

Conclusion

This study has focused exclusively on the fourth congressional district in one small New England state. As mentioned in the Introduction, this is one among 435 congressional districts in the United States. With respect to population, the fourth congressional district is home to roughly 707,000 residents, a figure that represents a mere 0.2 percent of the American population. Nevertheless, despite the very specific focus of this study, there are developments occurring within the political fabric of Connecticut's fourth district that have relevance beyond the district's borders, and which are emblematic of political trends among the New England states. This, in essence, is an added value of a case study of one congressional district. The findings, although limited in scope, are relevant to the larger study of congressional politics. Indeed, the trends uncovered in a case study often provide one not only with the opportunity to offer generalizations regarding the character of politics within the setting under investigation, but, more importantly, to make generalizations concerning trends in the surrounding region and, in some instances, in the country.

The most noticeable trend that seems to be emerging in the fourth congressional district and which is certainly portentous for the Republican Party is the slow but steady movement of wealthy, white suburban voters toward the Democratic Party. Although the wealthy suburbs are still, in general, Republican territory, the more important problem for the GOP in future elections will be the

solidification and mobilization of the Party's base among white, well-to-do voters. While the massive Republican victory in 2010 which returned Republicans to power in the United States House of Representatives might call this assertion into question, the fact of the matter is that the voting patterns examined in Connecticut's fourth congressional district over the course of the last several elections, combined with party affiliation trends, suggest a growing dissatisfaction with the GOP among upper-income and ideologically moderate voters. It is likely that such dissatisfaction is present not only in the fourth district but also in many upper-income New England suburbs that have a long history of supporting moderate Republicans. The Republican Party has not by any means lost this critical base of support, but there is reason to believe that movement towards the Democratic Party is underway.

In both 2008 and 2010, the Republican Party in the fourth district nominated congressional candidates who in many ways represented the values of moderate New England Republicans; Congressman Christopher Shays and state senator Dan DeBicella were both fiscally conservative, yet socially very moderate. Moderate Republican candidates who espouse moderate policy positions have historically appealed to suburban voters in Connecticut's fourth congressional district, as well as many congressional districts throughout the New England region. Yet Himes in 2008 and 2010 as well as Dianne Farrell in 2006 and 2004 were both able to make inroads into this key Republican voting block. As discussed in the Introduction, this can be attributed to the growing impression among highly educated, white, suburbanites that on social and moral issues the Republican Party has become too rigid and too doctrinaire. And regardless of how sincere both Shays and DeBicella were in their moderate political convictions, it was their affiliation with the Republican Party which diminished their appeal in the minds of many voters.

The "southernization" of the Republican Party has much to do with this perception.¹ In the realm of national politics, the Republican Party is now perceived by many voters as the party opposed to stem cell research, a woman's right to choose an

abortion, affirmative action, equal pay for women, civil unions, and gay marriage. Such perceptions are problematic for Republican congressional candidates in districts populated by many moderate and liberal voters. As John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira put it, the Republican Party has “rejected the new values and social structure that postindustrial capitalism is creating and nourishing.”² Moreover, as a result of ties to evangelical Christians, the Republican Party is perceived as supporting a close association between church and state. This includes support for school prayer in public schools, the posting of the Ten Commandments in public buildings, and the teaching of “intelligent design” rather than or alongside evolution. The GOP is also perceived as the party of states’ rights, which some interpret, although erroneously, as a code word for racial discrimination. And, more recently, the Republican Party has become identified as the party which subscribes to the mantra of “drill, baby, drill” for the purpose of reducing our nation’s dependence on foreign oil. The Republican Party is not perceived as the party of green technology. And while such perceptions have definitely strengthened the Republican Party’s base in certain regions of the country, most notably the South and West, it has done little to advance the Party’s appeal among voters who reside in the liberal and so-called “progressive” suburbs of Fairfield County and more generally the suburbs of New England.

Thus, what is happening in Connecticut’s fourth congressional district represents a larger regional trend. Connecticut’s fourth congressional district, like so many districts in New England, appears to be falling into the hands of the Democratic Party. The fourth district was the last in Connecticut to do so. The first and third congressional districts, currently represented by John Larson and Rosa DeLauro respectively, have been Democratic districts for many years and are essentially safe seats for Democratic incumbents. In 2006, however, Democrat Christopher Murphy was elected in Connecticut’s fifth congressional district, while Democrat Joe Courtney captured the second congressional district. Like the fourth district, the fifth and the second congressional districts were at one time represented by moderate Republicans: Nancy Johnson,

a very moderate Republican, represented the fifth district, while Rob Simmons, also a centrist Republican, represented the second district. But despite moderate positions on many issues, both of them went down to electoral defeat. Not long ago, conventional wisdom suggested that it was only arch-conservative Republican candidates who would have little chance of winning a congressional seat in Connecticut, while moderate Republicans were viewed as electable. Recent election results raise serious doubts about this long standing assumption.

The movement away from moderate Republicans in Congress and toward more liberal Democratic congressional candidates, such as Jim Himes, can be seen throughout the New England region. In 2010, of the twenty-two congressional seats up for election within the six New England states, the Democrats emerged victorious in twenty contests. This constitutes 91 percent of the congressional seats. The only exception was in New Hampshire, where the Republicans were able to capture both congressional districts. Otherwise, the five congressional districts in Connecticut, the two districts in Rhode Island, the ten districts in Massachusetts, the one at-large district in Vermont, and the two districts in Maine were all won by Democratic congressional candidates, many of whom were incumbent and liberal congresspersons. Thus, what is happening in Connecticut's fourth congressional district is in many ways a reflection of what is happening within the New England region. While some regions of the United States are clearly moving in a more conservative direction, Connecticut's fourth district, like the vast majority of districts in New England, are moving in a decidedly more liberal direction. Fourth district developments are a clear reflection of the regional realignments currently taking place at various levels of American electoral politics.³

In light of political developments in the fourth congressional district and more generally throughout New England, one very critical question that must be asked is: What will become of the Republican Party as white, moderate, and well-to-do voters continue to realign with the Democrats? One very plausible scenario is advanced by Judis and Teixeira. In their view, it is quite

possible that as Independent and Republican moderates transition to the Democrats, the smaller and more conservative elements of the Republican Party will likely gain control of the party's internal proceedings and ideological direction.⁴ As discussed throughout the previous chapters, there is an active and vocal Tea Party movement operating in Connecticut's fourth congressional district that favors very conservative Republican candidates. Thus, as moderate Republicans and Independents gravitate towards the Democrats, the "Tea Baggers," as they are known, will inevitably have more leverage in the context of Republican conventions, primaries, and caucuses. The end result of this development could very well be the future nomination of Republican candidates whose political base is closely aligned with the Tea Party but not with the majority of fourth district voters. Although the polarization of the two parties would lend itself to more distinctly differentiated choices for voters, the prospects for a Republican victory in the general election would likely be diminished. If a congressional candidate does not reflect the values of the district in which he or she is competing, then it is very doubtful that voters will find the candidate appealing. This, of course, poses a very real dilemma for the future of the Republican Party. Does the Party try to mirror the moderate and liberal views of Democratic congresspersons, such as Jim Himes, or will the Republican Party wage campaigns based on clearly defined conservative principles, regardless of political consequences?

For an example of a highly principled conservative election campaign, we might turn to the 1964 presidential election. In 1964, regarded by political scientists as a historic turning point for the Republican Party, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater was nominated as the Republican Party's presidential candidate. The Goldwater forces were able to wrest control of the Republican nomination from Nelson Rockefeller, the moderate Republican governor from the state of New York. Goldwater's controversial campaign theme, boldly proclaimed on campaign buttons, was that the Senator represented "a choice not an echo." Indeed, Goldwater's conservative and uncompromising positions were clearly summarized in his famous acceptance speech delivered at the 1964 Republican nominating

convention held at the Cow Palace in San Francisco. The highlight of his acceptance speech included the following two statements: "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." Unfortunately for Goldwater, far too many voters concluded that he was a right-wing political extremist and thus unfit to be president. As a result, he was soundly defeated in the general election by incumbent President Lyndon Baines Johnson in one of the most dramatic landslides in the history of presidential elections. Although there is much to be said for candidates who place principles ahead of politics, as Goldwater did in 1964, the fact of the matter is that on a much smaller scale an extremely conservative Republican congressional candidate in Connecticut's fourth congressional district will have a very difficult time winning a general election contest. Needless to say, it will be fascinating to watch how the Republican Party approaches fourth district contests in the years ahead.

The present case study will, I hope, prove beneficial to our understanding of not only the political nuances and particulars of Connecticut's fourth congressional district but also how political trends in this district have much in common with developments throughout the New England region. Many features of the fourth district are unique and set it apart from virtually every other district in the United States. But at the same time, the pattern of politics that is emerging in the district coincides with and parallels patterns in several New England states that will affect the character of congressional politics for many years to come. It is through the local that we come to understand the regional and the national, and additional case studies of congressional districts in various parts of the country would shed further light on the dynamic and evolving nature of congressional politics in the contemporary era.