

Brand New

A safe Democratic district in Virginia tests out a different kind of GOP candidate.

By Daniel McCarthy

ON MAY 14, the GOP lost yet another seat in Congress, this one, to the alarm of Republicans nationwide, in the once solid South. Mississippi's First Congressional District went the way of Louisiana's Sixth and Illinois's 14th, all of them supposedly safe GOP seats. Following this latest debacle, retiring Virginia Congressman Tom Davis announced in a memo to his colleagues, "The Republican brand is in the trash can ... if we were a dog food, they would take us off the shelf." The old product no longer sells even to the loyalist consumers. Republicans' survival now depends on marketing themselves as something other than the party of Bush.

Two Republican presidential contenders developed distinctive brands of their own during the primary season. Mike Huckabee ran as an explicitly Christian conservative and compassionate populist, developing a more authentic take on George W. Bush's campaign persona of 2000. Ron Paul, meanwhile, hearkened back to Robert Taft and Barry Goldwater and campaigned as an even more thoroughgoing anti-interventionist and libertarian than either of those old conservative heroes. Neither Huckabee nor Paul could keep John McCain from securing the nomination. But the future of the party may rest with the legacy of one of these defeated candidates.

A test of the Huckabee and Paul legacies—against one another and against an entrenched liberal Democrat—is fast approaching in Virginia's Eighth Congressional District. Its June 10 Republican primary pits Amit Singh, an Arlington defense contractor and first-time

candidate endorsed by Ron Paul, against Mark Ellmore, described by the *Arlington Connection* as a "religious evangelical Christian" who "ran on the promise of putting compassion back in 'compassionate conservatism'" in his first bid for the nomination in 2006. The winner faces an uphill struggle in November against incumbent Democrat James Moran, who has held the seat since 1991.

The district—which encompasses the D.C. suburbs of Alexandria, Falls Church, Arlington County, and parts of Fairfax County—was not always a write-off for the GOP. Republican Stanford Parrish represented it for a decade before losing to Moran. Parrish fell victim to a trend that has since endangered Republicans statewide: metastasizing Washington bureaucracy that has filled the Northern Virginia suburbs with Democratic-voting government employees. Immigration has also steadily transformed the Eighth, which as of the 2000 census was 9.6 percent Asian, 16.4 percent Hispanic, and 13.7 percent black.

Ellmore lost the 2006 GOP nomination to Iraq War veteran Tom O'Donoghue in a landslide, 69-31 percent. He had tried to reach out to African-Americans and other Democratic constituencies in the district, a strategy that the *Arlington Connection* suggests may have cost him the primary by alienating party regulars. Yet any Republican who hopes to improve on O'Donoghue's dismal showing against Moran in '06—31 percent to 66 percent—will have to appeal to voters well beyond the GOP core.

Amit Singh may have a chance of doing that. His candidacy has generated

considerable interest among the Indian-American community, with profiles of Singh, a second-generation Hindu-American, appearing in many of the country's largest Indian-American media outlets, including the newspapers *India Aboard* and *India-West* and the D.C.-based television program "Darshan TV." "There's an undeniable element of 'support our guy,'" says Vinod Valloppillil, who interviewed Singh for the influential Sepia Mutiny blog. "While Indian-Americans have become accustomed to seeing other Indian faces in hospitals, boardrooms, and labs over the last 20 to 30 years, seeing one in political office is still exceedingly rare."

But Indian-American candidates, particularly if they are Republicans, cannot take ethnic solidarity for granted. Asked about Bobby Jindal, the Indian-American Republican governor of Louisiana, a member of Singh's campaign staff said that roughly 70 percent of Indian-Americans are Democrats and have little regard for Jindal. Valloppillil confirmed the point. "Make no mistake, many Indian-Americans are impressed that a guy who looks like Jindal and has a last name like 'Jindal' could get the nod from the GOP and the state of Louisiana," he says. "However, others question what he had to do to join the party." They believe that by changing his name and religion—Bobby's first name is actually Piyush, and he converted from Hinduism to Catholicism—Jindal "sold out his Indian-ness to get GOP support."

Singh may have less trouble in that regard. He was born in Colonial Heights, Virginia, but his family took care to main-

tain ties to the subcontinent. “The family used to spend its entire summer in India because his parents did not want the children to lose touch with Indian culture,” notes *India Abroad*. But Valloppillil suggests that Singh’s platform has been as important as his Indian-American identity in generating support among the community. Singh’s focus “on more fiscal, economic, and personal liberty issues to the exclusion of the moral and religious ... really seems to have struck a chord with Sepia Mutiny’s readership,” Valloppillil says. Like Ron Paul, Singh takes a federalist position on controversial social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. His views on foreign policy and immigration have also resonated with Indian Americans. “I’d wager that Indo-Americans were more opposed to [the Iraq War] than other groups ... many even viewing it as a sort of British Empire redux,” says Valloppillil. Singh favors a “phased withdrawal” from Iraq, and he remarked in an interview with *India Today* that “by subsidizing illegal immigration [Democrats] are harming legal immigration from countries with high levels of educations and skills”—such as India.

Whether Singh’s fiscal conservatism and foreign-policy realism will find support among other minorities in the Eighth district—and among rank-and-file Republicans in the primary—remains to be seen. His views have, however, proven popular with many of the area’s GOP activists. Two influential Northern Virginia conservative blogs, Crystal Clear Conservative and Red Virginia, have endorsed him—in the case of Crystal Clear Conservative, despite disagreeing with him on Iraq. His campaign has attracted volunteers and staff from the Leadership Institute, an Arlington-based organization that trains young conservatives—even though the institute’s founder, RNC committeeman Morton Blackwell, is an Ellmore supporter. Singh’s campaign manager,

Steve Bierfeldt, is the institute’s national field director. And although he has not given a formal endorsement, state Sen. Ken Cuccinelli, a favorite of Virginia conservatives and candidate for the state GOP’s attorney general nomination next year, was a “special guest” at a \$100 a plate fundraiser for Singh on May 15.

Singh’s press secretary, Navdeep Singh (no relation to the candidate) suggests that several of Virginia’s younger GOP leaders—Amit Singh is 33, Cuccinelli is 39—share an affinity that is generational as well as philosophical: having come of age when Ronald Reagan was in the White House, the 42nd president’s optimistic, small-government sensibility comes naturally to them. Certainly Singh is a happy warrior. And while nearly all Republicans profess fealty to Reagan’s ghost, the generational difference between Singh and his opponent is real enough.

Ellmore, 49, has been campaigning on the strength of his relationship with the party establishment. His press releases highlight endorsements from local Republican officials past and present, including Chris Marston, chairman of the Alexandria GOP, and Jim Hyland, head of the Fairfax party. “A lot of times Republicans are left with a choice between candidates who have very similar positions on most of the issues,” Marston told the *Alexandria Gazette Packet* in April, “But this time we have two candidates who are offering a real choice to voters about the philosophy of government.”

Ellmore has downplayed his compassionate conservatism since Singh entered the race in April, however. A section on his campaign website entitled “Expanding Health Care and Protecting Seniors With Conservative Values,” which touted his support for “expanding Medicare to help pay for assisted living homes” and “a reformed version of SCHIP that guarantees health care to underprivileged children,” disappeared

after pro-Singh blogs called attention to it. The section was replaced with one that called for keeping “health care a private industry and not a government business.” Asked in an online interview about the characterizations of the race as “Ron Paul vs. Mike Huckabee,” Ellmore equivocated: “I admire Dr. Paul and Governor Huckabee. I have met Dr. Paul and appreciate his message. ... Both are wonderful servants of the people.”

Singh, for his part, has aired some of his differences with Congressman Paul. Unlike the Texan, Singh supports the Republicans’ presumptive presidential nominee. “I do support McCain, but I do want him to continue to get more conservative,” particularly on immigration, he says. Singh is also more flexible than Paul on a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. “Whether the phase out takes a year, 18 months, six months, whatever it might be, it has to happen responsibly,” he says. These differences did not prevent Paul from endorsing Singh or holding a fundraiser with him on May 14, however, which helped Singh exceed his target of \$50,000 for the primary. Singh was already comfortably ahead of Ellmore as of the March 31 filing date for FEC reports: Singh had raised \$35,339 and had \$29,595 cash on hand versus Ellmore’s \$13,600 raised and \$14,747 cash on hand.

It will take many multiples of the \$57,000 Singh has raised so far to mount a serious challenge to Moran in November, and even with Ron Paul-style fundraising, unseating Moran may prove an impossible task for any Republican this cycle. But as Marston says, the GOP will have a clear philosophical choice in its primary. And should Singh win the nomination, he will offer voters in November a brand of Republicanism very different from the one they are used to. If that brand can win converts in this heavily Democratic district, it may point the way toward Republican revival in places like Illinois, Louisiana, and Mississippi. ■