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By Celia Cohen  
**But His Mother's a Republican**

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The "Mike Castle" yard sign, framed on the wall, seemed a little weird in the home of the Democratic candidate running in the special election in Sussex County for the state House of Representatives.

It was explained by the yard sign hanging below it, the one for Battle Robnison. The signs were artifacts from the 1984 election, when the Republicans fielded Castle for governor and Robnison for lieutenant governor.

Battle Robnison is Rob Robnison's mother. He is the Democratic candidate. The way Democrats have been faring in Sussex County,

Rob Robnison can use all the Republican ties he can get, not to mention he was once a Republican himself.

Delaware is so small and the politicians so personally known, it is unusual for a campaign to turn on anything as blunt a weapon as party bashing, but this one could be it.

The special election is scheduled for Saturday, Sept. 12, to replace Joe Booth, a Republican who just won a special election for the state Senate to move up from the 37th Representative District, stretching from Georgetown to Lewes.

The Republicans like being Republicans in this race, where their candidate is Ruth Briggs King.

"A year ago it was not a good time to be a Republican, but there have been changes, particularly in Sussex County," said Bill Lee, the retired judge who has been both a Republican candidate for governor and a Sussex County Republican chair.

This is one of the Republicans' pet districts. Although they fell into the House minority last year, they were in the majority when they drew the district during the once-a-decade redistricting before the 2002 election. It was constructed so a Georgetown Republican like Booth could knock off John Schroeder, then the Democratic representative from Lewes, and it happened.

Since then, the district's voter registration has gone nominally Democratic -- with about 200 more Democrats than Republicans -- but so what? This is Sussex County.

It is Republican country. The voters have not sided with a Democrat for president in the last 30 years, except for the anomalous time that enough of them went for Ross Perot in 1996 to ambush Bob Dole and let Bill Clinton leave the county with a 1,000-vote edge.

The Republicans are pounding away at the issue of taxes, always one of their favorites. To the Republicans, taxation even with representation is tyranny.

Tax increases take a three-fifths vote to pass, and if the Democrats win this race, they would have the necessary supermajorities in both chambers, along with the governor. The Republicans' state Web site features scary, Halloween-type script shrieking, "Stop the Democratic Supermajority!"

In a sign the Democrats are concerned about the attack, Robnison dealt with it Monday as he declared his candidacy with announcements in Georgetown and Lewes.

"I know that families and small businesses cannot afford more taxes, which is why I will not vote for any tax increases proposed next year. I am not running to be part of a bloc vote. I am running as an independent-minded candidate," he said.

Although the Republicans were drubbed at the polls in 2008, they got on a roll afterwards in special elections. Since winning two races they should have lost -- swiping away Democratic seats in a Brandywine Hundred representative district and the Sussex County senatorial district -- the Republicans have the advantage this time of trying to keep a seat in friendly territory.

The Democrats countered by tapping Robnison as their candidate. His full name is Robert Houston Robnison Jr., signifying roots in Sussex County on both sides of the family and in both parties.

A great-grandfather, Robert G. Houston, was a Republican congressman who served during the

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1920s and 1930s. A grandfather, Julian Thomas "Tom" Robinson, was a Democratic speaker of the state House in the 1930s.

Rob Robinson's father used to run the "Sussex Countian" newspaper. His mother, who comes from North Carolina, was a Family Court judge, candidate for lieutenant governor and assistant counsel to Gov. Pete du Pont.

Rob Robinson is part of Sussex folklore himself. At his birth in 1972, he became the first baby ever born to a Sussex County lawyer. Battle Robinson was the first woman to practice law there.

Rob Robinson was a Republican until 2004. He said he did not put a lot of stock in the way he was registered and called himself a confirmed ticket-splitter, a reflection of the family heritage, but he found himself increasingly "more at home" with the Democrats, so he switched.

"You have to have people who believe in government in order to run it," he said.

Both candidates have backgrounds of civic involvement. Robinson, a public defender, chairs the Georgetown Planning Commission. King, the executive vice president of the Sussex County Association of Realtors, ran in the 2000 Republican primary in the 41st Representative District before the last redistricting and worked on Booth's senatorial campaign.

King is running on the Republicans' anti-tax message -- "This race is to ensure we have a voice and a vote in Dover" -- and Robinson understands the odds of overcoming it.

"It's obviously an uphill race for us. The mood for the country and particularly the county is hard for the Democrats," Robinson said.

Robinson's situation has echoes of another race, the year he was born, when an unknown 29-year-old Democrat named Joe Biden made his first campaign stop in Sussex County.

As Biden told the story, he was warned by Curt Steen, an influential Democratic state senator, that he was being hurt in Sussex County by a powerful rumor he was a Catholic.

When Biden said it was true, Steen blurted out a one-word epithet. Biden tried to soothe him.

"But, Senator, my wife's a Presbyterian," Biden said.

"We'll just have to go with that," Steen said.

Robinson's mother is a Republican. Maybe he can just go with that.



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