

National Republican right wing targets moderate LoBiondo

By DANIEL WALSH Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, November 29, 2009 |

The Republican Party's right wing is targeting U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, the moderate seven-term Republican who represents southern New Jersey's 2nd District.

If you search for "Frank LoBiondo" and the term RINO on Google.com, you'll get about 1,050 entries. Many are conservative political blogs, such as RemoveRinos.com or SaveTheGOP.com. While they are not all widely read, there are a lot of them, and most have something in common.

They don't like LoBiondo, and they want him out of office. Some dub him a RINO — Republican in Name Only — and call for conservative opponents to challenge him in a primary election. Prominent commentators, such as Michelle Malkin, have singled out him and other moderate Republicans as "turncoats" after they voted in June for a cap and permit system for carbon dioxide emissions.

Some conservatives are emboldened by an upstate New York election that saw a moderate Republican drop out just days before Election Day after a Conservative Party candidate drew support from 2008 vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin and others.

Could LoBiondo face electoral challenges from the right and the left in 2010? Some think so. Others don't.

LoBiondo, 63, represents a sprawling district that covers Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Salem counties and parts of Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties. He has long had his Democratic critics, as would be expected.

Erick-Woods Erickson, editor of the conservative Red State blog, noted that LoBiondo's district went for President Barack Obama, a Democrat, in 2008, but he doesn't think Democrats will nominate a significant challenger.

"My suspicion is that he's going to be more concerned about a primary challenge than one from the Democrats, because this is going to be a good year for Republicans," Erickson said.

Others think the seven-term congressman will face another ho-hum election year, with just token opposition from the Democrats. The 2008 election was the first time he received less than 60

percent of the popular vote in a re-election campaign, and he still collected 59 percent while Democrats won big elsewhere. His Democratic opponents have typically not been nearly as well-known as he is, and the party has not spent much money to support them.

Many have looked to state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, to challenge LoBiondo, and Van Drew has indicated he might like to run some day. But it probably won't be in 2010, Van Drew said.

"I don't anticipate having a congressional run," Van Drew said. "I'm just focusing on these state issues."

But, he added, "I never say never. I've been surprised before."

LoBiondo has long had one of the most independent voting records in Congress, according to Congressional Quarterly. Last year, for example, only nine House members voted with their party less often than LoBiondo.

LoBiondo said he's running for re-election and voting his conscience and on behalf of his district, not a national constituency. For example, take his vote against last year's bank bailout, which Republican leaders supported but many other Republicans opposed.

"I was convinced it was the right thing to do, and I was right," LoBiondo said. "You had a lot of Republican leadership who voted for the bailout. I don't know if people are saying they're Republicans in name only."

His willingness to go against his party's leadership — and its majority, as he has also done plenty of times — has driven right-wing anger toward him.

"Certainly you see a lot of anger on the conservative blogs, certainly on the national level, but who's going to challenge him?" said John Gizis, a University of Delaware astronomy professor and Woodstown Democrat who writes the Frank LoBiondo Record blog. "My impression is that people don't feel this will be a strong Democratic year, especially after (Gov.-elect Chris) Christie's election. Maybe they're not feeling confident."

Longtime LoBiondo watcher Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, agrees. She thinks Democrats might take a pass on seriously challenging LoBiondo this year as well, and she doesn't expect a serious primary challenge either. LoBiondo's support from labor and environmental groups and a campaign account now over \$1 million could dissuade Democratic challengers, as could the timing of next year's election. Mid-term elections have historically not been kind to the president's party, whether he was Republican or Democrat. The president's party has lost House seats in 15 of the last 17 mid-term elections.

“Mid-term elections are not a good time to do things like this, unless we find the economy progressing,” Schulman said.

No one has declared a challenge against LoBiondo.

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