

Column A Wins; A Vote About Anger, Anxiety

By RICHARD STEIER | Posted: Monday, September 19, 2011 5:00 pm

At 9:30 on the night of a special election that had taken on national significance for Anthony Weiner's old Congressional seat, Mark Weprin expressed a cautious optimism that was at odds with what the polls had been showing regarding his brother David's bid.

"The turnout is heavier than we expected, and it's in the right areas," the Queens City Councilman said, standing toward the back of the room at Cobblestones Pub, a Queens Blvd. sports bar that for one night was showing no channel other than NY1. "In the last couple of days, I felt the momentum shifting back" after David Weprin had gone from presumptive winner to shaky leader to trailing Republican Bob Turner by six points in two polls released in the final days before the vote.

The beginning of David Weprin's slide came when Ed Koch, who would eventually endorse Mr. Turner, called on Democrats in the 9th Congressional District to vote Republican as "a message" to President Obama that he had better change a position on Middle East peace talks that the former Mayor regarded as hostile to Israel, or risk massive defections of Jewish voters when he seeks re-election next year.

Unions Slow to React to Slide

That challenge gave the contest a jolt of adrenaline and Mr. Turner some attention that had previously been lacking because the 3-to-1 registration edge Democrats held over Republicans marked it as a "safe" district. A seat that was widely regarded as headed for extinction once district lines were redrawn early next year to reflect the loss of two Congressional seats statewide suddenly seemed worth fighting for, and as Mr. Turner picked up endorsements from the city's tabloids and prominent Republican used-to-be's like Rudy Giuliani and George Pataki, David Weprin seemed powerless to counter. And his unsteady performance on the campaign trail made municipal unions hesitant to rush to his aid, as if afraid they would take a drubbing by association if he lost.

Shortly after Labor Day, a switch seemed to go on, perhaps with the realization that a Turner victory would not only be a blow to Mr. Obama but would potentially lead to other serious challenges in the vicinity of the Brooklyn/Queens district to other pro-labor Democrats including State Sens. Joe Addabbo and Tony Avella. And so some key unions began to mobilize. The United Federation of Teachers geared up its formidable get-out-the-vote operation. Corey Bearak, a veteran Queens political activist, said that on Election Day he saw volunteers from both District Council 37 and Local 3 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers doing "door-to-door pulling, which they don't usually do."

It led Mark Weprin to say, while waiting for the first returns to come in, "People who wanted to make a statement before, they didn't want to vote for a statement."

By 10 p.m., the Weprin political dynasty's matriarch, Sylvia Weprin, had entered the bar, walking with a cane. Her son was trailing in the early returns by between 3 and 6 points, although his supporters—despite not knowing just which districts those returns came from—insisted the votes came from areas where he was weakest.

At 10:40 she admitted, "I'm nervous and I'm very tense. I'm not used to losing," concluding the sentence with a trilling laugh.

A few minutes later, the TV screens showed that with 24 percent of the precincts tallied, Mr. Weprin had cut the deficit to just two points, and the crowd cheered. "Statistically, it's a tie," one woman contended. But moments after she spoke, the lead was back to 4 points.

From early in the evening, the crowd in the bar told a story. Aside from a few activists from Transport Workers Union Local 100, there was no visible labor presence, even as Democratic elected officials like Council Speaker Christine Quinn, City Comptroller John Liu and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer dropped in. At 10:30, the free food was just about gone and the open bar was downgraded to cash status, and a good-sized segment of the crowd began drifting out of the place.

"I don't know," a clearly concerned Mark Weprin said at 11. "It's close, but we're down."

Mourning By Midnight

A half-hour later, Ms. Quinn was standing outside on the sidewalk, looking like someone who had come to pay her respects at a wake and then lingered amid some friendly faces until it was time to call it a night. Shortly before midnight, David Weprin arrived, intending only to tell the faithful that it looked like they were in for a long night with just 64 percent of the ballots counted, but as he mounted the stage, his younger brother told him, "AP's calling it." He wasn't ready to concede, but by midnight Mr. Turner was giving his victory speech, only the final 8-point margin still unresolved.

Late the following afternoon, Mr. Koch described himself as "very tired and very elated. Do I believe that the Democratic Party now recognizes that they can no longer take the Jewish constituencies for granted? I have no doubt about that."

Asked whether he was concerned that Mr. Turner's victory had given the Tea Party a foothold in areas that traditionally went Democratic beyond the 9th CD, where the party had held that seat in Congress for 88 years, he responded, "That's ridiculous! I wanted to send a message that can protect the Democratic Party and save them from themselves. I think that is a message worth sending."

What had bothered Mr. Koch so deeply about Mr. Obama's Mideast position was that in telling Israel to revert to the borders that existed prior to the 1967 war, he had made no such meaningful demands of the Palestinians and Hamas. Asked whether this wasn't sufficiently similar to the President's offering concessions on Social Security and Medicare to Congressional Republicans as

an opening gambit in the debt-limit negotiations as to suggest a tendency to extend himself for the side he deemed less-reasonable to engage them, Mr. Koch bristled again.

'Things Have Gotten Worse'

"I'm not a psychiatrist," he said. "What he should have said to Hamas was before Israel sits at that table, you have to renounce violence. Hamas isn't going to swap anything, because they believe Tel Aviv belongs to them. And things have gotten worse," referring to Turkey's prime minister a few days earlier making a statement Mr. Koch likened to "a declaration of war" and Egyptian authorities having stood by while demonstrators sacked the Israeli embassy in Cairo.

Asked whether he was concerned that any change in course by Mr. Obama now would be prompted solely by a need for political survival rather than genuine conviction, the former Mayor said he didn't care what motivated him. "I am hopeful that he will take my advice," he said.

A short time later, Mark Weprin acknowledged Mr. Koch's campaign had influenced the outcome. "He gave Bob Turner credibility where he had none" while also making it okay "for Democrats to vote for Republicans."

But, he said, "The No. 1 factor was people were angry. People were pissed off at government in general, and a certain segment was pissed off at the President in particular. The debt crisis killed us. People were so mad at what happened in Washington, where there was a point when it wasn't certain that Social Security checks were going to be sent out. Although I think the Republicans and the Tea Party were more at fault, in this race David was more the establishment candidate, and the President is the person in Washington that they know."

Same-Sex-Marriage Vote hurt

One Weprin supporter said one of the most-ironic twists in a race filled with them was that while Queens Democratic Chairman Joe Crowley was blistered for choosing a candidate who proved less than stellar on the stump, that was less a factor—given that Mr. Turner also committed his share of gaffes—than the anger David Weprin, an Orthodox Jew, generated among other religious Jews.

Same-Sex Marriage

Mr. Crowley, he said, had chosen Mr. Weprin in part because he was observant, figuring that could help in the heavily Hasidic Brooklyn part of the district where Mr. Obama had been weakest three years ago. For those voters, who tend to act as a bloc, this man said, Mr. Weprin's vote in favor of the same-sex-marriage bill signed into law by Governor Cuomo a couple of months ago was at least as important as their misgivings about Mr. Obama's stance on Israel. "I was surprised at the ferocity of their opposition to same-sex marriage," he said.

That view was echoed by Teamsters Local 237 President Greg Floyd, who a week before the election had alluded to what was widely viewed as disorganization in the Weprin campaign when he

said he had offered to send volunteers to help in getting out the vote and got no clear response on where they were needed.

But among non-religious and religious Jews alike in one of the city's most-conservative Democratic districts, Mr. Floyd said, the election was "definitely a referendum on the President's policies toward Israel." Having recently traveled there as part of a delegation from the Jewish Community Relations Council, the union leader said, he knew how much anxiety existed among Israelis about Mr. Obama's proposal, adding, "I don't think he should've said that without going over there to see what's going on."

He was not inclined, however, to see the result as a harbinger for future races "anywhere in Queens, Brooklyn or the rest of New York State."

Already Got Their Warning Shots

Mr. Floyd also demurred when asked whether Mr. Turner's election represented a "shot across the bow" to either the unions or to Mr. Obama about what they will be facing next year.

"The warning shot across the bow to the unions happened in Wisconsin," he said. "The warning shot across the bow of President Obama happened in the 2010 election."

Mark Weprin, discussing the Obama factor in his brother's defeat, said, "I don't think they hate the President; they're just mad, and he's the one they know."

It evoked what Mr. Floyd had said a week earlier, just prior to Mr. Obama's jobs speech, after remarking that "it doesn't seem like Congress or the leadership cares about what's happening to ordinary people."

He had been pessimistic that Mr. Obama's speech—which some commentators subsequently praised as his best since taking office—would have much impact, either in Congress or on the national mood. "I hear a good speech in church and I may be moved," Mr. Floyd said, "but it's up to me to live my life the rest of the week until Sunday. Speeches move people, but right now they're out of work or they're nervous about the economy, and they're angry."