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4th District race attracts scant notice

By John Cheves
jcheves@herald-leader.com

Voters in Northern Kentucky's 4th Congressional District have a choice Nov. 4 between their conservative incumbent and a liberal challenger, although many of them might not even know there's a contest.

U.S. Rep. Geoff Davis, R-Hebron, is cruising toward his third term. His \$1.9 million campaign treasury is filled largely by out-of-state donors — including those in the military and financial sectors whom he helps as a member of relevant committees. Davis has so much money, in fact, that he gives tens of thousands of dollars to other Republicans.

By contrast, Democratic challenger Michael Kelley is an Oldham County doctor with only \$18,000 to spread the word of his opposition to the Iraq War, coal-fired power plants, Wall Street bailouts and a campaign-finance system "that has legal bribery and corruption at its very core."

Davis has skipped every joint appearance with Kelley, including their Kentucky Educational Television debate, preferring to focus on campaign commercials. Without any advertising money, or support from the state Democratic Party, Kelley has ridden his bicycle nearly 250 miles around the district to introduce himself to residents.

Polls predict a Davis landslide. Survey USA recently had him beating Kelley by 22 points.

"Davis probably should have no concern at all," said Stephen Mergner, a political scientist at Georgetown College.

"Money usually translates into victory," Mergner said. "And of course, while people may not like Congress as a whole, they tend to be fond of their own local congressman, if only because they're familiar with his name."

Entrenched incumbent Davis, who turns 50 on Sunday, declined to comment for this story.

Since he first went to Washington in 2005, he has eased into the life of an entrenched congressman, albeit a junior member of the minority party.

He keeps a low profile, sponsoring almost no successful legislation in the 110th Congress, other than naming a post office in Dayton, and voting with House Republican leaders about 95 percent of the time. His conservative views on social issues, tax cuts and the Iraq War are popular in the 4th district, which includes the suburbs of Cincinnati



Geoffrey Clark Davis



Michael J. Kelley

Party: Republican
Born: Oct. 26, 1958
Residence: Hebron
Occupation: Congressman
Education: U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.
Family: Davis and his wife, Patricia, have six children
Public office: Congressman, 2005 to present
Campaign Web site: www.geoffdavisforcongressblog.com

Party: Democrat
Born: Jan. 7, 1966
Residence: La Grange
Occupation: Internal and pediatric physician
Education: B.A., Harvard University; M.D., University of Louisville Medical School
Family: Kelley and his wife, Gretchen, have four children
Public office: None
Campaign Web site: http://kelley08.com



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and Louisville as well as rural counties.

Davis' only national attention came in April, when he referred to Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama as "that boy," a racially controversial comment for which he later apologized.

However, Davis sits on the House Armed Services Committee and the House Financial Services Committee, which gives him clout when it comes to defense contractors and the banking and insurance industries.

Davis tucked \$8.4 million in earmarked projects into the 2008 defense spending bill, and he has collected \$168,050 from earmark recipients since his first congressional campaign.

This year, as American banks began to collapse, Davis asked banking executives and lobbyists for campaign money at a series of "intimate" cocktail parties and meals at upscale Washington eateries. They were promised a chance to bend his ear in exchange for donations.

So far in his career, Davis has taken \$1.6 million in campaign donations from the financial-services sector, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. His top donors for this election include CNG Financial, which is an Ohio-based payday-lending chain, and the American Bankers Association. The banks favorably note when he votes their way, such as this summer, opposing the Credit Cardholders' Bill of Rights Act of 2008.

Few Beltway insiders expect Davis to leave any time soon.

"Davis has now won two tough races in this Republican district," political magazine National Journal wrote recently. "It will take a strong Democratic candidate to seriously challenge him again."

Running without money

Kelley, 42, decided to run for Congress because he worried that his four children wouldn't enjoy the quality of life that he has. He said he blamed President Bush and a corrupt Congress for wasting trillions of dollars on foreign wars and corporate handouts while the American infrastructure deteriorates and workers' wages and benefits decline.

"I found that unacceptable," Kelley said. "And I realized that Geoff Davis is not the person who will change the course."

Kelley takes pride in the fact that he has almost no campaign money, citing it as proof of his purity while simultaneously recognizing that it makes his chances at victory "a long shot." He campaigns as humble "Doc Kelley," a Washington outsider.

"I'm not a politician, I'm a family doctor," Kelley said during the KET debate where he stood alone because Davis refused to appear with him. "If you're happy with where George Bush has led our country, then vote for my opponent. He's a huge supporter of George Bush."

On his campaign Web site, Kelley leaves no doubt about his positions, however unpopular they might be in Northern Kentucky. He calls for immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq; for no-emission energy sources, such as sun, wind and biomass, instead of coal; and for public financing of political campaigns.

On health care, Kelley said the government must play a stronger role in controlling market costs. He opposes Medicare's Part D drug coverage; he argued that it was a favor for the pharmaceutical industry, which was about to lose the patents on many best-selling drugs, because it forbids Medicare from negotiating for cheaper prices.

People seem to appreciate his message when he's able to talk to them, Kelley said.

"I understand that you don't get taken seriously in our political system unless you're dialing for dollars with the special interests and essentially soliciting bribes," Kelley said. "On the other hand, a majority of Americans have lost faith that Congress speaks for them anymore. I think that normal people have the constitutional right to run for office."

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