. Within the space of only two years, the Congressman’s staff established an excellent reputation for solving the needs and problems of many fourth district residents. The work of the Congressman’s district staff likely bolstered his reputation among fourth district voters.

A fourth reason why Himes made significant inroads into the suburbs pertains to his Wall Street background, most notably his previous career with Goldman Sachs. Himes knows this world very well, and he knows how to discuss complex financial matters such as banking and financial investment with voters who are in the

same socio-economic class as he is. Himes has developed a positive connection with many wealthy voters in Fairfield County, and from all indications he has made impressive inroads into this politically important block of voters. Unlike some of his Democratic colleagues in Congress, Himes often aligns himself with rather than antagonizes this powerful financial class. When required, he knows how to speak the language of the rich and powerful, and he is at ease within privileged social circles. Although Himes did not carry the suburbs during the 2010 fourth district contest, he did however do much better in these communities compared to what the pundits predicted.

Does Congressman Himes Have a Safe Seat?

Jim Himes won his first election to Congress in 2008 on the coattails of President Barack Obama. Although President Obama once again came to his aid during his bid for reelection, it is possible that he still would have won his bid for reelection without the President's help. Turnout in Bridgeport, Norwalk, and Stamford would have been lower, but perhaps still respectable enough for the incumbent congressman to win reelection, albeit by a much closer margin. At the same time, it is important to note that political, social, and attitudinal trends within the district are favoring the Democratic Party. Moreover, Himes's ability to positively connect with both white collar and blue collar voters, his popularity among African-American and Latino voters, including his ability to speak fluent Spanish before Latino audiences, along with his growing reputation as "New England's most independent Democrat" will likely help him in future election campaigns. Additionally, the Congressman has very strong connections to financial interests on Wall Street, and as a result will normally have an impressive campaign war chest. Additionally, he has hired an effective district staff that will continue to "fix" problems for fourth district voters.

Congressman Himes survived a major challenge in 2010 and retained his seat despite the Republican tsunami which swept numerous congressional districts across the land. It is quite possible

therefore that Himes is on his way to becoming an entrenched incumbent. He has the potential of representing the fourth district for many years, in much the same way that Christopher Shays and Stewart McKinney did.

But the operative word, of course, is “potential” and one is wise to remember that in politics nothing is ever certain. Unforeseen political developments could emerge within the space of only two short years which could have the effect of derailing Himes’s congressional career. For example, the top of the ticket in presidential election years could make a substantive difference with respect to fourth district voting behavior. It is possible that in 2012, the Republican Party could nominate a Republican presidential candidate who appeals to both moderate Democrats, independents, and Republicans within the fourth district, thus providing coattails for the Republican congressional candidate, similar to the manner in which Himes himself was first elected. Although Connecticut no longer has voting machines with party levers, the top of the ticket is still a relevant factor in congressional elections. And of course there is always the possibility that a scandal could surface involving high profile Democrats which in turn could have consequences for Democratic members of Congress, regardless of how pristine their public record is. On the other hand, it is also possible that the Republicans will nominate a less than inspiring presidential candidate to head the top of the ticket, thus negating any chance of coattails for the Republican candidate. And there is always the possibility that a scandal involving the Republican Party will doom any chance of a Republican reclaiming the fourth congressional district. Recent history continues to confirm that nominations, campaigns, and elections are inevitably unpredictable and volatile.

But generally speaking, there is reason to believe that Congressman Jim Himes is becoming a formidable incumbent. A new era seems to have commenced within the fourth congressional district. And although the fourth district can now be viewed as a “swing district” in the context of congressional politics, it will nevertheless be difficult, although not impossible, for the Republican Party to reclaim this congressional seat.