

MEDIA BUYING

OPINION

Animal Rights

A Sleeper Election Issue?

BY WAYNE PACELLE

On March 2, California state Sen. Rico Oller lost a competitive, three-way Republican primary for the U.S. House seat for the 3rd Congressional District that sweeps from the suburbs of Sacramento through the Sierras and to the border of Nevada. With a late surge, former state Attorney General Dan Lungren edged out Oller by about 2,500 votes. There were several decisive factors in the race, but one of them surely was Oller's appalling record on animal welfare issues and a concerted campaign by animal protection advocates to short-circuit his run for the House.

During his eight years in the state legislature, Oller had opposed some 20 animal protection bills. That included measures to strengthen laws against dogfighting and cockfighting, to provide elemental care standards for dogs in puppy mills, and to require that antifreeze contain a bittering agent to prevent accidental poisoning of pets and children. In addition, Oller himself is an enthusiastic bear hunter, specializing in hunting with hounds. A typical hound hunter chases a bear with a pack of radio-collared dogs and drives the bear into a tree, shooting the animal at point-blank range, a practice that even most hunters find loathsome.

Humane USA, the national political action arm of the humane movement, mounted an independent expenditure campaign against Oller that made use of mailings, radio advertisements and dozens of volunteers who went door-to-door in the district. Polling work done by humane organizations had revealed that most voters find animal fighting, high-tech hound hunting of bears, the mistreatment of dogs in puppy mills and other forms of animal abuse to be repugnant. In the end, the independent expenditure campaign—combined with a complementary effort by the Republican Mainstreet Partnership that focused on other aspects of Oller's background—acquainted voters



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A Vietnamese man, Nguyen Quang Trung, watches his fighting cocks. Cockfighting could be a major issue in this year's Louisiana U.S. Senate race.

in the district with Oller's record and caused them to look to other candidates.

Since its founding in 1999, Humane USA has singled out a number of candidates who have exhibited deplorable records on animal protection. A notable target was Georgia's outspoken U.S. Rep. Bob Barr (R). He had been among just three dozen or so legislators who had voted against legislation pushed principally by Republican lawmakers to ban the

commercial sale of videos depicting illegal acts of animal cruelty.

That included so-called "animal crush" videos, in which women in high-heeled shoes stomp small animals to death for the sexual gratification of viewers. Humane USA made an issue of this vote in his 2002 primary race against veteran U.S. Rep. John Linder, R-Ga., and helped cement the view that Barr, like Oller, was too extreme and did not deserve to serve in public office. Linder won easily.

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In 2000, Humane USA mounted a major effort against U.S. Sen. Slade Gorton, R-Wash., a three-term incumbent who faced a challenge from high-tech executive Maria Cantwell, a former one-term House member. Humane USA sent a mailer to 80,000 humane advocates in Washington that informed them about Gorton's terrible record on animal issues.

At the same time, humane advocates were turning out in large numbers for a successful ballot initiative to ban the use of steel-jawed leg hold traps, which Gorton had fought to keep legal on national wildlife refuges. The combination of these factors aided Cantwell's bid, and in the end, she defeated Gorton by a slim 2,200 votes out of 3.3 million cast.

This fall, Humane USA has taken a keen interest in a number of candidates, including U.S. Rep. Chris John, D-La., who is seeking the seat of retiring U.S. Sen. John Breaux (D). John is the Congress' leading cockfighting advocate. He's referred to cockfighting as a "cultural, family-type" activity and "an industry that is very important to America." He has long been the go-to guy for the cockfighting lobby, and Louisiana voters will be sure to hear that John embraces a pro-animal fighting position in advance of the November election.

A Model Use of Ballot Initiatives

There are 5,000 humane organizations in the United States, and most of them spend their resources directly caring for animals – whether helping dogs or cats in animal shelters or on the street or providing care to injured or orphaned wild animals in the care of a wildlife rehabilitation center. In recent years, humane advocates have become more politically engaged, recognizing the value of having sound public policies to halt animal cruelty and exploitation.

Since 1990, animal advocates have demonstrated extraordinary success in trying to halt particularly abusive types of animal exploitation through the use of the

ballot initiative process, which is available to citizens in 24 states. Animal organizations do not have the financial reserves of corporations that use animals, but they can call to service thousands of committed volunteers. The Humane Society of the United States, for instance, has more than seven million names on its mailing list.

Voters have approved 17 animal protection ballot initiatives since 1990 on subjects ranging from cockfighting to bear baiting to horse slaughter to canned hunts to the factory farming of pigs. Humane organizations have lost very few campaigns, usually only after being outspent.

The animal groups have been unique among those that have used the ballot initiative process by relying almost exclusively on volunteer petitioners, as compared with paid petitioners that the proponents of such initiatives typically hire. Since 1990, animal advocates have gathered more than four million signatures of registered voters to qualify these initiatives. They prevailed in the elections by showing emotionally powerful advertisements in the late stages of the campaigns, aiming for voters' minds as well as their hearts.

Congress and the States

Animal advocates have also spent considerable energies trying to persuade lawmakers to adopt sensible reforms. In the last 10 years, 26 states have created felony-level penalties for aggravated animal cruelty and abuse, bringing the total number of states with such provisions to 41. Lawmakers have approved other state laws relating to mandatory spay/neuter programs, greyhound racing, canned hunts and possession of dangerous exotic animals as pets.

In the past five years Congress has passed 14 new laws to protect animals, including measures to combat cockfighting and dog fighting, the interstate movement of big cats for the pet trade, the sale of videos depicting animal cruelty, the sale of dog and cat fur, and the validation of alternatives to animal testing. At the urging of

animal protection groups, Congress has increased funding for the Animal Welfare Act 81 percent and provided millions in funding for the first time ever to enforce the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. It also has cut funding for certain animal abuse programs, including promotional funding for the mink industry.

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Roscoe Bartlett, R-Md., Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., Sam Farr, D-Calif., Elton Gallegly, R-Calif., Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio, Chris Smith, R-N.J., and Ed Whitfield, R-Ky. In the Senate, supporters include Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, Robert Byrd, D-W.V., Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., John Ensign, R-Nev., Carl Levin, D-Mich., Herb Kohl, D-Wis., and Rick Santorum, R-Penn.

The Humane Society of the United States and the Fund for Animals produce a scorecard that tallies the records of legislators, and Humane USA will make endorsements in more than 500 races this election cycle. The goal is simple: to educate and elect individuals who will support and promote public policies to halt cruelty and abuse.

In a nation with 70 million pet owners and 50 million bird-watchers, along with millions of others who show their appreciation and respect for animals in myriad ways, the animal protection cause is gaining political momentum every year. And lawmakers should realize that support for animals is not just good public policy, but also good politics. 