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Debate offers more of the same

Race tilted in Klobuchar's favor, analysts say

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When Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Amy Klobuchar was asked Tuesday to name something she likes about Republican candidate Mark Kennedy, she said, "I appreciate his predictability."

In their Moorhead, Minn., debate Tuesday, Klobuchar, Kennedy and the Independence Party's Robert Fitzgerald all seemed to relish their predictability.

Although the candidates talked more about transportation, the Central American Free Trade Agreement and North Korea in the Debate Minnesota gathering than they have in other meetings, they largely sang the same notes they've been crooning during the entire race. Debate Minnesota is an independent organization that sponsors political forums across Minnesota.

In the debate, Kennedy, a three-term U.S. representative from Watertown, accused Klobuchar of backing a proposal that would give illegal immigrants Social Security benefits and supporting a job-killing tax increase.

"Congressman Kennedy has been in Washington so long he's left his Minnesota nice behind," Klobuchar responded. She said she's publicly told Kennedy that she doesn't support giving illegal immigrants Social Security benefits and would limit tax increases to those earning more than \$336,000 a year.

Klobuchar, a two-term Hennepin County Attorney, accused Kennedy of being a rubber-stamp Republican and shirking the oversight responsibilities given to Congress.

"I'm not sure where 'rubber stamp' fits into Minnesota nice," Kennedy responded. He said he's worked well with Democrats in Congress and has helped bring together people on important local issues, like the Stillwater bridge or rural airports.

Fitzgerald, who lightened the debate with jokes, often mentioned his main theme: bringing down the debt that will otherwise be handed to future generations.

"Young people understand that debt is a four-letter word because they are swimming in it," he said.

The debate may do little to shake up the steady, quiet state of the Senate race, once expected to be nail-bitingly close. According to recent polls, Klobuchar holds a significant lead over Kennedy, with Fitzgerald trailing a very distant third.

National analysts believe the race, coming in a potentially disastrous year for federal Republicans, is tilted in Klobuchar's direction.

Kennedy has reacted with hard-hitting television ads deriding Klobuchar's positions, career and honesty. He voiced many of the same claims in the Moorhead debate.

As he has throughout the campaign, Kennedy championed his record of "reaching across the aisle," backing proposals to fight the war on terror and supporting tax cuts that he said have created jobs.

"We've helped create 6 million new jobs ... because of the tax relief we passed," he said.

In her introduction, Klobuchar said she would talk about her "North Star agenda," of affordable health care, changing course in Iraq and investment in energy produced by Midwest farmers.

"I'm here today to lay out a positive agenda for the people of this state," she said.

But, as Fitzgerald pointed out, their upbeat goals didn't match their performance on the Concordia College.

"They are great to be around individually," Fitzgerald said of his opponents. "But when you get on stage with them, it's kind of like being caught in the middle."

On Iraq, Klobuchar took the middle ground. She said she's looking for a change of course, a gradual withdrawal and asking more questions in Washington.

"There has been no oversight from this congressman. There has been no oversight from this Congress," she said.

Kennedy said prevailing in the war in Iraq was part of facing the challenge of the war on terror. Klobuchar's position was untenable, he said.

"We don't need Washington politicians telling our troops in the field what to do," he said.

Fitzgerald once backed sending more troops to Iraq but now believes immediate withdrawal is the only just answer, he said.

Klobuchar and Kennedy will debate again Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press."

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