

## Chapter 7

### **“The Virginian” vs. “The Little Mexican”: the 2002 Race in Arizona 1**

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Arizona’s newly-created First Congressional District sprawls over a rural area larger than Pennsylvania. The 2002 race for Congress in this district promised to be wide open, both figuratively and literally. Seven Democrats and six Republicans sought their parties’ nominations, and two unknown political novices emerged victorious with small pluralities of the vote in the primary elections. The general election, initially projected as a toss-up, took on national prominence in an election season with few tight races and control of the U.S. House of Representatives at stake. For the first time, rural Arizona experienced big-time national politics, accompanied by big-time money and mudslinging.

The new district had been formed in response to complaints from rural Arizonans that urban communities had dominated previous districts, causing rural concerns to be overlooked in Washington. Ironically, in 2002, rural voters found themselves choosing between two outsiders they had scarcely heard of. The general election candidates had only tenuous ties to the district and had recently established residency in the district in order to run for the open seat.

Republican Rick Renzi financed his primary win from his own deep pockets. Democrat George Cordova opted for a grassroots primary campaign, focusing on Native American and Hispanic voters and ignoring the mostly-white population centers of the district. This strategy earned him just enough support for a surprise primary victory.

Both major parties found themselves with nominees about whom they knew little. While the national Democrats hesitated to throw their full support behind the unknown

Cordova, national Republicans sensed weakness and recognized an opportunity to pick up the seat. They poured money into a negative campaign that was designed more to attack Cordova than to promote Renzi. In a bitterly negative race virtually free of substantive debate, Renzi outspent Cordova by a wide margin and eked out a narrow win.

### CONTEXT

**The district.** Covering more than 58,000 square miles, Arizona 1 is the nation’s largest congressional district that does not encompass an entire state. It stretches from Fredonia in the northwest part of the state to Duncan in the southeast, a 520-mile drive.

The district was created by Arizona’s Independent Redistricting Commission following the 2000 Census, when the state gained two seats in Congress<sup>2</sup>. By design, it is an all-rural district<sup>3</sup>. The largest city in the district is Flagstaff, with a population of



57,000. The district was not designed to be dominated by one political party. While Democrats have an 8-point registration advantage within the district, Republicans typically enjoy a higher rate of voter turnout in Arizona, and the state’s rural Democrats tend to be conservative and receptive to Republican appeals. Voters living within the district

avored George W. Bush in the 2000 election by approximately 11,000 votes; on the other hand, they supported Bill Clinton in 1996, 47 percent to 38 percent (*Cook Political Report* 2002).

The district's population is quite diverse. The voting-age population of the district is 64 percent white, 19 percent Native American, and 15 percent Hispanic. The southern part of the district, including the city of Casa Grande south of Phoenix, is heavily Hispanic, while the northeast part consists of the Arizona section of the Navajo Nation, the largest reservation in the country. (The neighboring Hopi reservation was placed in District 2, creating a large "hole" in the middle of District 1). In addition, there is a strong Mormon presence throughout the district, and the cities of Flagstaff and Prescott are growing rapidly, as retirees and others without strong ties to the region move in.

Due to its size, its low population density, and the diversity of its people, the district is neither socially nor politically cohesive. There is no one dominant media market in the district. Phoenix television and radio stations reach much of the district, but demonstrate little concern with local affairs. Phoenix's *Arizona Republic* newspaper, the state's largest circulating daily, had a northern Arizona correspondent assigned to the District 1 race, but it was not given high priority in their coverage. Three small daily newspapers, Flagstaff's *Arizona Daily Sun*, the *Prescott Daily Courier*, and the *Casa Grande Dispatch*, and one television station, KNAZ in Flagstaff (an NBC affiliate), provided local coverage of the race but did not have the resources to cover the entire district. Consequently, the District 1 race did not receive attention befitting its importance as one of the few toss-up contests in the nation.

In addition, the neck-and-neck race for Governor and a series of ballot propositions on gambling on Indian reservations drew extensive media attention and campaign spending. The gambling propositions alone attracted \$39 million in media spending (Stearns 2002); media time was scarce. District radio station employees told of campaigns so desperate to spend money that they didn't care if their ads ran in the middle of the night. In short, candidates faced a great challenge in trying to get their message out to the entire district.

**The candidates.** Given the wide-open nature of the race, the primary election was an opportunity for a variety of candidates to throw their hats in the ring. Seven Democrats, six Republicans, and two Libertarian candidates ran in the primaries.

The national and state Democratic parties chose to stay out of the primary election, largely because they did not want to alienate any of the candidates. Fred DuVal and Steve Udall were presumed by all to be the frontrunners. DuVal was a former Chief of Staff to former Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt and a member of the Clinton White House staff. Udall had the greatest name recognition of any candidate, hailing from a prominent political family sometimes referred to as "the Kennedys of the West." Only DuVal and Udall hired professional political consultants to run their primary campaigns.

Late polling in the primary election showed Diane Prescott, lawyer and businesswoman, to have emerged from the crowded primary field as another serious contender for the Democratic nomination. This prompted an unregistered group called "Arizonans for a Democratic Congress" to attack her with phone calls and mailers claiming she had been registered as a Republican as recently as October 2001 (Candee 2002b).

The Democratic primary vote was fragmented across many candidates. Venture capitalist George Cordova, a virtually unknown candidate, won the primary in a stunning upset with 22 percent of the vote.

Thirty-seven year old Cordova was not on anyone's radar screen. Born in Mexico, he immigrated to southern Arizona with his father, a migrant farm worker, at age five. He graduated from Arizona State University and worked with businesses around the southwest (Kitching 2002b). Cordova moved to the small town of Payson to establish residency in the district in late 2001. He ran a grassroots campaign, concentrating his efforts largely in areas with large minority populations. He campaigned for months on the Navajo Nation, meeting Navajos in chapter houses throughout northern Arizona. Convicted felon Peter MacDonald, the controversial former Navajo Nation President, served as one of his campaign advisors. Cordova spent so much time among the Navajo that they gave him the affectionate nickname "Nakai Yazhi" ("the Little Mexican") (Maniaci 2002). He also courted the vote of Latino Democrats in the district. In contrast, he spent relatively little time campaigning in the vote-rich counties of Yavapai and Coconino.

On the Republican side, businessman Rick Renzi entered the race hoping to exploit his ties to the state. The son of a general, Renzi was a "military brat" who spent part of his youth at Fort Huachuca, a southern Arizona Army base under his father's command. After graduating from high school in southern Arizona, Renzi attended Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, where he was a football star and 1980 graduate. Since that time he had developed various business holdings throughout the state. But he had resided in the Washington, D.C. area since 1984, interning on Capitol Hill, earning a

law degree, and working at the Pentagon and in the real estate and insurance fields, before buying a house in Flagstaff in October 2001 (Marizco 2002). His family continued to live in Virginia throughout the campaign, leading many to label him a “carpetbagger.” Renzi was running against Republicans with deep roots in the district: Lewis Tenney had served on the Navajo County Board of Supervisors, Bruce Whiting’s family had long been one of the area’s major employers, and Alan Everett served as mayor of Sedona, Arizona.

Renzi emerged as the frontrunner in the race, largely because he had more funds to work with than the other Republican candidates. Renzi, 44, outspent his primary opponents by a substantial sum of money. He invested \$585,000 of his own money and raised another \$100,000 to run radio and television advertisements throughout the district (Gehrke 2002). He was the only Republican candidate to hire a professional campaign consultant.

Displeasure with Renzi’s outsider status bubbled to the surface during the primary campaign. When Renzi appeared on a Prescott public-access television show, an on-screen graphic labeled him, “The Virginian” (Shaffer 2002a). Republican candidate David Stafford took out full-page newspaper ads with photos of Renzi’s “two MILLION DOLLAR HOUSES in Burke, Virginia.” “I don’t know how they do it in Virginia,” the ad said, “but here in Arizona we don’t like being lied to by someone who lives in Virginia” (Stafford 2002). Flagstaff’s *Daily Sun* refused to run the ad, but it appeared in other district newspapers. Days before the primary election, a radio spot ran calling for voters to “send the carpetbaggers packing.” Though no names were mentioned, the ad

clearly targeted Renzi and Democrat DuVal. The spot was paid for by an unregistered group called Seagull PAC.

Renzi ultimately succeeded in a primary race where the Republican vote was splintered among six candidates. Two Mormon candidates, Tenney and Whiting, split the Mormon vote in the northern and eastern parts of the district, and Renzi won with 24 percent of the 46,585 total votes cast. Half of his votes came from just one county, Yavapai, where recent arrivals make up much of the population.

### **CAMPAIGN DISCOURSE: PAID MEDIA**

**Television.** The size of the district, its lack of a central media market, and the presence of other big races and issues on the ballot made it difficult for candidates to get their messages out through paid media such as television and radio. Rick Renzi's campaign was able to use a generous infusion of soft money from national Republicans to unleash a negative media campaign against George Cordova that not only drowned out Cordova's message, but ultimately, Renzi's as well.

During the primary campaign Renzi dipped into his personal fortune and was the first candidate to run television and radio spots. His initial TV ads used shots of him traveling scenic Arizona dirt roads in a pickup truck, wearing a flannel shirt, chatting with local folks, and petting horses. Another showed Renzi playing with his twelve children<sup>4</sup> in a field set against a beautiful mountain backdrop. Renzi, attempting to inoculate himself against the "carpetbagger" label, offered little political substance in the ads and instead spoke glowingly of his love for rural Arizona. But the tone of the Renzi message would take a nasty turn in the general campaign.

Like everyone else, Renzi and the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) were surprised by Cordova's primary victory. NRCC research showed that Renzi would face a 17-point deficit in a race against DuVal or Udall. A DuVal or Udall win would likely have triggered the NRCC to step out of the race and not to fund the Republican candidate (Schmidt 2002).

But after the primary election, the NRCC sought to reassess its chances and scrambled to learn more about Cordova. NRCC "opposition research" yielded potential ammunition in the form of serious concerns about Cordova's business record. The NRCC quickly committed approximately \$1.9 million to Renzi's campaign; this money was soon poured into an all-out negative barrage against Cordova (McElwain 2002).

The negative campaign was established through skillful manipulation of the press. Two weeks after the primary election, a thick binder containing the results of opposition research against George Cordova was delivered to the northern Arizona correspondent for the *Arizona Republic*. The reporter turned the research into a story that detailed allegations against Cordova (Shaffer 2003). The story was then cited by the Republicans in a series of negative ads that were soon on the air. The charges against Cordova had essentially been "laundered"<sup>5</sup> by getting them into print in the state's largest newspaper, and they took on a mantle of legitimacy.

The negative television ads employed a familiar formula: ominous music, grainy slow-motion, black-and-white imagery of the targeted politician, and a stern-voiced narrator reciting allegations against him. These ads made no mention of Renzi; they simply attacked Cordova's integrity and business record, accusing him of being sued for fraud by former business partners, of failing to pay taxes, and of being involved in four

failed business ventures. In total, five such ads, three paid for by the NRCC and two paid for by the Renzi campaign, ran with great frequency throughout the short general election campaign (Arizona had a rather late primary: September 10).

Cordova, meanwhile, struggled as the general election campaign began. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) had developed cozy relationships with Fred DuVal and Steve Udall and was not prepared to immediately throw its full support behind Cordova's candidacy. Cordova was having trouble even shoring up Democratic support throughout the district. He had alienated many local Democrats during the primary by petitioning to have the other minority candidates disqualified from the ballot. Five of the other six Democratic primary candidates refused to endorse him in the general election.

After wavering for several crucial weeks, the national Democrats signed on to support Cordova. The DCCC initially pledged to invest \$1.5 million in the race and ultimately claimed to have invested \$600,000. But one highly-placed state Democratic official reported that the combined spending of the DCCC, DNC, and state Democratic Party on Cordova's campaign was only \$250,000: the flow of money slowed as the prospects of a Cordova victory became more distant and national Democrats opted to concentrate resources on incumbents with better odds of winning (Shaffer 2002d).

Cordova found himself overwhelmed, dramatically out-financed, and forced to play defense against the charges leveled at him. He attempted to respond to each of the explicit accusations, noting that the suit against him had been settled out of court, that the missed tax payments totaling less than \$1,500 were due to mix-ups and had since been paid. He also argued that he had been involved in over 200 businesses as a venture

capitalist, so four failures was not unusual. Late in the campaign, he ran two television ads defending himself. His explanations, however, failed to receive the same coverage as the allegations.

The negative attacks against Cordova overshadowed everything else that either candidate had to say during the campaign. When Renzi and Cordova were able to communicate their positions on issues, they tended to be quite vague. Cordova, like many Democrats in 2002, attempted to emphasize his support for Social Security and a prescription drug program, almost to the exclusion of everything else. His first television ad was set in a pharmacy, and a second criticized “Rick Renzi’s special interest friends” and called Renzi’s stance on prescription drugs “a prescription for disaster.” Renzi, meanwhile, attempted to position himself near the political center after the primary, staking out traditional Democratic territory by advertising his support for Social Security, prescription drug benefits, and education. In the final weeks of the campaign, Renzi, sensing a backlash to his attacks on Cordova, ran a pro-education ad. Neither candidate’s ads provided very much substantive information to support their stances.

**Mailings.** During the primary, Rick Renzi’s well-funded campaign was able to produce and widely distribute nine large, glossy mailers emphasizing his “Arizona roots” and “Arizona values” and also promoting traditional Republican themes such as cutting taxes and government waste. When he came under attack from his primary opponents, he attempted to deflect the criticism by producing a mailing featuring his picture alongside Ronald Reagan’s, seeming to invoke the former president’s “11<sup>th</sup> Commandment”: “Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Republican.”

Cordova, on the other hand, produced only one small mailer for the primary; it touched on a laundry list of issues, including education, jobs, support for family-owned businesses, and national security.

During the general election campaign, a large number of mailers were distributed by the national and state parties and issue advocacy groups. The NRCC led the way, pumping out thirteen glossy mailers. Of these, three were positive, one was comparative, and nine were negative. They followed the themes of the television campaign, declaring “George Cordova can’t be trusted,” and “Cordova’s hypocrisy is almost unbelievable.” One of these mailers stated, “George Cordova’s Values Don’t Work for Arizona Families,” and condemned Cordova for having been endorsed in a 1994 race by the Arizona Human Rights Fund, a gay-rights organization.

Renzi was also supported by mailings from the Arizona Republican Party, America 21, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, the National Rifle Association, the National Right to Life Committee, The 60 Plus Association, The Seniors Coalition, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Cordova received less outside backing. The Arizona Democratic Party sent out six mailers supporting him, only three of which specifically dealt with his race. These mailings stuck to the Social Security and prescription drug themes, comparing the positions of the two candidates. Arizona Citizen Action sent two “nonpartisan voter guides” on the same topics, comparing Cordova favorably to Renzi. The Arizona Education Association, Arizona AFL-CIO, Sierra Club, and Yavapai County Democratic Committee also sent mailers for Cordova, but many of these listed him only as one of a group of various statewide candidates to support.

The candidates themselves contributed little to the mailing frenzy of the general election. Renzi produced only one new mailer, about education, and Cordova did not send any new mailings during the general election campaign.

While the mailers in general offered more information than the race's television ads, the negative NRCC pieces stood out, adding to the public's disgust with the tenor of the race. Of the other mailings, most were produced by non-local organizations and tended to be generic in their references to the candidates. Many of these mailings were being used in campaigns across the country, with the name of the applicable local candidate pasted in. In some cases, this rendered the mailings meaningless or misleading. For example, the 60 Plus Association's mailer "certified" Renzi as "a Guardian of Seniors' Rights in the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress," a body of which he was not a member.

**Radio.** Due to the physical size of the district and its widely-dispersed population, radio became a critical medium to reach voters. Candidates were forced to buy advertising time on a large number of small radio stations. Both Renzi and Cordova employed East Coast media buying agencies to handle this task.

Renzi maintained a strong presence on the radio, going on the air with ads in April, long before any of his opponents. The National Right to Life Committee also ran radio ads endorsing Renzi. Cordova was slower to advertise on the radio, and in the final weeks of the campaign, he had trouble finding available air time; at least one station was unable to run all the ads he had bought and issued a refund to his campaign. Both candidates ran radio ads in English and Navajo.

**Telephone.** Both candidates made use of automated phone calls during the general election campaign. Once again, the discourse in this medium was dominated by

negative charges. Republican calls repeated the attacks made against Cordova on television and in the mail, while Cordova used several calls to attempt to refute them. Cordova's camp also used phone calls to attack Renzi on abortion, and Arizona Citizen Action calls criticized Renzi on Social Security and prescription drugs. Renzi himself seemed to avoid this low-budget medium until the day before election day, when he sent a get-out-the-vote message, as did Cordova.

One phone call in particular demonstrated the negativity and distrust that permeated the campaign. State Democrats had sent out early ballot request forms to voters after the deadline to return such forms had passed. Realizing their mistake, the Democrats made an automated phone call instructing voters to throw away the invalid forms. Many people misunderstood the call, however, thinking it was telling them to throw out their early ballots. Having endured weeks of attacks and bickering, they jumped to the conclusion that the call was a "trick" designed to mislead people into not voting (*Arizona Daily Sun* 2002a, 2002b).

**Web sites.** Both candidates' Web sites were well-designed, though Renzi's had a slicker, more professional feel to it. They provided such things as candidate biographies, issue positions, and links to news articles about the campaign. Both sites allowed visitors to sign up for electronic mailing lists, but neither campaign made much use of this medium. Renzi's campaign sent subscribers a total of six emails, all in the last week of the campaign, and Cordova sent just four emails.

One attack mailer from the Arizona Republican Party contained a reference to "www.whoisgeorgecordova.com," a domain name registered to a Virginia Web design firm, but the site never came on-line.

## CAMPAIGN DISCOURSE: FREE MEDIA

**News coverage.** The huge size of the district made news coverage of the race difficult. Local news media organizations lacked the resources to follow the campaigns effectively. The large number of candidates in the primary elections further complicated their efforts. In the general election, the media did not seem to know what to make of the two candidates who were basically strangers to the district, and voters never really got an understanding of who these men were.

In addition, few local reporters had experience in covering an intense, nationally-significant election campaign. Consequently, coverage of the race was inadequate and easily manipulated by the campaigns. The young reporter assigned to cover the race for the district's only television news organization illustrated this point (Rauzon 2003). The station has high turnover among reporters; he had only moved to Flagstaff in September 2002. With no local background, he said he found himself "very much at the mercy of my handlers," by whom he meant the people running the campaigns. He felt that they tried to prey on his inexperience and pressured him to shape his coverage to fit their message. Over time, he thought, he would be able to learn the ropes and become a more effective local reporter. "But by then," he said, "I will have left Channel 2 and there will be another 'newbie' in my place." Indeed, by April 2003, he had moved on to a television job in California.

No media outlet reached the entire district. The closest thing to a central news source was the *Arizona Republic*, which may explain why its northern Arizona reporter was chosen to receive the opposition research on Cordova.

Critics charged that by attacking Cordova’s business record, Renzi was inviting scrutiny of his record by the *Republic*, scrutiny that never took place. The *Republic* reporter argued that while the newspaper could confirm the validity of opposition research presented to it, it did not have the resources to conduct such research in a race that was not particularly important to it. Other races were higher priorities to the newspaper (Shaffer 2003).

Editors from the three district newspapers (the *Sun*, the *Courier*, and the *Dispatch*) had agreed to share stories and resources throughout the campaign. While a few articles were shared (largely in the direction of articles written for the *Sun* appearing in the other papers), there were noticeable differences between the papers in the amount of coverage allocated to the elections. The *Sun* ran more stories than the other three newspapers covering the race, and its coverage was more investigative, with reporters asking original questions and examining new issues and concerns.

**Table 7.1: Newspaper Coverage of Arizona 1<sup>st</sup> General Election Campaign**

|   | <i>Arizona Daily Sun</i><br>(Flagstaff) | <i>Arizona Republic</i><br>(Phoenix) | <i>Casa Grande Dispatch</i> | <i>Prescott Daily Courier</i> |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Campaign articles<br>(8/19/02-11/5/02)                                    | 85                                      | 27                                   | 31                          | 35                            |
| Average quality of coverage<br>(1=low, 5=high)                            | 3.40                                    | 3.00                                 | 3.00                        | 3.80                          |
| Average depth of coverage<br>(1=low, 5=high)                              | 2.75                                    | 2.75                                 | 2.00                        | 2.50                          |
| Issue/Character balance<br>(1=all character, 5=all issue)                 | 3.00                                    | 2.00                                 | 2.75                        | 3.25                          |
| Tone of stories about the Democrat<br>(-1=all negative, 1=all positive)   | 0.17                                    | 0.00                                 | 0.00                        | 0.00                          |
| Tone of stories about the Republican<br>(-1=all negative, 1=all positive) | -0.18                                   | -0.20                                | -0.50                       | -0.36                         |

Source: coding by Northern Arizona University Social Research Laboratory staff.

Faced with two relatively unknown candidates who tended to be very vague on the issues, and who were hard to track down as they campaigned across the giant district, the media had little to report on. The stories that did emerge tended to be related to the novelty of the hard-fought, negative, and sometimes nasty campaign, the likes of which had never been seen in rural Arizona. The negativity of the campaign soon became the primary theme around which coverage was centered.

A series of scandals of varying degrees of seriousness received media attention. The attacks on Cordova's business record were detailed, then questioned in the local media (Shaffer 2002b; Fischer 2002; Hendricks 2002; Ghioto 2002d). Both candidates had their residency status scrutinized (Shaffer 2002a; Dodder 2002). Arizona Republican Senator Jon Kyl disputed Renzi's claims about working in Kyl's D.C. office (Thomsen 2002). Cordova claimed that the Renzi campaign was using "midnight faxes" to spread false rumors about him, such as that he was gay and had referred to God as "She" (Kitching 2002b). Cordova was criticized for consulting with two formerly prominent politicians in the district who were convicted felons. Allegations of anti-Cordova push-polling and "smear calls" arose (Ghioto 2002b). Some Democrats found the darkened black-and-white shots of Cordova used in attack ads to be disturbing, if not racist (Shaffer 2002c). Renzi's campaign manager, Joe Galli, and another staffer were arrested for drunken driving (Galli publicly resigned, but continued to work behind the scenes) (Ghioto 2002c). Neighbors accused campaign workers at Renzi's Flagstaff house of obnoxious behavior (Kiefhaber 2002).

Coverage of stories such as these was allegedly hindered by Renzi staffers. Several sources charged that the Renzi campaign had threatened reporters during the

campaign. A Prescott *Courier* reporter was allegedly told that the paper would be sued if it ran articles questioning Renzi's residency within the district. A Flagstaff reporter was allegedly told by an NRCC spokeswoman that she would never work again in journalism if she reported the story about Renzi's neighbors' complaints. Such alleged threats may have had a chilling effect on newspaper reporting during the election season.

Citizens of the district expressed their displeasure as the campaign became more negative. Of the 85 letters to the editor about the race in the *Arizona Daily Sun* during the general election campaign, 55 were critical of Renzi or his campaign. The *Casa Grande Dispatch*, on the other hand, ran only nine letters, and the *Prescott Daily Courier* printed no letters about the race, due to its policy against letters endorsing candidates by name, designed to keep the editorial page from becoming a "billboard for candidates" rather than a "forum for issues" (Doddard 2003).

Other extensive coverage was devoted to President George W. Bush's September 27 visit to Flagstaff in support of Renzi. Renzi received generous backing from national Republicans, as Vice President Dick Cheney, House leaders Dennis Hastert and Tom DeLay, and Cabinet secretaries Gale Norton and Christine Todd Whitman came to Arizona to help him raise money at private events; Bush's visit, obviously, attracted the most attention. Flagstaff had never before hosted a sitting president, and an estimated 5,000 people came out to hear him. Bush offered little specific endorsement of Renzi other than to crack, "He believes in family values...after all, he's got twelve kids," before launching into a stump speech (Ghioto 2002a). Nevertheless, the President's star power and the public and media interest the visit generated was a major boost to Renzi. On October 27, Bush again visited Arizona, appearing with Renzi and gubernatorial

candidate Matt Salmon at a Phoenix rally. Cordova was able to bring Senator Joseph Lieberman to Flagstaff for an October 23 appearance.

Adding to the difficulty of providing substantive coverage was the candidates' seeming difficulty in appearing for scheduled debates and forums. In the final week before the election, the Renzi campaign attacked Cordova for missing a scheduled candidates' forum. Cordova staffers pointed out that Renzi had failed to appear at five previously scheduled events. The candidates did meet at three small forums during the campaign, which received modest media coverage but were not broadcast. A local reporter later regretted that local media organizations had not sponsored their own debates, so that professionals, rather than "some guy at the VFW," could ask the questions (Ghioto 2003b).

Surprisingly, the usually conservative *Arizona Republic* endorsed Cordova, while the three district dailies endorsed Renzi. None of these endorsements could be described as ringing, and several were made with reservations. Renzi and Cordova had received no paper's endorsement in the primary election.

A Northern Arizona University Social Research Laboratory (SRL) poll conducted just after the primary found the two candidates deadlocked (Social Research Laboratory 2002a). But a second SRL poll, taken after Bush's visit and the onslaught of negative ads against Cordova, showed Renzi with a 12-point advantage. The second poll showed that Democrats were being demobilized by campaign events, adding to Renzi's lead (Social Research Laboratory 2002b).

Despite this lead, Renzi appeared uncomfortable as mudslinging became the big story of the campaign. When a newspaper story pointed out the many "sins of omission

and distortion” in the Republicans’ attack ads, Renzi tried to distance himself from them, claiming that the negative ads were coming from the national Republican Party, that they were out of his control, and that they were not coordinated with his campaign (Ghioto 2002d). Yet the Renzi campaign itself was sponsoring two television ads featuring almost identical negative attacks against Cordova.

In the end, after outspending Cordova by three to one (Ghioto 2003a), Renzi’s margin of victory was less than four percentage points. Voters’ disgust with the campaign was perhaps evident in the showing of Libertarian candidate Edwin Porr. With virtually no campaign activity or media coverage, Porr received almost nine thousand votes, five percent of the total, in a district with fewer than 1,400 registered Libertarians.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Arizona 1<sup>st</sup> Congressional District race illustrated the perils of running, covering and voting in a newly-created, gigantic, all-rural district. With no incumbent to unseat, the district attracted a large number of candidates. The subsequent splintering of votes in the primaries helped two relative unknowns to advance to the general election. Neither candidate had much of a local record to run on, and both played to the political center. Hurling negative charges became the best way for the candidates to achieve differentiation from one another. Local media outlets did not have the resources, the experience, or the reach to lead or support meaningful discourse. In a district unaccustomed to such a style of politicking, this negativity became the story of the campaign, drowning out all other messages.

This is not to say that voters could not make an informed choice between the candidates; there were some issues on which they clearly differed. For example, a single-

issue pro-life voter could feel safe in choosing Renzi over Cordova. With the gap between Republicans and Democrats in the House so narrow, many voters probably found that party labels alone were sufficient in making their decision.

But the overriding theme of the race was the negative campaign against Cordova financed by the NRCC. Many voters' decisions may have been based on who was made to look worse by the mudslinging, the slinger or the slingee. It is likely that disgust with the campaign and the candidates led many rural Arizonans to cast protest votes for Porr, to hold their noses as they voted for the lesser of two perceived evils, or to simply skip the ballot box entirely.

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<sup>2</sup> Arizona's Independent Redistricting Commission was created in 2000 with the passage of Proposition 106 by state voters. Redistricting duties were taken from the State Legislature and given to the five-member Commission, which consists of two Democrats, two Republicans, and one Independent.

<sup>3</sup> There was no clear understanding among the candidates about what it means to represent "rural" interests (Candee 2002a).

<sup>4</sup> Campaign observers enjoyed pointing out that the names of all twelve of Renzi's children begin with 'R'.

<sup>5</sup> Northern Arizona University journalism instructor Rob Breeding first used this term to describe the use of this technique in this race.