



Gay, abortion robo-calls hit SC state Senate race

By JIM DAVENPORT, Associated Press Writer
October 29, 2008

Voters in Lancaster and York counties are getting automated phone calls from a phony gay organization that says it supports the Democratic candidate for the local South Carolina state Senate seat, a move a national group called "gay baiting."

Candidate Mandy Powers Norrell said Wednesday that the Alliance for the Advancement of Gays and Lesbians does not exist and says the calls that began Tuesday are likely illegal.

Louise Pettus, an 82-year-old retired Winthrop University professor, said she picked up her ringing phone Tuesday and heard the recorded voice of a woman who claimed to be speaking for the group. The recording said "she hoped I would vote for Mandy Norrell because she believes in the same cause and believes in abortions, legal abortions," Pettus recalled.

Pettus, who pledged to her grandfather when she was 8 she'd never vote Republican, considers herself up on state and national politics. She's known Norrell for years and had no idea who was behind the call. She saw it as an effort to drive voters away from Norrell. She said she wasn't put off by the call as much as she was by the "the trickery, the idea of dirty politicking that many people would be tricked."

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund, said she's worked with groups around the nation and never heard of the Alliance for the Advancement of Gays and Lesbians. "I would say this type of gay baiting has no place in modern politics," Carey said.

Norrell said she heard about the calls Tuesday, shortly after they began, but had not listened to a recording of the message. She said she's never brought up gay marriage or abortion rights in her challenge to Republican state Rep. Mick Mulvaney for an open seat in a growing area south of Charlotte, N.C.

"My opponent has accused me of being for abortion and gay marriage and I have said unequivocally I am for neither," Norrell said.

Mulvaney denounced the calls. However, he vouched for the accuracy of remarks about Norrell's support for gay marriage and choice on abortion.

"I believe that the statements regarding Ms. Powers Norrell's positions are accurate. I absolutely condemn the method in which this message was conveyed," Mulvaney said.

"It's clearly designed just to stir up hatred and to distract from the issues," Mulvaney said. "If this was my own mother I would condemn it and demand that they stop."

The automated call would "work against me more than it does against her," Mulvaney said.

Nonetheless, Mulvaney has raised both issues in the campaign on his own. He read and sent a reporter a copy of an October 2004 e-mail that Norrell and her husband sent to friends defending U.S. Sen. John Kerry as he campaigned for president, explaining his stances on gay marriage and abortion rights.

"I've used her own words against her," Mulvaney said.

With more public officials openly gay and holding office, "this is certainly a tactic from another era," Carey said.

But it's the second time in a week that sexual orientation has been raised in South Carolina politics, a state that made national headlines this summer for pulling money out of an ad campaign in London's subway system trying to lure gay tourists.

Last week, state Rep. Thad Viers, R-Myrtle Beach, called attention to openly gay Democrat Linda Ketner's sexual orientation. Ketner is seeking to unseat Republican U.S. Rep. Henry Brown.