

The Washington Post

Worried Democrats courting elderly voters as midterm elections near

By Sandhya Somashekhar
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, August 20, 2010; A01

Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-Va.) is no stranger to Greenspring Village, a gated retirement community in Springfield that is a frequent stop for local politicians. It leans Democratic, but that tilt is being tested in a year in which the party faces a perilous erosion of support from an age group that will probably play an outsize role in this year's elections: senior citizens.

So Connolly came by again on Tuesday. He brought cake and diabetic-friendly cookies, and made a personal plea to supporters who showed up to clasp his hand and tell them he has their vote.

"Make sure your neighbors feel that way, too," he told one couple, his hand on the woman's shoulder.

The visit was part of a recent push by Democratic leaders to highlight their commitment to Social Security in tandem with the program's 75th birthday -- and also to try to seize on the issue as a way to regain their footing with seniors. Several Republicans have revived the idea of privatizing the federal entitlement program, an idea that met with deep resistance when President George W. Bush proposed it five years ago and that Democrats are looking to exploit this year.

But the effort exposes a deeper problem Democrats face this fall: They have struggled to maintain support among seniors in recent years, even as they have racked up large margins among young adults. Voters older than 65 were the one age group that did not back Barack Obama in 2008, and their disenchantment has only grown since he took office -- especially after his health-care overhaul was passed this year.

In a poll this month by the Pew Research Center, 46 percent of seniors reported that they would be voting for the Republican on their congressional ballot this fall, compared with 43 percent for the Democrat. The most recent Gallup data showed an even starker difference: Fifty-three percent of seniors said they would vote for a Republican House candidate and 38 percent said they would opt for the Democrat.

Advertisement

Help people in need.

Donate your car, boat or RV

Free Towing • Tax Deductible

FREE
3 day vacation
to over 80
destinations



Call Toll-Free

1-877-225-9384



http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/19/AR2010081906688_pf.html

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Washington Post

Worried Democrats courting elderly voters as midterm elections near

"They are the voting group we are doing the worst with," said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster. "They are also the voting group with the highest turnout in an off-year election. So it is going to be up to the individual members of Congress to go out there and make their case personally to seniors in their districts."

The financial meltdown two years ago hit those of retirement age the hardest, and seniors remain slightly more negative about the Democratic-backed health-care overhaul than the general public, according to polls. A striking number of seniors, about 36 percent, believed the misconception that the law "allowed a government panel to make decisions about end of life care for people on Medicare," according to a July poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

That sentiment was on display at Greenspring Village, but a larger number expressed anxiety about the economy. Some said they worry that they might outlive their savings and are concerned about the prospects for their children and grandchildren.

"We have seen our assets go down. As we get old and still get older, we have to think about nursing homes and all that," said Hazel Poole, a 10-year Greenspring resident who considers herself a strong Democrat. "The part that worries me now is the health plan. I don't see how we pay for that without

going into debt more. And I keep thinking about the younger people coming up, how they're going to have to pay for all of this."

Ross K. Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers University, said the president and his party have done a poor job of assuaging the fears of the elderly at a time of enormous change and uncertainty.

"The president, I think, needs to be a better grief therapist," he said. "As inspiring as he can be to young people, he doesn't get the kind of fears that creep up on people when they get older. The 'change' mantra is one that may be superficially appealing to people, but when they get down to it, they don't really feel comfortable with change. That is especially true for seniors."

This month, Democratic leaders in the House issued a memo to their colleagues, recommending that they take advantage of the 75th anniversary of Social Security to

Advertisement

Own a new computer for just \$29.99* per week!

Call today to get the computer of your dreams, and improve your credit at the same time.



If you can afford a weekly payment of just \$29.99* for just 12 months, then you're already approved for a brand new Dell™ or HP™ Computer, guaranteed.

1-877-294-3988

GIVE US A CALL TODAY!

*Prices start at \$29.99 but may vary by model.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/19/AR2010081906688_pf.html

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Washington Post

Worried Democrats courting elderly voters as midterm elections near

reach out to these crucial voters. Although only a few Republicans have proposed privatizing Social Security, Democratic leaders suggested warning seniors of the resurrection of that Bush administration idea.

Keith Fimian, Connolly's Republican opponent in what will probably be a close race, has said he opposes privatizing the federal entitlement program. However, Connolly's campaign has criticized Fimian for his endorsement by FreedomWorks, a fiscally conservative group that supports allowing workers to divert a portion of their payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts.

Many at the Greenspring event recognized the need to fix Social Security, which is on track to go bankrupt in the coming decades without changes. However, most in attendance did not think privatizing it was the solution.

"There are people who think even today that it would be a good idea to privatize Social Security," Connolly said to the group, eliciting boos. "I will resist to my last breath any attempt to privatize Social Security."

It was a potent issue for the approximately two dozen seniors who gathered to hear Connolly speak and nibble on chocolate cake decorated with the number 75. This is a community of loyal voters and news junkies. In 2006, during the last midterm elections, 80

percent of the voters at Greenspring turned out to vote.

For most of the visit, however, Connolly simply worked the crowd, calling the women "darlin'" and cracking jokes about his Irish heritage. He threw an arm around the shoulders of one Republican he knows, and the two engaged in good-natured ribbing. Connolly greeted many by their first names, and amazed one man by recalling that he had recently turned 90.

"I know everything," Connolly responded. "I'm your congressman."

Advertisement



Send flowers
for any occasion

Bouquets \$19.99
from \$19.99^{+s/h}

ProFlowers[®]
Order ONLY at
proflowers.com/happy
or call 1-877-888-0688

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/19/AR2010081906688_pf.html

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™