



Everything Jersey

The Star-Ledger

Lautenberg, Zimmer rally party troops in Morristown

Political experts agree challenger won debate, but incumbent holds big lead

Page 2 of 1

Fresh from their final debate the night before, U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and his Republican challenger, former congressman Dick Zimmer, went to Morristown yesterday to fire up party loyalists.

"Look at what's about to take place. We're going to change course from the failed policies of the Bush administration," the 84-year-old Lautenberg told an enthusiastic crowd of about 500 at a late afternoon rally on the Morristown Green. He urged them to "get out there and work."

About 1 1/2 hours earlier, Zimmer had arrived at the Green, which sprouted signs for Democrats Barack Obama and Tom Wyka, who is running for the House of Representatives.

"I thought, 'This is probably not the place,'" Zimmer said. The rally he wanted was up the block and around the corner in the parking lot of GOP county headquarters, where two pickup trucks were parked rear to rear to form a makeshift stage.

"They were just about to close the proceedings down when I ran down the street to climb up on the truck," the 64-year-old Zimmer said.

He urged the 175 or so people in attendance, "if they hadn't already seen it," to watch the online version of his debate Saturday night with Lautenberg on New Jersey Network.

"I think I did well," Zimmer said. "It was helped by the fact that Lautenberg couldn't answer a lot of the questions."

A trio of political scientists said Zimmer won that debate, but without landing the knockout punch he needed.

"In order to combat both Senator Lautenberg's incumbency and Senator Obama's enormous coattails, Congressman Zimmer needed Senator Lautenberg to make an enormous mistake. And he did not," said Brigid Harrison, who teaches political science at Montclair State University.

Lautenberg is completing his fourth six-year term in the U.S. Senate.

"Dick Zimmer won the debate," said Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

Lautenberg, she said, "rambled at times. It was like he was trying to get a lot of things out and wasn't cohesive."

Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, concurred but added, "For those people who know Frank Lautenberg, I don't think they would be surprised by his sort of rambling way of speaking."

All three political scientists agreed the debate was unlikely to hurt Lautenberg's prospects for re-election.

"I think it's much too late," Reed said.

Schulman said, "A Saturday night debate on NJN is probably not a big viewership."

Harrison said incumbent U.S. senators who seek re-election succeed 88 percent of the time. She judged Zimmer the better debater, but added, "both of them had their moments."

Lautenberg went into the campaign's final week with a huge lead in the polls. A Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind poll conducted from Oct. 23 to Oct. 28 showed Lautenberg leading Zimmer 52 to 32 percent.

The senator has run a classic incumbent's campaign, issuing a steady stream of news releases about his legislative accomplishments while rarely mentioning his opponent. He agreed to just two debates despite Zimmer's repeated calls for more. The first aired last Wednesday on radio station 101.5 FM.

Robert Schwaneberg may be reached at (609) 989-0324 or rschwaneberg@starledger.com.

©2008 Star Ledger

© 2008 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.