



O'Donnell, Coons Spar Over Marxism, Evolution

Marxism and evolution were among the topics raised in a wide-ranging and frequently contentious nationally televised debate in Newark, Delaware, on Wednesday night, October 13, between Senate candidates Chris Coons, a Democrat, and Republican Christine O'Donnell. O'Donnell, who once called evolution "a myth," said her beliefs about the origin of the species are irrelevant to her Senate candidacy, while Coons denied he had been a "bearded Marxist" in his college days.



"I am not now, nor have I ever been, anything but a clean-shaven capitalist," said Coons, a lawyer and county executive for Delaware's New Castle County. On matters of more immediate concern to Delaware voters, the candidates traded barbs over taxes and spending, as well as military and national security issues.

"My opponent wants to go to Washington and rubber-stamp failed spending bills," O'Donnell said. "This is wrong. Uncle Sam needs to be cut off." Coons cited his record as executive of the state's most populous county, saying it is one of only 30 of the 3,000 counties in the nation that have earned a triple A bond rating. "Ms. O'Donnell is not familiar with how bond ratings work," he said.

The race has drawn an unusual amount of national attention since O'Donnell, a political newcomer and Tea Party favorite, upset Congressman and former governor Mike Castle in the Republican primary. O'Donnell immediately became a controversial figure, based largely on remarks she made in television appearances a dozen years ago, including the evolution comment and the admission that she had "dabbled" in witchcraft in her teens.

The 90-minute debate at the University of Delaware was carried live by the Cable News Network and moderated by CNN's Wolf Blitzer and Nancy Karibjanian of Delaware First Media. The format was less structured than the typical candidates debate, with the contenders sitting side by side, rather than at lecterns on opposite ends of the stage. The candidates were given frequent opportunity to question one another and at times were encouraged to respond to each other's statements without waiting for the designated one-minute for rebuttal.

In the most controversial, headline-grabbing statement of the evening, O'Donnell contrasted her Catholic faith with what she called her opponent's "Marxist beliefs." That came after Coons expressed surprise at seeing in a newspaper interview a statement by O'Donnell that "she would not have her faith be a central driver of her decisions if elected." Saying he was for "protecting a woman's right to choose, protecting reproductive freedom," Coons said that getting "on the record" his opponent's "views on things like prayer, abortion, evolution is important" when considering "what sort of judges she would



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confirm, what sort of issues she would take up."

O'Donnell said she made her comment about evolution during a discussion of the teaching of creationism in public schools. Local communities should decide, she said.

"What I believe is irrelevant," O'Donnell, insisted when Blitzer her pressed her to state her own view of evolution. "What I will support in Washington is the ability for the local school system to decide what is taught in their classrooms," she said.

O'Donnell claimed Coons had said "that it was studying under a Marxist professor that made him become a Democrat...I would argue that there are more people that support my Catholic faith than his Marxist beliefs, and I'm using his own words."

Coons denied making that statement and said in response to a question from Blitzer that the "bearded Marxist" phrase appeared in an article he wrote for his college newspaper as something his Republican friends jokingly said when he returned from a trip to Kenya and became a registered Democrat.

"Forget the bearded Marxist comment. You, writing an article saying that you learned your beliefs from an articulate, intelligent Marxist professor and that's what made you become a Democrat," O'Donnell said. "That should send chills up the spine of every Delaware voter."

"If it were accurate, if it were true, I would agree," Coons replied. "But it's not accurate. It's not true."

"You said that on MSNBC just a few weeks ago," O'Donnell said.

O'Donnell said she would vote to extend the Bush-era tax cuts, due to expire at the end of this year, while Coons said he would support extending the tax cuts for lower- and middle-class taxpayers, but would favor retaining them as well for families earning more than the \$250,000 that President Obama has set as upper limit for tax relief. The cap he would favor might be "up to \$1 million or \$2 million or \$5 million," he said. Acknowledging it's a "tough choice," Coons said any tax relief will add to the annual deficits and the national debt.

O'Donnell said "drastic measures" were needed to reduce deficit spending and called for canceling the unspent portion of the economic stimulus bill, along with a freeze on discretionary spending and on the hiring of non-security employees. She also called for rooting out waste and fraud in programs like Medicare and "schoolhouse pork" in education programs.

Coons said he would "seriously consider" a three-year freeze on non-defense discretionary spending, as recommended by President Obama, and would favor cuts in agriculture price supports and in hiring, as well as reducing federal office space. He spoke of cuts in defense, including the C-17 aircraft and other weapons "that the Pentagon itself has already said they no longer need." Other savings could be made "through the BRAC (Base Relocation And Closure) program and other things that have shown a real capacity to save," Coons said.

When O'Donnell described Coons as beholden to the teachers unions that have endorsed him, she was asked if she would support the elimination of the U.S. Department of Education, a pledge that was added to the national Republican campaign platform in 1980 and dropped in 2000.

"I don't think we have to take that drastic a step," she said. A report released by Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Oklahoma, shows millions of dollars in Department of Education money have been wasted, O'Donnell said. "That's the kind of stuff we have to stop. We also have to make sure that the money we are putting into education does go to the classroom and makes them more effective." She called for "putting the power back to the parents over where they send their children to school."



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Coons said he believes there is a "significant role" for the federal government to play in providing financial support and scholarships for those who want to teach science technology, engineering and math. "We need a new generation of teachers who are fully prepared, fully equipped, fully qualified to engage their students in the classrooms," said Coons, adding that the No Child Left Behind Act should be "modernized and made more flexible and responsive."

On foreign and military issues, the candidates clashed over President Obama's timeline for exiting Afghanistan, with the troop withdrawal scheduled to begin in July of next year.

"We've spent \$1.3 trillion in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has significantly contributed to our debt," said Coons, adding that more than 5,000 American servicemen have died in the two countries and others are serving there on their third or fourth tour. "I am far more concerned about the threats to our security posed by an unstable Pakistan, posed by Iran and posed by an endless war in (Afghanistan) where we're trying to build a nation where there really hasn't been one in modern times."

O'Donnell argued that "this random time withdrawal" will embolden the terrorists. She called for adherence to benchmarks that include "making sure that there's a government — that a representative government over there that serves the needs of the people and that can defend themselves. When we've reached these benchmarks, that's when we withdraw." When O'Donnell went back to talking about her opponent's position on tax cuts, Coons objected.

"Let's stay focused on the issue in front of us, which is Afghanistan," he said. "You've suggested gauzy benchmarks."

"And it's you — you're jumping around," O'Donnell replied.

"No," Coons answered, "we're staying focused on the issue of Afghanistan rather than jumping to other issues."

Photo: Democratic candidate Chris Coons and Republican candidate Christine O'Donnell, right, respond to a question during a televised Delaware Senate debate at the University of Delaware in Newark, Del., Oct. 13, 2010: AP Images



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