

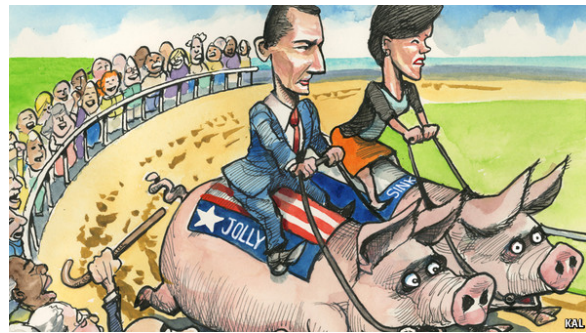
**The
Economist****Lexington**

Of pensioners and pork

Lessons from a bellwether congressional race in Florida

Feb 15th 2014 | From the print edition

LATE last year Florida's 13th congressional district—a sprawl of mobile-home parks, retirement villages and strip malls, fringed by Gulf coast beaches—lost its congressman, Bill Young. The Republican's death, after 42 years of service, left a void. But in truth, the district had been in a form of mourning since 2010: a year that saw a ban on the “earmarks” that enabled Mr Young to channel hundreds of millions of dollars to his district and state.



Dry numbers cannot convey the Babylonian scope of his works. Military bases and weapons factories rose from Florida's swamps at his command. After storms, he had the Army Corps of Engineers “renourish” beaches with the finest white sand. He widened highways, expanded hospitals for children and ex-servicemen and poured taxpayers' cash into such causes as the University of South Florida (USF) and national bone-marrow registries. A grateful Florida placed his name on a marine-science complex, a military cadets' centre, a National Guard armoury, a veterans' hospital and a mid-sized reservoir.

Mr Young's death triggered a special election to be held on March 11th. Pundits see the race as a trial run for campaign themes that will dominate November's congressional elections. Sure enough, Democrats are busy pummelling the Republican candidate, David Jolly, as a shill for special interests (he is a lobbyist, after years as an aide to Mr Young). When not running ads calling him “Lobbyist David Jolly”, Democrats and allies call him an extremist, noting his opposition to abortion in most cases and stern views on immigration. Not to be outdone, Republicans and conservative groups are buying up millions of dollars of TV airtime, bashing his Democratic opponent, Alex Sink, as a backer of “Obama's reckless

agenda”, meaning above all Obamacare.

There is a logic to such hardball tactics. The 13th is that modern-day rarity, a swing district, whose voters elected Mr Young 22 times but narrowly plumped for Barack Obama in his two presidential elections. Victory there would give either party bragging rights, though Democrats have more to lose after fielding a much better-known candidate (Ms Sink, a former banker, narrowly lost the 2010 Florida’s governor’s race). A win by Mr Jolly would be seized on as evidence that Republicans can ride distrust of Mr Obama and his health law to a banner year in 2014.

Yet it is underselling this special election to treat it merely as a rehearsal for November. Mr Young’s fiefdom is interesting in its own right. The area has been sending Republicans to Congress since the 1950s, well before other bits of the state, notes Darryl Paulson of USF. That was made possible by migration into the district by northern businessmen and midwestern retirees: stolid Rotarians and Chamber of Commerce types, rather than the fiery southern conservatives found elsewhere in Florida. The district is unusually elderly: voters aged 61 and over cast 40% of all ballots in the 2012 general election (nationally, that age-group cast 30% of all votes). It is strikingly dependent on federal funding, and not just because of its old folk, defence contractors and veterans’ hospital. Many locals own properties covered by subsidised federal flood insurance, and live in terror of a 2012 law (now partly delayed) that would allow many premiums to rise closer to market rates—ie, to make people with beachfront homes pay the full cost of them rather than dumping the bill on taxpayers.

All that prompts nostalgia for the Young era. At a recent gathering for Democratic-voting business owners at a local café, a hotel boss, Gary Renfrow, urged Ms Sink to keep beaches topped up with federal sand. An insurance broker, Eric Greene, wanted cash for roads. In contrast, government came in for much abuse at a Republican fundraiser for Mr Jolly, held at a waterfront grill, though—Lexington noticed—guests seemed more tolerant of the government’s money, when heading their way. A tax adviser, Paul Bedinghaus, denounced Mr Obama for telling businesses to provide health insurance and pay workers a minimum wage rather than “what they’re worth”. A defence consultant, Walter McCracken, demanded lower taxes and less “government imposition” in his life. Yet both men trenchantly defended Mr Young’s earmarks, calling them money “coming back to the district”. There was wide agreement among guests that Washington (while in many respects a spendthrift fount of tyranny) should bankroll Floridians’ flood insurance.

Spending on you: waste. On me: an investment in the future

In the face of such voters, both candidates pander. They agree that flood-insurance prices should not rise while cheaper alternatives are sought. Both reject the idea that urgent reforms are needed to keep Social Security (public pensions) solvent—that might alarm the many pensioners whose votes they need.

Mr Jolly dubs himself a “Bill Young Republican”. Defending his profession to a gathering of building contractors, he called himself an expert in fighting for their interests: “We have 435 lobbyists up in Washington, DC, and they’re called members of Congress,” he argues. “They’re all lobbying for their districts.”

Ms Sink is less polished: for all her experience she does a good impression of someone being forced to campaign at gunpoint. Stressing bipartisanship, she grimaces when asked if she would welcome a visit by Mr Obama, saying she wants to run on “local issues”. To her credit, she has mounted a more robust defence of Obamacare than many Democrats, vowing to fix rather than repeal the law and accusing Mr Jolly of wanting to go back to letting insurance companies “do whatever they want”. But after listing Obamacare’s pros and cons, she sadly notes: “It took me five minutes to explain that. It doesn’t lend itself to soundbites.”

If the special election does not seem very uplifting, with its wildly entitled voters and pandering candidates, contemplate this: by 2030, much of America will be as old as Florida is today. If rational spending seems a hard sell now, just wait until more places vote like the Sunshine State.

From the print edition: United States