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In Nevada, It's Hold Nose and Cast Vote

By DAN BARRY and MICHAEL COOPER

HENDERSON, Nev. — The knock on the front door elicited the annoyed yapping of an unseen dog, followed by the appearance of a gray-haired man busily eating chips from a bag. His callers were two union workers, canvassing the neighborhood on behalf of Democrats, especially Senator [Harry Reid](#).

The man said that he knew Mr. Reid, and that Mr. Reid was an idiot. So was his Republican opponent, [Sharron Angle](#). In fact, said the man, a retired steelworker named Mario Mari, he might very well choose a third option here in Nevada: the phantom candidate known as None of the Above.

“This country is going down,” Mr. Mari said, before closing the door to a bleak Nevada landscape, where jobs are few and foreclosures many.

This is the up-for-grabs Third Congressional District, the most populous in Nevada and the most contested in this state’s contentious Senate race, sprawling across the dry terrain to form a kind of martini glass around the olive of downtown Las Vegas. It is here, in this packed suburban stretch of terra cotta roofs and crushed-rock yards adorned with Halloween skulls and campaign signs, that the battle for the country’s direction is being waged.

The two candidates could not be more ideologically different. But in these last frantic days of an extremely tight and unpleasant campaign, one with implications for the balance of power in

Washington, they are united by the same problem: the voters of Nevada do not particularly like either of them.

“More people in Nevada dislike these candidates than like them,” said Ryan Erwin, a Republican consultant in Las Vegas. As a result, he added, “It’s going to be about which side is going to persuade voters that the other candidate is worse.”

On one side, the incumbent of two dozen years: Mr. Reid, 70, the Senate majority leader, a close ally of **President Obama** and, behind the scenes, a flinty, old-school Nevadan. But if a microphone appears, he assumes the persona of a wan, Old West undertaker whose own pulse needs to be checked.

In addition to giving interviews and busily visiting key racial, ethnic and union groups, the senator is counting on a highly disciplined ground game — put in place after Republicans swept into state offices in 2002 — that does everything from sending out door-knocking union members to providing hotel maids and blackjack dealers free bus rides to early voting sites.

Finally, the Reid campaign’s closing-argument commercials are casting Ms. Angle as a flaky, even dangerous extremist. The most recent commercial for the Reid campaign ends with: “Sharron Angle? Pathological.”

On the other side, the challenger from out of nowhere: Ms. Angle, 61, this season’s anti-Obama **Tea Party** standard-bearer. A former schoolteacher, state legislator and competitive weight lifter, she has choice words for Washington and curious words for the rest of the country, as when she suggested that Islamic religious law had taken hold in two American communities. But if a microphone appears, she begins to play hide-and-seek: she hides, reporters seek.

Ms. Angle has emerged as a candidate wary of some of her Republican colleagues, and the feeling is often mutual. Sometimes she listens to the professional Republican consultants who have descended on this race; sometimes she does not. While they want her to avoid the press, they do not want her to be seen running away from cameras — which has become a common sight on Nevada television, one

that some Republicans say is entirely of Ms. Angle's design.

Although Ms. Angle usually flees microphones, she speaks clearly through her campaign commercials, which question the source of Mr. Reid's wealth and portray him as a calcified Obama toady who all but invites thuggish undocumented immigrants to your family's Thanksgiving.

In their own ways, then, both candidates are asking the same plaintive question in this close race:

What are you thinking, Nevada?

In one of the storefronts of a tired, partly vacant shopping center blessed by the bright lights of a central Las Vegas casino called Arizona Charlie's, a clutch of Republicans spent Tuesday night making telephone calls to registered Republicans. Words on a grease board underscored their mission's importance:

"Dirty Harry won by 428 votes in 1998. How many calls did YOU make today?"

Jesse Law, 28, a mortgage broker with Tea Party credentials, sat among a half-dozen other volunteers who, by the end of the day, were to have made more than 2,200 calls from this office alone. When not working at a Republican phone bank, he is leading groups of canvassers through the almost identical subdivisions carpeting the southern Nevada desert. His message is consistent:

Oust Reid.

This mantra binds the various bands of Nevada Republicans and Tea Party members, who normally find their oxygen in internal squabbling. It is a strange moment of unification, though, given how divisive a figure Ms. Angle has been.

According to a profile in The Las Vegas Review-Journal this spring, the deeply religious Ms. Angle underwent a political conversion after surviving a medical crisis — a tumor blocking her spinal fluid — three decades ago. A friend confided that she had seen Deborah, a heroine from the Old Testament, while dreaming about Ms. Angle, who interpreted this as a sign.

“Deborah was really the first woman politician,” Ms. Angle told the newspaper.

Ms. Angle went on to become a pro-gun, anti-tax state legislator from northern Nevada who relished being the antiestablishment outsider. In 2008, for example, she unsuccessfully challenged a veteran Republican leader from Reno, State Senator William J. Raggio, in a mean primary. Then, in the Republican primary for the [United States Senate](#) in June, she came from far behind to beat several established candidates, including Sue Lowden, a former chairwoman in the state [Republican Party](#).

The hurt feelings created by her audacity have not eased. Mr. Raggio, who is among several prominent state Republicans reluctantly supporting Mr. Reid, recently issued a statement that criticized Ms. Angle’s unwillingness to work with others, even those in her own party, as well as “her extreme positions” on a range of issues.

Some Republicans fear losing such a powerful ally in Washington — no matter that his name is Reid — at a time when Nevada is in precarious economic shape. And Ms. Angle’s relationship with Republicans in Washington is complicated. She eyes them warily, while they fret that their overt help might offend her Tea Party supporters.

Even so, Ms. Angle is not above accepting the help of the Republican establishment, whether by receiving significant financial support from, say, Senator [Jim DeMint](#) of South Carolina, or holding an event on Friday night with Senator [John McCain](#) of Arizona. She melds the inside with the outside, as when, during a recent appearance with [Newt Gingrich](#), she told her supporters — “Nevada patriots,” she called them — that she wanted to cut any federal spending not provided for in the Constitution.

Still, it seems that no adviser can stop Ms. Angle from being herself, as when she suggested to a rural community that Islamic religious law had taken hold in Dearborn, Mich., and Frankford, Tex., which no longer exists. (“I think that’s arguably the craziest thing that she has said, and the most dangerous,” said Jon Ralston, who writes the state’s most influential political column for *The Las Vegas Sun*.)

Her candor has caused advisers to suggest that she lie low in these last days, so low that reporters have

relied on the [Twitter](#) messages of a Democrat dressed as a chicken to track Ms. Angle's whereabouts.

But Ms. Angle's outlandish comments and harsh commercials — juxtaposing menacing, dark-skinned men with anxious white people — have not affected her ability to raise and spend money. From July 1 to Oct. 13, her campaign spent \$16.9 million, well more than the \$11.2 million spent by the Reid campaign, and her advisers say their ground game is better than people might imagine.

“If you include the enthusiasm advantage that we have, we're feeling quite good,” said Jordan Gehrke, Ms. Angle's deputy campaign manager.

In a union hall tucked among subdivisions and wisps of desert, some steelworkers, letter carriers and culinary workers filed in to get their Saturday morning coffee and marching orders before heading out to canvass for Democrats. Many of them passed a handwritten sign suggesting how to respond to “Reid Distrust.” It advised:

“Acknowledge: ‘I hear you, but despite what the media says ... Harry brings it home for NV.’”

Mike Reinecke, the state political director of Labor 2010, the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#)'s get-out-the-vote program, gave a pep talk and released them with: “See your captains, grab your packets and let's hit the pavement.”

Union members have knocked on 200,000 doors and made 48,000 calls as part of a one-vote-at-a-time effort by Democrats to counter a general disgust with the establishment — personified these days by Mr. Reid, who might otherwise be seen as a Horatio Alger character from Nevada: a poor, pugnacious kid from Searchlight who rose to become a power broker able to secure federal money for large, jobs-creating state projects.

Well aware that polls show Ms. Angle slightly ahead, Mr. Reid has been forced to shed his dour Washington persona and stump like a challenger. At a recent rally in Las Vegas's Chinatown, he posed for photographs for 45 minutes with any supporter who wanted one, then left to shake hands and share hugs at a barbecue with black supporters.

Still, Mr. Reid cannot deny being such a creature of distant Washington that he made the tone-deaf decision years ago to move into the Ritz-Carlton — a name that, in these hard Nevadan times, smacks of exclusive luxury. And for all his kisses and embraces, he still has that undertaker's parched look; he still has that propensity for clumsy statements, as when he recently suggested that: "But for me, we'd be in a worldwide depression."

With all this in tow, Richard and Tracy Griffin, a married couple who, as letter carriers, know how to calm barking dogs, headed out into the key Third Congressional District, where the chocolate-brown Black Mountains loom in the distance, the deep cuts in their sides all that exist of luxury developments never completed.

In recent elections, the global-positioning systems used by the union door-knockers could not keep up with all the new roads. Now the district is the foreclosure capital of a state that is the foreclosure capital of the nation — and Mr. Reid needs the votes of its anxious, angry electorate.

"In the beginning it was very tough," Ms. Griffin said as she went door to door, talking to laid-off workers, cranky retirees, homeowners nervous about the future. "It seems to be changing now, as we get closer to the elections, and the realization of putting her in office is starting to hit people. We have rarely heard a pro-Angle, it's usually ——" "

"Anti-Reid," said Mr. Griffin, finishing the thought.



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