

Lawrence Eagle-Tribune

Taking the Fifth

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Editor's note: The campaign is on for Congressman Martin Meehan's soon-to-be-vacated 5th District seat serving Lawrence, Haverhill, Methuen, Andover and 25 other communities. Here is a weekly look at what's happening in the campaign.

BOSTON - Niki Tsongas has a 23-point lead among Democrats in the race to succeed former Congressman Martin Meehan, according to an internal poll obtained by The Eagle-Tribune.

With 10 weeks to go before the Sept. 4 primary, Tsongas has 36 percent of likely voters, putting her ahead of Lowell City Councilor Eileen Donoghue, who was at 13 percent.

Rep. James Eldridge, D-Acton, has 12 percent, Rep. Barry R. Finegold, D-Andover, 10 percent. Rep. James Miceli, D-Wilmington, 4 percent.

Twenty-five percent of those polled are still undecided.

The poll suggests Tsongas' appeal is nearly districtwide. Finegold, according to the poll, trails Tsongas 41 percent to 20 percent in Greater Lawrence, his home area. Tsongas is ahead of Donoghue in Lowell 34 percent to 26 percent.

But Tsongas and the liberal Eldridge are neck-and-neck in the southwestern part of the 5th District, with Tsongas leading 35 percent to 32 percent.

The memo detailing the poll's results showed Tsongas's lead was virtually unchanged since May 22, the last time the campaign polled voters. Then, Tsongas had 38 percent compared to 11 percent for Finegold, 10 percent for Eldridge, 9 percent for Donoghue and 3 percent for Miceli. Twenty-nine percent were undecided.

Only the Finegold campaign responded for this item. Nairi Tashjian, a spokeswoman, said the campaign isn't focused on other candidates' polls.

"We're building a strong field organization to surprise a lot of people on election day," Tashjian said.

How good is the Tsongas poll or any poll leaked to the media? Because the poll numbers are accurate doesn't mean they're right, said David Paleologos, a Suffolk University pollster. Positive polls are leaked for a reason.

"You leak to raise money or to shape perception," Paleologos said.

The Tsongas poll would appear to be timed to refute a poll leaked by the Donoghue campaign earlier this month showing their candidate closing the gap with Tsongas. A June poll conducted for the Donoghue campaign showed Tsongas with a 23-point advantage, but that in July that lead had been whittled to 9 points.

The Donoghue poll showed Finegold at 13 percent and strong in Greater Lawrence, trailing Tsongas by 3

percent with 24 percent of the vote.

Now, Paleologos said he respects the pollsters who did the surveys for Tsongas and Donoghue, Tom Kiley and Jim Flemming, respectively. And he believes their results are accurate. But the results they get depend on the questions that are asked.

Paleologos is an independent pollster - his polls are paid for by Suffolk University and media outlets that use the information to gauge public opinion.

"The best polls are independent polls," he said.

When Paleologos conducts candidate polls, he first asks about how a candidate is viewed. He then asks who they would vote for. If a pollster asked questions that raised negatives of opposing candidates, that could cause fewer people to say they'd vote for another candidate.

Still, Paleologos said the Donoghue and Tsongas polls contain what he believes is truth: Tsongas is leading the field in all of them.

Murphy correction

Last week, we incompletely described Patrick Murphy's Shared Sacrifice Act of 1997. We caught up with Murphy, an independent for Congress, early last week.

If passed, the U.S. government would impose a tax to pay for war, including the current war in Iraq, rather than paying out of the U.S. Treasury. The tax would be paid for by people in the military or who did not serve as combat veterans.

"This is an important way to engage people in an extensive debate before we go to war," Murphy said.

The tax would be progressive, adding percentage points to the federal income tax to raise the money needed to wage war. Congress would have to report once a year on the progress of the war and vote by a simple majority to continue it and the tax.

Murphy, a 25-year-old Lowell stonemason who is not a veteran, said there is historical precedent for paying for war as you go. And, as the proposal suggests, it spreads the sacrifice in time of war.

"The first income tax was in 1861 and it was to pay for the Civil War," Murphy said. "Every war since, people have been asked to share in the sacrifice of the people over there fighting."

Congress already annually votes to continue the Iraq war, effectively doing so by reauthorizing spending for the venture. The Democratic-controlled Congress has been criticized for pushing to cut off funding for the war while leaving troops in the field.

Murphy said his plan would allow Congress to cut off funding for war and bring the troops home simultaneously.

"It's the best way to bring about an end to this war and in the future take more responsibility in how we declare war in the future," Murphy said.

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