

On Voting for Bad Democrats: the Perriello Predicament

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What if you told your local congress critter you'd oppose them if they funded more war, and they funded more war, but their opponent is even worse and a Republican?

Tom Perriello, first-term Democratic congress member from Virginia's Fifth district, is widely expected to lose his reelection bid, in part because he voted for a healthcare bill. Right wingers in the district hated the bill for doing anything at all. Others of us who want to eliminate the health insurance corporations, as other wealthy countries have done, thought it was a terrible bill and quite possibly worse than nothing, as it empowers and entrenches the problem even while imposing some reforms.

So, why did Perriello vote yes? Doing so pleased a lot of Democratic voters, pleased the Democratic Party, and conceivably Perriello himself thought it was a good bill; he said he did. But, having promised during the campaign to support abortion rights, he voted for the Stupak-Pitts anti-choice amendment to the healthcare bill. While there are women and those who care about women in Perriello's district, you wouldn't know it from the reaction. The anti-healthcare crowd, on the other hand, proposed to burn him in effigy.

On Perriello's votes for war funding, he hasn't said what he himself thinks. He has voted for the largest military budgets ever, which have included massive funding of illegal wars. He has also voted for supplemental bills funding just the wars.

In 2009, Perriello voted for war funding. Then the Senate added to the bill an IMF bailout for Eastern European bankers. At that point, all the Republicans and right-wingers turned against the bill despite its funding of mass-murder, whereas others of us just thought the bill had two great reasons to vote against it now instead of one. The vote was very close and followed a lot of pressure from the White House and the Democratic Party on its members. Perriello voted yes. Why?

We don't know, but we know that it didn't please a lot of Democratic voters and did put him on the wrong side with the right-wingers. Rather than pleasing any block of voters, Perriello pleased the Democratic Party, which — and I'm sure this was all coincidence — quickly bought him radio ads and shipped Steny Hoyer and Van Jones down to do press events in Perriello's district.

Come 2010, there was another war supplemental vote, this one to escalate the war in Afghanistan. Perriello could have voted no and allowed the bill to safely pass. The Republicans were backing this one. In the end 12 Republicans and 103 Democrats opposed it, but Perriello voted yes. He didn't have to do that to please his party or his funders, and it displeased those Democratic leaning voters who heard anything about it. There was never

a single news story printed in any Fifth District newspaper to tell anyone the vote had happened at all. Perriello either voted yes to please right-wing voters or because he actually thought the war should be escalated. But he never made a public case for that escalation, and when a small group of us met with him prior to the vote he refused to say what — if anything — he thought.

Perriello is now receiving the backing of the National Rifle Association. When you look through his record on all types of issues, it's among the very worst for a Democrat. ProgressivePunch.org scores him as the 232nd most progressive member of Congress and puts him in the category of "leaning Republican." Some supposedly progressive organizations continue to back Perriello as a stand-out progressive. At least some who support that counter-factual position argue that Virginia's Fifth District is so backward, that Perriello is relatively more progressive than are the very best members of Congress who have it easy in their super-enlightened districts.

But, taking the national perspective, one has to ask what good it does the nation or the world to focus on electing bad congress members even if they are better than their districts. I'd much rather support the very most progressive members who are in any danger, and run more-progressive challengers in primaries if not general elections against those who are falling behind strong majority positions in their safe districts. The Democrats have a big majority in the House. If your goal is to keep the Democrats in charge, why not do so by protecting the best or even the mediocre Democrats? Why put energy into keeping the worst Democrats around?

Some well-meaning souls tell me that Perriello is with us in his heart and would vote the right way if he thought he could. Supposedly, he does vote the right way when bills fly under the radar and won't be a big deal to his constituents. The evidence for that is underwhelming. The approach to democracy that it establishes is disturbing. If Perriello believes his district is lagging behind, he ought to use the platform he has to educate people, not make enlightened votes when, and only when, nobody's watching.

When I look for the very best members of Congress, I notice that some of them are in similar situations to Perriello. Congressman Alan Grayson is a first-term Democrat from a traditionally Republican district in Florida. He, like Perriello, came in through a narrow victory in a year in which a presidential race turned out lots of new and excited voters. Grayson quickly became a leader in the progressive caucus and went beyond what most of its members would do. He took an out-spoken position in support of peace, justice, and the social good on a wide range of issues. He didn't just vote against more war. He publicly organized people around the country to lobby other congress members to vote No. That kind of leadership is almost unheard of. It almost makes it look as if the congressman actually wants to end the wars. People have responded by flooding Grayson's reelection campaign with support and funding. Perriello, too, has raised lots of money, so much that the Democratic Party has an excuse for not giving him more, despite his loyalty.

But here's the difference: people are excited and energized to back Grayson. His blunt outspokenness for progressive positions generates endless controversy and free media attention. He aggravates people who would never have voted for him anyway. And he excites people who would otherwise likely stay home to get out and vote and bring all their neighbors. I tell people to help Grayson, and I live in Perriello's district. Here, the arguments for Perriello are mumbled more than shouted. They focus on his supposed

goodness at heart, his voting record notwithstanding, and the horror of his opponent.

Perriello's Republican opponent, Robert Hurt, would likely be as bad or worse than him on every issue. He opposes any sort of controls on carbon emissions. His father is an investor in uranium mining, which Hurt pushed a state bill to create a study of in Virginia. Hurt would openly and unapologetically back a corporate agenda across the board.

Perriello's other opponent, Jeffrey Clark, ended up on the ballot because the Virginia Independent Green Party collected signatures after having assumed, without any investigation, that Perriello was a progressive, and assumed that putting a Tea Partier on the ballot would help Perriello by hurting Hurt. Clark says he would vote against war funding. But I don't think even he knows with much confidence how he would vote on most issues, and I certainly disagree with him on many.

Only Hurt and Perriello, of course, are predicted to have a chance. Voting for Clark might be a way to make an anti-war statement. So might staying home. It's hard to see how voting for Perriello or Hurt could do anything immediate for peace or for shifting our financial investment from the military to schools or jobs or green energy. Hurt seems likely to back wars the Republican Party backs, which is just about all of them. Perriello defers to the president on all such matters, at least when the president is a Democrat.

In July, Perriello voted for an amendment that would have requested that the President come up with an exit plan, any exit plan, for Afghanistan. There was no date attached, and no enforcement. It was just rhetoric, but Perriello backed it, just as he did the so-called "Responsible Plan to End the War in Iraq" that dozens of Democrats campaigned on in 2008. That plan committed Perriello to banning presidential signing statements, and he hasn't lifted a finger as the new president has produced them. It required smaller military budgets, and Perriello has voted for larger ones. The plan supported the Geneva Conventions and habeas corpus, while opposing warrantless spying and rendition and calling for the creation of a war crimes commission. We have yet to hear word one out of Perriello the congressman on any of it. As far as withdrawing from Iraq, the plan was weaker than the treaty Bush signed, so counting on Perriello to fight for compliance with the Status of Force Agreement is unwise.

And yet, Hurt doesn't even drop rhetorical teases that one might hope to later hold him to. He's a sane Republican by today's standards. This is a contest between a non-lunatic Republican and one of the worst Democrats, but there's still nothing good that can be said about Hurt, even in comparison to Perriello, except for the fact that he isn't Perriello.

I told Perriello I would oppose him if he voted for the war money. If I follow through, even by voting for Clark, it helps Hurt. But if I don't follow through, I can't tell some later post-Hurt representative what I want and expect to be taken seriously at all. Or at least I like to imagine that there is that kind of institutional memory. I even like to think that the Democratic Party will notice if its progressive leaders, like Grayson do well while its "leaning Republican" members like Perriello fail.

One way to make such a message resonate, I think, and to allow those of us unsure what to do in our district to take some kind of action rather than trying to articulate the reasons for our sitting still, would be this: organize progressives in Virginia's Fifth District to make contributions of money and of time making phone calls to Alan Grayson for Congress.

<http://www.graysonforcongress.com>

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