

Political parties scratching heads over Costa-Tacherra shocker

By John
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Not a single person steeped in the world of federal politics saw this coming.

Not the political pundits of the Washington Beltway. Not the National Republican Congressional Committee or its counterpart, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Not the deep-pocketed independent groups that shower cash on candidates in competitive races.

Not even, it seems, Jim Costa.

Now — for the second time in four years — the Fresno Democrat finds himself in a tight re-election campaign, having to hope that uncounted mail and provisional ballots in the 16th Congressional District will be enough to push him past Burrell dairy farmer Johnny Tacherra, his unheralded and lightly financed opponent.

Costa “just got blindsided by an angry electorate,” said Allan Hoffenblum, a longtime Republican strategist and author of the California Target Book, which tracks the state’s elections.

With the Election Day ballot counting finished, Tacherra holds a slim 736-vote lead over Costa. In percentage terms, it is 50.5% to 49.5%.

“When you are that close (in the vote count), you think you should have done more,” said former congressman and longtime Democratic Party stalwart Richard Lehman. “But (Costa) didn’t see it coming.”

Neither did anybody else.

“Tacherra never was seen as a strong candidate by either party,” Lehman said. “Nobody saw this. The Republicans didn’t see this.”

But plenty of mail and provisional ballots remain to be counted, and those might save Costa, as they did in 2010 when he turned an 1,823-vote, election-night deficit into a 3,031-vote victory.

Still, it might take some luck, and Lehman thinks it might not be as easy as 2010.

To win, Lehman figured, Fresno County’s part of the 16th District needs to have 2,500 more absentee and provisional ballots to count than Madera and Merced counties combined. If those votes break along the same percentage for Costa as the 16th District Fresno County votes counted so far, which is 62.5%, he would have enough votes to overtake Tacherra — barely.

If a third of the approximately 42,600 Fresno County mail and provisional ballots left to count are from the 16th District, its share would be around 14,200 ballots still to count. That means Madera and Merced counties combined could have no more than 11,700 16th District mail and provisional ballots left to tally for Lehman’s scenario to have a good chance of working out in Costa’s favor.

Fresno political consultant Tim Orman’s math doesn’t exactly jibe with Lehman’s, but his basic conclusions do. If there’s 10,000 votes left to be counted in the Fresno County part of the 16th Congressional District, and 8,000 in Madera and Merced counties, Tacherra will win, Orman said, based on what each candidate has won among the votes already counted.

In Merced County, there are 5,757 mail and around 1,500 provisional ballots left to count, officials said late

Wednesday. Madera County won't know its count until Thursday. All of Merced County, but only a portion of Madera County, is in the 16th District.

Given turnout trends — especially the low Fresno County number — Orman thinks the odds favor Tacherra.

“There's a better-than-good chance that we're going to be talking about Congressman Johnny Tacherra in January,” Orman said.

That Tacherra is even this far almost seems impossible, given his campaign. He had no campaign manager, and only one paid staffer and two consultants. Beyond that, it was all volunteer work. When Tacherra would court a big-money donor, he said, they'd always ask about his campaign structure.

“I was afraid to tell them we're on bare bones here,” he said. “And look where I'm at.”

Tacherra said he made a promise to himself to just put his head down “and just work myself to the bone.” He didn't blame the pundits for dismissing him or the big-money independent groups from passing on his race. Given Costa's track record, he said, it wasn't surprising.

But Tacherra said he always felt he was in the race, and now, he says, “we feel pretty confident” of winning.

Costa, however, remains optimistic.

“We always knew this race would be close, and voter turnout was lower than we anticipated,” Costa said in a statement. “With thousands of absentee and provisional ballots outstanding in all three counties, this race is not over. I have always put my faith and trust in the voters of the Valley and we must ensure every vote is counted.”

Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee spokesman Tyrone Gayle was more definitive: “We're confident Rep. Costa is coming back to Congress.”

The National Republican Congressional Committee didn't return a phone call, and it was unclear why the party machines were unprepared for the close finish. Some experts say Hispanics stayed at home in record numbers, and that hurt Costa. Others said just a little financial help from the NRCC or independent groups could have pushed Tacherra to a definitive victory — but he got no money.

Lehman said he thinks the election was part of a perfect storm much like the Republican Revolution of 1994, when Lehman himself was beaten in his congressional re-election bid by Mariposa Republican George Radanovich.

Factors that likely conspired to hurt Costa include:

- Dismal turnout, making the election more like a primary that features motivated party-base voters and almost always benefits Republicans.
- Costa's polling that estimated a higher turnout, which may have been why he seemingly was caught flat-footed by the results.
- Little bounce from now four-term Gov. Jerry Brown, who lost every county in the Valley and didn't make a lot of effort to help the rest of the ticket.

Lehman and Hoffenblum added another factor: Dislike for the state's proposed high-speed rail project in the northern parts of the district. Costa is losing Merced County by 10-percentage points this year. Two years ago, he won it by 4,000 votes. Add Costa's party connection to intensely disliked Rep. Nancy Pelosi, and the Republicans had motivation that the Democrats seemed to lack this year.

It is often said that Republican “tidal waves” stop at the Sierra Nevada and don't reach California. But it happens occasionally, and Lehman said this is shaping up as one of those years, as other incumbent California Democrats in

Congress are struggling to win as well.

Hoffenblum compared Costa to House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, a Virginia Republican who surprisingly lost in the primary election to a Tea Party challenger.

“People just got tired of him,” Hoffenblum said.

“They threw (Costa) out, they didn’t vote this guy (Tacherra) in.”

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