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Governor's race, automated phone calls emerge as factors in Doherty-Karrow battle

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Heading into Tuesday's primary against Assemblyman Michael Doherty, Sen. Marcia Karrow had the power of money and incumbency on her side.

In the eyes of enough Republicans, it seems, Karrow was not aligned with the GOP candidate that they wanted to see as governor.

The day after Doherty beat Karrow for the Republican Senate nomination in the 23rd Legislative District, party leaders and a political analyst pointed to both candidates' affiliations with different gubernatorial candidates as one of the factors leading to Doherty's victory.

Republican gubernatorial candidate Chris Christie, whom Karrow ran with, won the nomination statewide but lost Warren and Hunterdon counties to Steve Lonegan, the more conservative candidate running with Doherty.

"It wasn't just a contest between her and Mike Doherty," said Ingrid Reed, a policy analyst with the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "It was also the commitment to Lonegan."

As Lonegan topped Christie by 739 votes in the two counties, Doherty overcame Karrow by 999 votes, according to unofficial election results. In Karrow's home county of Hunterdon, where she lost by 527 votes, the candidates running with Lonegan put up a solid showing.

Conservative territory

The primary results stand as a reminder that Republicans in the northwest part of the state tend to be more conservative than party members in other areas.

On the issue of abortion in particular, Doherty, who was endorsed by New Jersey Right to Life, targeted Karrow's position in his campaign. Karrow supports the right to have an abortion, though with parental notification and other restrictions.

U.S. Rep. Leonard Lance, R-Hunterdon, previously won the Republican nod for the Senate seat in three primary elections, even though he supports the right to have an abortion.

Warren County GOP Chairman Douglas Steinhardt noted that Lance never faced a primary challenge. In his experience, Steinhardt said abortion has never been a central primary issue.

"You never had to ask anybody to make that choice," Steinhardt said.

Mailers, calls a factor

Another factor in Tuesday's results from both counties appears to be the abundance of political mailers and automated calls coming from the different campaigns.

In Hunterdon County, where some people received about 10 calls and four mailers in a given day, the practice discouraged Republicans from voting, county GOP Chairman Henry Kuhl said.

"Voter turnout was extremely limited as to what it should have been," Kuhl said.

White Township resident Jack Nicholais said he would have voted for Karrow, but he did not cast a ballot out of frustration with the flood of automated calls from candidates in general.

A Republican primary voter for about 40 years, Nicholais became fed up after getting at least five calls each night in the weeks leading up to the election. Sometimes he wouldn't even find out who was calling because

he hung up too quickly, Nicholais said.

"I even got a call from Mitt Romney," said Nicholais, referring to the former Republican presidential candidate. "The mailers you can control. You can pick them up and throw them in the waste basket. But the phone calls you have no control over."

Now Nicholais plans on becoming an unaffiliated voter.

While he was unable to have his phone number removed from such campaigning, Nicholais suggested candidates figure out how to satisfy that request.

"If I was a politician, I'd look into it because it's costing candidates votes," he said.

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