

Often, the most interesting thing about a person is the characteristic that lies beneath, that hidden thing that bobs up along the waves of time. But the most compelling part of Rep. Allen West of Florida is his own biography, there for all to see: an African-American, Tea Party activist, zealously pro-Israel Republican congressman, who, after his beloved career in the Army ended under a cloud, defeated the sitting Democrat in a largely white, politically-polarized district here and quickly became one of the right's most visible spokesmen.

West's fans in his district, which stretches over two counties along the east coast of Florida, are both numerous and loud; hundreds fill his town hall-style meetings, many of them favoring T-shirts bearing his image. At a recent Tea Party rally in Washington, supporters flocked to him like sea gulls to a crust of baguette. Among the 87 House Republican freshmen, he ranks third in the latest fundraising period for his re-election campaign; his \$433,551 haul came largely through individual donations.

West's popularity among conservatives goes far beyond south Florida. He was chosen to give the keynote speech last February at the Conservative Political Action Conference and is frequently featured on the Fox News Channel and on other conservative venues where he enjoys explaining, reiterating, or unleashing any number of incendiary remarks concerning what he often calls "the other side."

There was his recent observation that liberal women "have been neutering American men," and that the president of the United States is a "low-level socialist agitator."

West scoffs at the notion he has become a sensation.

"I don't drink my own tap water or read my own press," he said in a brief interview before a town hall-style meeting here this week. "I tell the truth and I stand on convictions and you know what you're getting."

While West's decision to cast himself as an iconoclast has made him a conservative star, it is unclear how well it will serve him as he seeks re-election next year in this swing district, where far more voters are likely to come out for a presidential election than in the midterm cycle.

With its two new congressional seats, Florida will likely receive intensified national attention among swing states in 2012, perhaps highlighting this district — which was central to the disputed 2000 presidential recount — as one of the best tests of the Tea Party's endurance outside reliably Republican districts.

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