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Classic Candidate Differences Present a Stark Choice

By ROBERT PEAR

IRON MOUNTAIN, Mich. — Differences between the Democratic and Republican candidates to succeed Representative [Bart Stupak](#) are as big as the vast expanse of northern Michigan that he has represented for the last 18 years.

The Democrat, Gary McDowell, from a small town at the eastern end of the Upper Peninsula, near Sault Ste. Marie, is a Teamster who drove a United Parcel Service truck for 33 years. He served on his county board of commissioners for 22 years and is completing six years in the state House of Representatives.

Dan Benishek, the Republican, is a surgeon from Crystal Falls, near Iron Mountain on the western side of the district, more than 225 miles from Mr. McDowell's home. Mr. Benishek boasts that he is not a career politician and has not held political office.

Republican chances to win the seat increased when Mr. Stupak, a Democrat, announced on April 9 that he would not seek a 10th term.

The Benishek campaign may also be helped by the strength of the Republican candidate for governor, Rick Snyder. Polls show Mr. Snyder with a wide lead over his Democratic opponent, Virg Bernero, in

the race to succeed Gov. [Jennifer M. Granholm](#), a Democrat.

The candidates here typify the stark choices facing voters in many competitive districts across the country. Mr. Benishek advocates less government, less regulation and lower taxes. He vows to repeal the new health care law. He promises to resist what he calls “the socialist agenda” of [President Obama](#), Congressional Democrats and their labor union allies. He supports Arizona’s tough [immigration](#) enforcement law. And he was endorsed this week by [Sarah Palin](#), the former governor of Alaska.

His unguarded comments in the primary campaign provided fodder for Democrats asserting that he would privatize [Social Security](#) and [Medicare](#) — a potentially potent argument in a district where more than one-fourth of the people are on Social Security.

Mr. McDowell boasts of his work with Republicans in the State Legislature. He supports the new health care law, but says he is open to changes if some provisions do not work. He would try to end tax breaks for companies that send jobs overseas, and says he would “take a step back from free-trade deals” to examine how best to help American manufacturing.

Both candidates support gun rights and oppose abortion rights. Each candidate says the other is too extreme for the First Congressional District, which accounts for 44 percent of Michigan’s land area but has no city with a population greater than 21,000.

One ad, by the National Republican Congressional Committee, portrays Mr. McDowell as an acolyte of Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#), on the assumption that she has few fans in this rural, socially conservative district.

In an interview at his campaign office here, Mr. McDowell, a hay farmer, said his roots were firmly in the Upper Peninsula, where his family has lived for five generations.

“I do not know the speaker,” Mr. McDowell said. “I’ve never talked to the speaker. I have no relationship with Speaker Pelosi. This race is not about her. It’s about creating good middle-class jobs. It’s about protecting Social Security and Medicare.”

Mr. Benishek sums up the theme of his campaign in three words: “Enough is enough.” He elaborates: “Enough of the waste. Enough of the spending. Enough of the debt. Enough of the arrogance in Washington, D.C.”

In a recent blog post at the conservative Web site [RedState.com](#), Mr. Benishek said he offered an alternative to the agenda that he said was being pushed by unions, progressive Democrats and “their socialist/Communist supporters.”

“Once President Obama was elected, the pace accelerated for the socialist agenda,” Mr. Benishek wrote. He said Mr. McDowell was “seeking the same agenda as Obama, Pelosi” and the Senate Democratic leader, [Harry Reid](#) of Nevada.

Mr. McDowell said: “I personally don’t know any socialists or Communists. We are proud, we are independent here in northern Michigan. But we do believe in social justice, in community, in helping each other out in tough times.”

Mark T. Gaffney, president of Michigan State [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), said: “Gary has the right profile for the district. But he is struggling a bit because of the environment. Voters across the country are angry. In northern Michigan, they are very angry because of the loss of jobs.”

Michigan has the nation’s second-highest unemployment rate, after Nevada. The rate is even higher in parts of northern Michigan that have lost jobs in the paper, forest products and auto-parts industries.

Mr. Benishek said he decided to run for the House after Congress passed “that so-called stimulus bill, which has stimulated nothing but government.”

He said Mr. Stupak had betrayed the district by agreeing to a compromise on abortion as part of the health care legislation.

And Mr. Benishek calls for stricter control of the borders. “Illegal immigrants are using our resources,

taking our jobs, filling our schools, our hospitals and our prisons,” he said, “and we are paying for it all.”



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