

# *THE* **ROTHENBERG** *POLITICAL REPORT*

*A Nonpartisan  
Analysis of American  
Politics and Elections*

## **The Most Refreshing, Yet Unusual, Candidate Interview I've Done**

*March 8, 2010*

*By Stuart Rothenberg*

*Roll Call Contributing Writer*

Over the past 20 years, I have interviewed thousands of candidates, but never one quite like Richard Hanna.

I didn't interview Hanna last cycle, even though he ran a surprisingly strong race against then-freshman Rep. Michael Arcuri (D) in New York's 24th district, an oddly shaped swath of territory that includes a chunk of central New York state.

Arcuri won by just fewer than 10,000 votes (less than 4 points), a weaker showing than two years earlier when the Democrat won an open seat against a veteran GOP state Senator. In fact, Arcuri had the closest call of any Democratic incumbent who won re-election in the entire nation.

Nobody expected Hanna, who ran on the Republican, Conservative and Independence lines, to come as close as he did. He had never been active in politics, let alone run for political office. The National Republican Congressional Committee didn't do much for him, and the Rothenberg Political Report never carried the race as a district that might flip.

Hanna called me last year after his failed bid to talk about his race. I thought it a little odd, since I had ignored the contest, and he had no reason to touch base with me at that point. When asked, he said that he hadn't decided about running again.

So before I interviewed Hanna four days ago, all I knew about him was that he was in the construction business, had decided to seek a rematch against Arcuri, had far exceeded expectations in 2008 and had now caught the attention of the NRCC.

Normally, my candidate interviews are not for quotation, but when three-quarters of the way through the interview I asked him if all of his comments were on the record, he looked at me as if I were a little dense. Of course, he answered. That's the answer I expected.

Here are some of the things Richard Hanna, the 2008 Republican nominee for Congress and a 2010 hopeful, said during that interview:

"I never really thought of myself as a Republican. I still don't."

"I don't live in a world where ideology helps you. I live in a world of practical solutions."

Would he like Sarah Palin to campaign for him? "No," he said, smiling. "She seems like a nice lady, but that's not me."

When asked about Republican Capitol Hill enthusiasm for his rematch against Arcuri: “It’s nice they are excited about my race, but they may be disappointed when I get here.”

And, finally, when I asked him whether he would commit to supporting House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) for Speaker if the GOP wins back the House, he looked incredulous. “No,” he responded. “I don’t know him. I would need to meet him.”

I don’t mean to give the impression that Hanna, who identifies himself as something of a libertarian, is politically naive or in the wrong party. He isn’t, on either account.

On cultural issues, he definitely differs with many of his Republican supporters, since he supports abortion rights and civil unions for gays, and he thinks “don’t ask, don’t tell” should be reversed.

But on other issues, he is conservative, opposing the stimulus bill (for stimulating the growth of government, not creating jobs), the public insurance option and an insurance mandate in health care reform, and cap-and-trade.

A critic of the Iraq War during the Bush administration, he seems conflicted about U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

What did I think of Hanna? He was delightful — thoughtful, down to earth and straightforward. My “b.s. meter” didn’t go off even once. Many of the candidates I’ve interviewed over the past five years have called themselves independent and portrayed themselves as outsiders, but their answers to my questions told a different story. That’s where Hanna is different.

Just think, he actually wants to meet his party leader, talk with him and size him up before committing to vote for him for Speaker. My goodness, what a concept.

After meeting thousands of candidates who rarely have an unscripted or interesting thought, who are so predictable that I could give their answers before they do, I was obviously stunned by Hanna’s approach to politics, policy and public service.

Can Hanna win this time? That’s unclear at this point.

The district, which includes Rome, Utica, Oneonta, Cortland, Geneva and the territory in between, is politically competitive.

Liberal Republican Sherwood Boehlert held the seat for years before retiring in 2006. President Barack Obama carried the district narrowly, 50 percent to 48 percent in 2008, but George W. Bush won it in 2004 (53 percent to 47 percent) and more narrowly in 2000 (48 percent to 47 percent). Republicans have a registration advantage over Democrats, but not by much.

Arcuri didn’t really unload on Hanna last time, preferring to ignore him. This time, Arcuri and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee are likely to pulverize Hanna, who readily admits that his business has been sued and he “has fought with [the Occupational Safety and Health Administration] and municipalities.”

I remember interviewing Arcuri, then the Oneida County district attorney, during his first run, and he was poised and serious. He won’t roll over for Hanna. Last year, Arcuri apparently ran a mediocre race, but this year I expect him to run a far better campaign.

I look forward to a very interesting contest between two quality candidates.

Stuart Rothenberg is editor of the Rothenberg Political Report.