

# A Cartwright victory could further polarize Congress



MATT CARTWRIGHT'S defeat of U.S. Rep. Tim Holden in Pennsylvania's 17th District Democratic primary last week was a spirited victory for the new liberal-leaning district. But

Cartwright's old-school Roosevelt Democratic politics will be a liability on Capitol Hill if he wins the general election in November.

Cartwright benefited from Holden's apparent indifference toward voters in Luzerne and Lackawanna counties, who now represent 80 percent of the reconfigured district. Those voters are also more liberal than Holden, a "Blue Dog Democrat" whose moderate credentials consistently swayed voters from his Schuylkill County base to his side since 1992.

Cartwright campaigned on a platform that included a public option in health insurance, more spending on jobs and infrastructure, and improved educational programs. Those policies are extremely attractive to the region's voters, most of whom are living on fixed incomes or belong to the working and struggling middle classes.

Just as appealing to those voters is Cartwright's proposal to pay for the programs by raising taxes on the richest 1 percent and by making moderate cuts in military spending.

Eliminate the cut in defense spending, and Cartwright is firmly rooted in the politics of Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose New Deal programs of the 1930s established a precedent in welfare spending that continues to the present day.

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## COMMENTARY

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But that doesn't mean Cartwright's politics will be successful in Congress.

Congressional approval ratings are at an all-time low, with only 9 percent in favor of the job Congress is doing. The 2011 session has been the least productive since 1995. The reason for the legislative gridlock is rigid partisanship.

During the Obama administration, many members of Congress have shifted further to the right in the GOP and further to the left in the Democratic Party, making the legislative process so onerous that it's difficult to solve any of the problems our country faces. Meanwhile, those problems are compounding.

One of the reasons Holden was able to survive in Congress for 10 terms was because of his ability to break partisan ranks and work with Republicans on important legislation that included immigration reform, environmental concerns and job creation.

Cartwright, who prides himself on his rigidly liberal credentials, might only add to the gridlock if he prevails in November. His advocacy of deficit-spending to create more jobs – another FDR trait – could ensure that the acrimony between both parties will continue at a time when the federal budget is already bloated.

Another reason Holden was able to hold onto his congressional seat was due to his seniority. As the senior Pennsylvania mem-

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ber serving on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, he had a significant influence on the legislation that came out of the committee and was often able to secure passage.

If Cartwright is elected to Congress, he will be starting at ground zero with only two years to prove himself and a constituency that demands immediate results. Unless he's appointed to a committee in which he can make an immediate impact, his chances of success are limited.

The power and influence of seniority in the U.S. House of Representatives should not be underestimated, particularly in Northeastern Pennsylvania which historically has benefited from the billions of dollars channeled here by such legendary pork barrelers as Daniel Flood and Joseph McDade.

While some people might question the methods of those former congressmen, it's difficult to deny that they were among the region's most effective politicians because of their seniority and bipartisanship.

Matt Cartwright strikes me as a man who will earnestly fight for the needs and interests of his constituents. But that's not enough to achieve success on Capitol Hill.

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TIMES LEADER

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