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Taking the midterms to Virginia's neighborhoods

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 12, 2010

Rep. Tom Perriello, left, talks with community activist Joe Epps during a walking tour of downtown Chase City, Va., July 8. (AP/Steve Helber)

Penhook, Virginia (population 785) is well off the beaten path. Located about an hour south of Lynchburg, the town is nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, and along the 14 mile route from the main road, you pass signs directing you to six different Baptist and Christian churches as well as a farmhouse flying the Confederate battle flag.

In town, just past Carl?s Place Family Diner but before the post office is the Penhook United Methodist Church where, once a month, they host a community breakfast to build fellowship and raise money for charities that feed the hungry. You can have waffles, turkey sausage and cheese casserole, bacon and sausage cooked on the grill outdoors, grits with or without cheese, biscuits with gravy. ?The gravy?s not too good today, I don?t know what happened,? one woman apologizes to me, but it tastes plenty good to me.

In 2008, the precinct that includes Penhook gave President Obama 357 votes compared to the 689 it awarded Sen. John McCain. Penhook is not the kind of place you expect to find a Democratic member of Congress campaigning, especially one who supported Obama on the stimulus bill, health care reform and cap-and-trade legislation. But, on this Saturday morning, there is Rep. Tom Perriello sitting at a table, answering questions and explaining his stand on the issues. In the course of a little over an hour, he goes to all the tables and meets all of the 45 people who are there.

This week, *NCR* is reporting on some of the most hotly contested races of the 2010 midterm election cycle. Our coverage includes:

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?He?s not been my candidate,? Cindy Galvin says, setting aside the towel with which she has been washing dishes in the church hall?s kitchen. ?I don?t always agree with his platform.? Galvin tells me that people in town are paying close attention to the election, but their interest is not always pleasurable. ?People can?t handle it anymore,? she says. ?It doesn?t take much to govern us. Simpler is better.?

Galvin is a friendly and chatty woman, retired like many of Penhook?s residents who moved into homes along the nearby scenic Smith Mountain Lake. She says that health care reform is ?ridiculous ? you?re never going to have equal results. We?re all gifted differently.? She is very opposed to abortion and when I point out that Perriello considers himself pro-life also, she looks at me skeptically and moves on. ?I?m not sure I?m going to vote for Mr. Hurt [Perriello?s opponent] either,? she says. ?We?re reading and listening.?

Outside, where his task as grillmeister has been handed over to a friend, Cindy?s husband, Bernie, has definitely made up his mind. He pronounces Perriello ?far too liberal? and himself ?an anti-big-government guy, closer to libertarian than a Republican.? He is also a Roman Catholic, who attends one of the two Catholic churches in Franklin County before returning to Penhook to attend the Methodist church with Cindy. He is not as loquacious as his wife, as if explaining something so obvious as the need to throw the Democrats out of office is not worth the time.

?Well, that was a much more positive reception than I expected,? says Perriello as he leaves the breakfast, walking briskly to his white Ford Ranger with an extra suit and several shirts hanging behind the seat. ?The seniors in particular. ? If they believe the lies on television, they?re against us, but if you give them the truth, they are with us,? he says. Perriello is pleased that he recently convinced his congressional colleagues to back a $1 million grant for a Center for Emerging Industry in nearby Martinville, a part of Virginia hit with especially high unemployment. He calls the project a ?game-changer? that will help ignite job growth in green jobs, those higher-paying, environmentally friendly jobs that could renew the economy of the region. ?My focus is on rebuilding the middle class,? he says. ?Are we going to be a country that makes and builds things again?? He jumps into his pickup truck and heads off to another campaign stop.

Perriello has earned a reputation as the hardest-working member of Congress, in part because the beaten paths of this sprawling district, slightly larger than New Jersey, have all been newly beaten by Perriello as he goes from one end of the district to another, frequently crashing on supporters? couches. In the summer of 2009, when the tea party began to brew and the debate over health care turned many town hall meetings into shouting matches, Perriello held 28 such meetings, more than any other congressman. Health care reform was a key plank in Perriello?s platform two years ago.

James Salt, director of organizing for the progressive Catholic group Catholics United, recalls a man recently giving Perriello a hard time over his vote in favor of cap-and-trade legislation. ?Tom didn?t back away from his vote like so many other Democrats are doing this year,? Salt says. ?He explained that biofuels are a growth industry for farmers in Southside,? Salt tells me, referring to the section of the district bordering North Carolina. He is clearly impressed by Perriello?s commitment to explaining himself and, even more, his unwillingness to distance himself from his votes on controversial issues.

Progressive Catholics are keeping an eye on the race. Perriello was a key mover in the effort to launch Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, a sister organization to Catholics United, launched after many progressive Catholics grew disgusted at the way Sen. John Kerry?s religion was used against him by fellow Catholics in 2004. Catholics United will not be overly involved in the Virginia race: The region has few Catholics, and they are working hard for two pro-life, pro-health-care congressmen in Ohio and for Kathy Dahlkemper in Pennsylvania. But Salt and others are working with the Matthew 25 Network, a progressive ecumenical group that will be running ads supporting Perriello on Christian radio stations in the district. In a rural district like this, people spend a lot of time in their cars, and radio ads are key.

Saturday afternoon finds the GOP faithful of Greene County, just north of Charlottesville, gathered for their annual Pig Roast. In a field in the middle of nowhere, several dozen mostly older Republicans sit in lawn chairs next to a large tent that has buns waiting for the roasting pig, beverages and slews of desserts. The podium has a large banner that says, ?November is coming,? a campaign sponsored by the tea party group Americans for Prosperity funded by billionaire David Koch. The other side of the platform is adorned with a sign for Perriello?s opponent, Robert Hurt.

The speeches are preceded by the Pledge of Allegiance and an invocation. ?We were promised change in the last election,? intones the Rev. Linda Graves, a chaplain at two local hospitals, ?but it wasn?t the change we wanted.? Fourteen-year-old Galen Creekmore, whose great-grandfather started the Pig Roast 31 years ago, gives the best speech of the day, a patriotic call to arms. Before his speech, Creekmore tells me that he doesn?t agree with Perriello?s stances on the issues. ?Our loyalties are God first, then family, church, state and the federal government, in that order,? the young man says with an earnestness only a 14-year-old can muster. ?The Democrats today are taking God out of it.? He says of Hurt, ?He?s a fine Christian man.?

Hurt is the star attraction at the Pig Roast and he moves easily among the crowd. He is a tall, handsome man and he shakes hands with one person, embraces another, chats up a group of seniors, and consults with his press secretary briefly. Hurt is introduced by George Allen, former U.S. senator and governor of Virginia whose career came a cropper when he was caught on tape uttering an ethnic slur. Today, Allen derides the ?pompous elites in D.C.? and ends a peroration against cap-and-trade legislation with the observation, ?We?re not addicted to oil; we?re addicted to freedom.? Allen?s introduction is all red meat and the crowd eats it up more eagerly than the pig.

When he gets to the microphone, Hurt delivers a brief list of shout-outs to the organizers, to Allen, to Galen Creekmore, although both Hurt and Allen get the young man?s name wrong. The crowd nods in agreement with Hurt?s speech. He says he is in favor of the ?principles of the founders: individual liberty, limited government and free markets.? He says that ?nobody wanted? the health care plan that Perriello supported. He talks about a 90-year-old, a veteran of World War II who told him this was the most important election in his long lifetime. The crowd interrupts Hurt?s well-delivered, polished speech several times with applause.

At least four times Hurt repeats the phrase from the Declaration of Independence about pledging ?our lives, our

fortunes and our sacred honor.? Hurt makes fun of Perriello?s 28 town hall meetings to talk with constituents about health care and observes, ?Then what did Tom Perriello do? He went to D.C. and voted the way Nancy Pelosi told him to vote.?

The key to a midterm race is what campaign workers call the ground game, getting your supporters to the polls. Both campaigns told me they were busy canvassing neighborhoods and calling voters. There are differences, though. Perriello has 14 offices across the district compared to Hurt?s three. Perriello?s campaign is also more exact in its efforts to identify and cultivate supporters. John Greene, who is in charge of canvassing for Perriello in Charlottesville, tells his volunteers that they are not to leave literature at the door if no one is home. They need to mark down the voter?s name so that they can go back another time. The Hurt campaign has literature with a large hole in the top, so that a canvasser can leave it on the doorknob if no one is home. Additionally, Perriello supporters are given a pledge card with a picture of Obama on it. Voters are asked to sign the pledge that they will turn out on Nov. 2 to continue what they began two years ago.

A lot has changed in two years, both nationally and in Virginia?s 5th Congressional District. Over lunch in a small restaurant across the street from the magnificent Rotunda of the University of Virginia, designed by hometown hero Thomas Jefferson, I ask the bartender, Donnie, if he is paying attention to the election. ?No,? he replies. And his customers? ?Not really. There are plenty of commercials but I don?t know much about either guy.? Donnie tells me that there was a great deal of excitement two years ago about the Obama candidacy.

That excitement in 2008 helped propel Perriello into Congress. A combination of higher than usual turnout among young collegians at the University of Virginia and black voters in the rural Southside district were key to Perriello?s victory in 2008 and it lingers among some of the Democratic faithful.

One of the canvassers getting ready to hit the pavement in Charlottesville is Chelsea Henderson, a young woman who attends a college in a different part of the state. She came home for the weekend and instead of enjoying the beautiful autumn day at the university football game, she is gearing up to go knocking on doors for Perriello. ?Tom is one of a kind,? Henderson tells me. ?He?s a genuinely good guy who does what?s right.?

[Michael Sean Winters, an *NCR* contributor, writes the ?Distinctly Catholic? blog on NCRonline.org.]

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