

Tulare Republican Devin Nunes' seat secure despite criticism from right

By John Ellis

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/04/27/3898794/nunes-secure-despite-critics.html>

The Fresno Bee

April 27, 2014



Gary Kazanjian AP file, 2009 Republican Rep. Devin Nunes addresses water-policy protesters in Fresno in 2009. He had hinted he would challenge Sen. Dianne Feinstein, but an aide now says he's not running.

Last fall, Rep. Devin Nunes called his hard-right Republican House colleagues "lemmings with suicide vests" for shutting down the government over opposition to the Affordable Care Act.

Some angry conservatives called the Tulare Republican a sellout. They hinted that a political challenge from his own party, only further to the political right, might be coming.

It was new political territory for Nunes, a staunch conservative who was more known for his verbal broadsides against the political left, especially environmental groups.

But now the election season is in full swing, and Nunes is as politically comfortable as ever in his 22nd Congressional District seat. Only token political opposition — both from the left and right — stands in the way of a seventh term in Congress.

"He's as secure as a lawmaker can get," Fresno State political science professor Tom Holyoke said.

Still, it's not stopping Clovis resident Alberto Zuniga from haranguing Nunes on Facebook, saying the congressman is a supporter of big government and is close to House Speaker John Boehner, who must be ousted.

Zuniga is positioning himself as the candidate from Nunes' political right, though he failed to qualify for the ballot and now says he is a write-in challenger. Fresno County Clerk Brandi Orth said Zuniga has not yet taken any of the official steps needed to qualify as a write-in candidate.

There also are two qualified challengers — John Catano and Suzanna "Sam" Aguilera-Marrero. But neither appears to have the political clout to make Nunes break a sweat.

Aguilera-Marrero is a Democrat in a district where Republicans enjoy a 13-percentage-point edge in voter registration and where Nunes never has been seriously challenged by a Democrat.

She couldn't be reached for comment, but her Facebook page has campaign material that highlights "immigration reform, safe drinking water, high speed rail."

Born and raised in Porterville, Aguilera-Marrero now lives in Tulare. She retired last year as a captain from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Catano is — like Job Melton in Jim Costa's 16th Congressional District — running a low-budget, unorthodox campaign that will rely on the Internet and technology, largely through a budding grass-roots movement at www.placeavote.com.

He recently changed his registration to Republican, saying it is a better way to make the November runoff. Under the state's primary rules, the top two finishers will move on to November.

Neither Catano nor Aguilera-Marrero has raised any campaign cash, according to Federal Election Commission documents, while Nunes has more than \$2 million in campaign account.

It's largely left Nunes to do his thing, which right now is continuing his career-long push for more water for the Valley, and also to pursue the chairmanship of the House intelligence committee.

On water, Nunes still is pounding away at environmental groups. He was less than two minutes into a speech to farmers this week in Selma when he criticized "radical environmentalists." It's one of Nunes' signature terms, and he went on to repeat it several times.

"I actually believe in what I say," Nunes said in an interview. "I don't call them radicals because I'm trying to be mean or I'm trying to make a point. They are radical."

Beyond that, however, is Nunes' ongoing feud with the Friant Water Users Authority, which represents 15,000 mostly east-side Valley farmers — almost all of them in Nunes' district.

Nunes is mad that Friant continues to support the San Joaquin River Settlement agreement, which he hates.

He also is upset that Friant isn't backing drought legislation that he is pushing, along with Reps. David Valadao, R-Hanford, and Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, that would authorize new dams, repeal the settlement agreement and make other major changes in the state's water delivery systems.

In a radio appearance earlier this year, Nunes compared water district leaders like those running Friant to "communist politburo" members who collect big checks and do nothing. After the statement went out on Twitter from a third party, Nunes even re-tweeted it.

The settlement, which proposes to restore the San Joaquin River, ended a long-running federal court case.

But the resulting federal legislation, Nunes said, is terrible for Valley agriculture.

He wants to junk the settlement, even if it means landing back in court, where environmental groups had fought a nearly two-decade battle to restore the San Joaquin — and had basically won.

Congress, he said, must come up with a new solution.

But Nunes said it hurts his negotiating position when Friant isn't in his corner.

"We've got to get the whole Valley speaking with one voice, and until we do that, we're not going to win," Nunes told farmers this week.

Mario Santoyo, assistant general manager of the Friant Water Authority, said he is tired of Nunes' constant bashing.

After an 18-year legal battle, he said, Valley agriculture had lost, and a federal judge could have taken anywhere between 30% and 50% of Friant's water. Instead, he said, a deal was made that will cost the authority, on average, 15% to 20% of its water.

It was the best deal possible, Santoyo said, and for Nunes to ignore that is to ignore reality.

"If my actions risk the livelihoods of farmers, I better be careful," he said. "You can sit in a leather seat in a marble building in (Washington) D.C. and risk going back to court and getting killed, but (Nunes is) not the one who's going to get killed. It's the farmer."

Nunes isn't backing down, however, and frustrated farmers like what they hear, though even Nunes admits it will be tough to get real change on water.

But he said he does feel like he is getting people to pay attention. When Nunes ran on water and pushed a new reservoir at Temperance Flat in his initial 2002 campaign, water wasn't as hot a political issue as it is now.

"In that sense, we are moving public opinion," he said.

Holyoke, the Fresno State professor, agreed that Nunes had done a good job of rallying Valley support for water, and can make a "credible claim" that he has nudged Sen. Dianne Feinstein into actions on the water issue that she otherwise might not have taken.

Joel Nelsen, president of California Citrus Mutual, the Exeter-based citrus growers lobby, likes what he sees.

"I believe he is what an elected official should be — transparent in message, solid in substance, willing to meet," Nelsen said. "We need more than a good vote. We need an advocate who can win votes and deliver legislation. You get what you need from Devin and frankly, if he can't deliver, he'll tell you that, too."

Still, it doesn't mean Nelsen hasn't clashed with Nunes. He has. And sometimes he thinks Nunes goes over the top with his vitriol.

"There are times I grit my teeth," Nelsen said.

But Nelsen understands Nunes' frustration, and especially knows his anger with environmental groups, who Nunes believes lied to him a decade ago during the CalFed program, which was a wide-ranging state and federal effort to protect the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, but which also looked at building new reservoirs.

"I realized these radical environmental groups were not negotiating in good faith," Nunes said.

Others say the heated rhetoric — or such actions as purchasing commercials on Valley television that criticized Feinstein, who would be key to any water solution, or feuding with Rep. Jim Costa, a Fresno Democrat — hurts the overall effort more than it helps.

Nunes, however, always has been one to speak his mind.

"This business isn't for wimps," he said. "We get hit every day."

He criticized President George W. Bush for waiting until after the 2006 elections to fire Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, saying it likely cost Republicans the Senate, and maybe the House.

In 2009, Nunes again made news by calling on then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to resign when he failed to call on President Barack Obama to turn on the delta pumps at a water rally. He dubbed Schwarzenegger's speech "lip service."

It's also why he stands by the "lemmings in suicide vests" comment.

"The whole defund argument was a myth," he said. "You could not defund Obamacare. It was stupid politics. I think most people know now how dumb it was because imagine where we'd be in the polls today if we'd not looked so incompetent. That looks like we don't know how to govern."

If nothing else, Nunes' approach has been consistent ever since he won election to Congress in 2002.

It was at the time considered a mild upset because former Fresno mayor and current Assembly Member Jim Patterson was in the race. But so was then-Assembly Member Mike Briggs.

Patterson and Briggs split the Fresno County vote, and some say that was enough to boost Nunes to victory. He was just 28 at the time.

Since then, Nunes has easily dispatched a string of Democrats and, now and then, a third-party candidate.

He never has won less than 61% of the vote in his district, which is centered on Tulare and Fresno counties.

Now 40, Nunes has developed a close relationship with Boehner, the House speaker, and is seeking the chairmanship of the House intelligence committee.

He has been on the committee since 2011.

Nunes also is a member of the influential House Ways and Means Committee, where he chairs the trade subcommittee and is also on the health subcommittee.

"Two of the best committees to be on," Nunes said.

The trade subcommittee is especially important for the Valley, where significant amounts of stone fruit, pistachios and dairy products are exported.

"We're totally relying on trade," he said. "We're getting out of the subsidy business. We have to have these markets opened so we can export product."

He is seeking the intelligence committee chairmanship, he said, because it is an important committee.

"Most people expect their federal government to protect them," he said.

Through it all, Nunes says he is in Congress because it is an important job, not because he likes it. Given a choice, Nunes said he would prefer to be a vintner.

He is part owner of the Alpha Omega Winery in the Napa Valley. It is operated by Nunes' college friend.

He bought into the winery, which was started in 2004, after he sold Valley farmland he owned.

22nd Congressional District candidates

SUZANNA "SAM"

AGUILERA-MARRERO

Age: 51

Hometown: Tulare

Occupation: Retired captain from California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

Education: n/a

Family: n/a

Party preference: Democratic

Web: n/a

Twitter: @sam4cd22

Facebook: www.facebook.com/sam4cd22

JOHN CATANO

Age: 30

Hometown: Fresno

Occupation: Information technology manager

Education: Porterville High

Family: Single

Party preference: Republican

Web: placeavote.com johncatano.com

Twitter: n/a

Facebook: n/a

DEVIN NUNES

Age: 40

Hometown: Tulare

Occupation: Congressman

Education: California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, B.S. 1995

Family: Married, three children

Party preference: Republican

Web: www.devinnunes.net/

Twitter: @devinnunes

Facebook: www.facebook.com/rep.nunes

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