National divide intensifies congressional battle between Klein, West

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The campaign for Congress in District 22 has become an economic stimulus program for Palm Beach and Broward Counties.

According to the Federal Election Commission, through September more than $8 million was spent in the bruising race between Democratic Congressman Ron Klein and his GOP foe Allen West, among the most expensive Congressional campaigns in the country.

And the cash has continued to gush.

From Oct. 1-13, GOP fundraiser Karl Rove and his "super political action committee," American Crossroads, spent $215,616 in activities opposing Klein. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee countered with $315,840 to stymie West.

"If either side thought they couldn't win, you wouldn't see all that money still pouring in," said Kevin Wagner, political science professor at Florida Atlantic University. "Few districts in the country are still considered real battlegrounds. Most analysts have this one as a tossup."

Final registration numbers tell the tale of a close race: 173,386 Democrats; 172,758 Republicans -- a difference of less than half a percent. With control of Congress in the balance, it is a battlefield with national implications.

A Sunshine State Poll conducted by Voter Survey Service Oct. 17-19 put West ahead 47 to 44, within the margin of error. Nine percent were undecided and the candidates are targeting them.

Much of the campaign cash is invested in television attack ads. Klein has criticized West's character, focusing on personal financial problems in the past. West has tied Klein to President Barack Obama and Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and what he calls their failed policies.

On billboards, Klein is pictured as a puppet on strings controlled by Pelosi. West, a motorcycle enthusiast, is depicted by Klein's campaign as a crony of criminal bikers, especially the Outlaws Motorcycle Club, some of whose members attended at least one of West's speeches. West also contributes a column to a biker magazine that the Klein campaign labels "misogynistic."
"It's been very negative, awful," said Josh Grodin, West's campaign manager. Klein spokesperson Melissa Silverman agrees the current campaign has been much rougher than the 2008 contest, when Klein beat West by 10 points. She attributes that to a closer contest and "the need to let people know there is a real clear choice in this race."

"We've had attacks ads before, but with all the money pouring in this year the volume is much higher," said FAU's Wagner.

That negative exchange has left both candidates with low approval numbers among voters, according to the Sunshine State poll. Klein has a 39/43 favorable/unfavorable rating; West, a 40/43 split.

But when it comes to the issues, the candidates take clearly divergent paths.

With about 130,000 senior citizens in the district, Medicare and health care generally are monster issues.

Klein touted the Obama administration's health care reform and emphasized his bipartisan effort to end Medicare fraud and his work to close the gap in prescription drug coverage -- known as the donut hole.

West would repeal the administration's health reforms, saying they endanger Medicare.

Klein supported the administration's stimulus program and bailouts of banks and auto industry, which he said kept the country from sinking further into recession. West said he would have opposed both.

West favors an Arizona style immigration enforcement bill. Klein is opposed.

"West has tried to nationalize the campaign, making it referendum on the Obama administration," said Wagner. "Klein has tried to keep it local."

Klein has also touted his local endorsements, including the Florida Police Benevolent Association, Florida Realtors, and all three major South Florida newspapers -- including The Palm Beach Post. West countered with an endorsement by GOP star Sarah Palin, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and his support from South Florida Tea Party members. West, a former U.S. Army officer, has been endorsed by various veterans groups and Klein by one.

The campaigns have both committed gaffes. The Florida Democratic Party issued documents on West's former financial problems that included his Social Security number. The ad was soon withdrawn. Meanwhile, West was quoted at a Tea Party rally in Broward: "You must be well-informed and well-armed because this government that we have right now is a tyrannical government," he said. West later said he was speaking "metaphorically."

Asked for a final message to voters, Grodin pointed to high unemployment and foreclosure rates in South Florida. "Are you better off than you were four years ago when Ron Klein entered Congress?" he asked. "If the answer is no, you should vote for Allen West."
Silverman countered, "Ron Klein is a moderate who has worked with both Republicans and Democrats in Congress. Allen West is an extreme and divisive figure."

A fight to the end.

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