

McConnell vulnerable, group's poll suggests

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FRANKFORT, Ky. — The main group pushing for a constitutional amendment against flag desecration tried to put more pressure yesterday on one of its main targets, U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell.

The Citizens Flag Alliance, created by the American Legion, released a poll in which Kentuckians said they are less likely to vote for McConnell once they know he voted against the proposed amendment.

McConnell said that voters base their decisions on many issues and that this one would make no difference anyway because his likely Democratic opponent, Steve Beshear, would oppose the amendment, too. He gave no basis for his prediction.

Beshear, who has declined to take a position on any issues since declaring his candidacy in December, didn't respond to calls seeking comment.

At a Frankfort press conference, the president of the pro-amendment group suggested that McConnell may have been responsible for this week's resignation of the pollster who has been taking surveys for the group.

The pollster, Ed Goeas, said he was not pressured by anyone and resigned because he learned that the Citizens Flag Alliance was planning to run television commercials against Republicans running for re-election.

McConnell, who denied putting any pressure on Goeas, is the only Republican senator up for re-election this year who voted against the proposed amendment last fall. He supported it when he last ran for re-election, in 1990, but says his work on campaign-finance issues since then has made him "a First Amendment hawk."

The Citizens Flag Alliance ran TV ads putting pressure on McConnell in December, before the Dec. 12 vote on the amendment, but Goeas said he didn't learn of the ads until after doing the recent poll, which was conducted Jan. 16-17.

Goeas, chairman and chief executive officer of The Tarrance Group, said the alliance's attitude has changed.

"Now it seems to have crossed the line to 'He voted wrong, and we're going to do everything we can to defeat him,'" Goeas said.

Goeas said in his Feb. 19 resignation letter that his firm has a "strict policy" of not participating in any effort "designed to weaken an incumbent Republican elected official."

In his Jan. 25 memorandum to the alliance, Goeas discussed how the issue could hurt McConnell.

He said only 10 percent of the 500 registered voters surveyed by telephone said they were more likely to support McConnell because of his vote on the issue, while 62 percent said his vote made them less likely to support him — and 49 percent said they felt strongly about that.

The poll's margin of error is plus or minus 4.5 percentage points. It did not screen out people who are unlikely to vote in November.

The poll also showed that McConnell ranked relatively low when voters were asked a standard question about an incumbent — whether they think he has done his job well enough to deserve re-election or whether "it's time to give a new person a chance."

Only 34 percent said McConnell deserves re-election, while 40 percent said a new person should get a chance. Another 26 percent volunteered that they were unsure or that their vote would depend on who was running against McConnell.

The Courier-Journal's Bluegrass State Poll of 801 registered voters Feb. 1-6 matched McConnell and Beshear. It found that 50 percent supported the senator and 36 percent favored his likely challenger, though most hadn't heard of Beshear. The poll's error margin was 3.9 percentage points.