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# Successful Grassroots Mobilization: Explaining the Victory of Tom Perriello's 2008 Congressional Election

Brian John Mandeville  
*Longwood University*

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# **Successful Grassroots Mobilization:**

## **Explaining the Victory of Tom Perriello's 2008 Congressional Election**

Brian John Mandeville  
brian.mandeville@live.longwood.edu  
Longwood University  
Box 1752  
Farmville, VA 23909  
(757)-871-4760

Faculty Sponsor  
N. Scott Cole, PhD  
Associate Professor of Political Science  
colens@longwood.edu  
Longwood University  
201 High Street  
Farmville, VA 23909  
(434) 395-2526

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The 2008 congressional election in Virginia's Fifth District was one of the biggest upsets to occur during the election. The incumbent, Virgil Goode, had been the representative for the Fifth District since 1996, and had been in the state Senate before that. Congressman Goode was heavily entrenched, well liked, and well known. Essentially, he had no reason to believe that he would not win reelection. Tom Perriello, on the other hand, was young and relatively unknown in the district. He ran an uphill campaign that most pundits believed would fail. Despite this, Perriello was able to win the 2008 election and unseat one of the most well-established congressmen in the state of Virginia. My research seeks to understand how this happened.

The track record for House incumbents and Representative Goode would suggest that the odds were in his favor and that Perriello should have lost, but he did not. The majority of research and literature that currently exists on this subject helps to highlight the reason that this issue is so interesting. Incumbency advantage has been one of the most decisive factors in House elections since World War II. Almost all of the literature agrees that incumbents have major advantages over challengers, especially in House elections. Perriello was running in a conservative district that tends to favor Republicans over Democrats. This can be seen in many of the articles that covered the race. The great majority of those that highlighted the Perriello campaign claimed that Goode had a lead during the entire election. This should come as no surprise considering that until the day of the election, it appeared that Goode was ahead by several points and had a steep advantage over Perriello. Finally,

Perriello was running in an incredibly rural and expansive district that makes campaigning, especially for challengers, exceptionally difficult.

Considering all of these factors, it is remarkable that Perriello was able unseat Goode. How did Tom Perriello defeat Virgil Goode in this election? While it is clear that many different factors contributed to Perriello's win, my research contends that his ability to create an effective grassroots organization played an important role in his success. This thesis will be explored in this paper.

This research project is significant for several reasons. First, there has been very little research done on Perriello's victory. This is surprising because it seems that political scientists could learn many lessons by studying this election. This election was unique for several reasons and a comprehensive review of the election will greatly aid the political science community in understating challenger victories. Second, the scholarly literature seems to ignore challenger success in congressional elections. Political scientists have spent most of their time focusing on House incumbents and their campaigns. Thus, it is clear that a greater understanding of challengers is needed. Third, this research will aid in the understanding of grassroots movements in House elections. This research will increase the understating of how grassroots movements can aid congressional campaigns, especially in rural areas.

The main focus of this project is a qualitative case study of the 2008 congressional election in Virginia's Fifth District. This paper will consist of several major components. The first will be a review and analysis of the scholarly literature. These sources will be used to give background information about congressional incumbents and congressional elections. This literature review will be accompanied

by an examination of information collected from different media outlets that reported on the election. These sources will include newspaper articles and editorials. Other information, such as polling data and campaign materials, will also be used in this project. Finally, a significant portion of this paper will use data gathered from direction observations of the election.

In the next section, a literature review is presented. After this, a brief history of the campaign is presented, which highlights key factors in Perriello's success. Next, there will be a methodology section that examines the techniques of this research and provides for some definitions. Following the methodology section, there will be a case study of the campaign that will state the main arguments to support this research's thesis and include more data to help reinforce the claims being made. Specifically, I will explore the grassroots aspects of Perriello's campaign. Finally, I will summarize my findings and suggest areas for future research.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

There has been a copious amount of research done on congressional campaigns as well as on the issues of incumbent strength and challenger weakness. Almost all scholars agree that House incumbents are some of the most entrenched and most successful candidates in the American political system. Meanwhile, the opposite can be said for the challengers who face them. While there is not nearly as much information on the many weaknesses that challengers face, the literature is clear that challengers are generally the losers in congressional contests. After an extensive review of the literature, it is also clear that there is a limited amount of research that

has been conducted on the subject of how challengers are able to beat incumbents. In general, political scientists focus mostly on open-seat elections and incumbents and there remains a significant hole pertaining to data on successful challengers. In the following pages, I divide this literature review into three sections to explore how scholars explain this subject. A fourth section follows that elaborates on the current literature that surrounds the Perriello campaign.

#### **A. Institutional Factors**

The literature that covers this subject makes it clear that incumbents have numerous advantages that allow them to devastate the majority of challengers that face them. One benefit that many scholars cite is the redistricting process. In most states, redistricting is done every ten years by the state government. If an incumbent's political party is in power within the state government, then that incumbent will often gain a new gerrymandered district that will increase his or her chances of winning reelection. This is done by redrawing the lines of districts in order to be more favorable to that party's candidates. This is a process that can be done legally and is commonly done by both Democrats and Republicans. Steven Hill (2003) is one scholar who clearly details the strengths that redistricting gives to incumbents. Hill describes redistricting as "a glorified incumbent protection racket that has robbed most voters of any semblance of choice or a competitive election" (2003: 320). Hill goes on to explain that gerrymandering has made elections so predictable that the Center for Voting and Democracy, which makes predictions on elections based solely on the demographics in a district, has been able to make congressional election predictions that "were 100 percent accurate for the 2002

elections and 99.8 percent accurate for the previous three election cycles” (2003: 321). Hill explains that redistricting allows incumbents to have a secure district, garner more election money, silence political debate and do all of this with very little to no notice of the public because of the minuscule focus that is put on state legislators and their role in redistricting.

Dan Gilgoff (2006) also cites gerrymandering as a tool that incumbents use to help entrench themselves into congressional districts. Gilgoff argues that the introduction of redistricting software during the early 1990s has caused a massive decrease in the number of competitive House races and that “after the post-2000 redistricting, the number of competitive House races tumbled from 53 to 38” (2006: 3). This software helps incumbents by allowing them to see voter preferences and history, house by house. It thus allows their party to more easily redraw their district to favor them. Even Paul Herrnson (2000) explains the significances that redistricting can have on an incumbent’s chances of winning reelection. Herrnson explains that “some districts are so dominated by one party that few individuals of the other party are willing to commit their time, energy, or money to running for office” (2000: 24).

John Moore (2003) asserts that “some political scientists believe that redistricting is the single most important factor determining partisan control of the House” (2003: 400). Rhodes Cook (2000) also acknowledges the power gerrymandering gives to incumbents. He claims that “incumbent reelection rates have been high since World War II, in part because a proincumbent spin in much of the line drawing diminishes the prospects for dramatic change in the House’s membership” (2000: 99). Finally, Samuel Issacharoff and Jonathan Nagler (2007)

both argue that gerrymandering has contributed to insulated incumbents, a decrease in contested elections and what they call an insulated Congress, or a Congress that “becomes increasingly inattentive to the preference of the electorate” (2007: 1135).

## **B. Media Factors**

Another advantage that incumbents have over challengers is that they typically retain certain benefits from the media than do their challengers. The current literature makes it clear media endorsements, biases, and access tend to favor incumbent candidates. This only adds to the many disadvantages that that challengers face. Mark Harmon (2007) makes this point immensely clear in a study he did that reviewed the endorsements that papers have given incumbents. Harmon found that “the most striking finding is how consistently newspapers prefer incumbents to challengers. In 2002, this occurred at a ratio of about four-to-one. It ballooned to about six-to-one in 2004 but fell back to a rough four-to-one ratio in 2006” (2007: 71). Harmon also found that the endorsements had “a tendency to prefer congressional candidates slightly more conservative than congressional averages” (2007: 73). Paul Herrnson argues similarly and even claims that media endorsements tend to favor incumbents by a margin of 6 to 1 (2000: 219).

The bias and endorsements that candidates receive are not the only media benefits that they have. Many scholars, including Rhodes Cook (2000), go on to say that incumbents also benefit from higher media visibility as a result of “easy and regular access to the media” (2000: 62). Incumbents simply have more media access because they are already in Congress. They are not viewed as a candidate but as a representative in the area; and as a result, they have more media access both during

the campaign season and during the rest of their term. The ability for incumbents to have greater media access is greatly influenced by their ability to have much greater name recognition, which is expanded on in the next section.

### **C. The Incumbency Advantage**

Incumbents have several benefits that stem from the representative nature of their job, which include higher name recognition and approval ratings, among other things. Charles Finocchiaro (2003) points out that name recognition often leads to greater approval ratings for the individual incumbent but “the influence of congressional approval, while potentially important, is modest” (2003: 64). Janet Box-Steffensmeier, David Kimball, Scott Meinke, and Katherine Tate (2003) all argue that “through name recognition, constituent evaluations, and vote choice... incumbent members of Congress reap electoral benefits from several aspects of the representational relationship” (2003: 267). Edward Lascher’s (2005) study makes the argument that “greater average constituency size is consistently associated with better results for incumbents” (2005: 276).

Jeffery Mondark (1995), moreover, puts forth the argument that greater name recognition and higher approval ratings of incumbents translate into the fact that “incumbents are not ousted randomly, but rather as a function of their competence and integrity” (1995: 1066). Many incumbents are only unseated if they are involved with a well-known scandal. While some scholars and political scientist might disagree with Mondark’s conclusions, most agree with the fact that greater name recognition and approval ratings are experienced by incumbents compared to their challengers.

Incumbents also have a major advantage in raising funds for their campaigns. An article by Seth Linden (2005) explains a great deal about incumbent campaign funding. In his article, Linden explains that incumbents feel pressure to raise massive funds even when there is little or no competition. These funds help to deter more wealthy challengers, allow incumbents to donate to their parties, influence constituents, and, of course, fund their campaign. Linden also makes it clear that the more entrenched an incumbent is the more easily he can raise funds. Furthermore, Herrnson (2000) stresses the advantages that incumbents have in raising funds. Herrnson points out that incumbents begin to raise money earlier, get more money from political action committees (PACs) and individuals, and in general are able to raise “more money than challengers because they tend to be more visible, popular, and willing to exploit the advantages of office holding” (2000: 154).

Rhodes Cook (2000) also emphasizes many of these points and goes on to argue that “PACs have been overwhelmingly oriented toward incumbents” (2000: 56). He also points out that “fifty-seven percent of all individual contributions went to incumbents. The percentage was much higher for PAC contributions – nearly 77 percent went to incumbents” (2000: 62). John Moore (2003) points out that “PACs give overwhelmingly to incumbents because they are in a position to support PAC interests when legislation is drafted as well when it come to a vote” (2003: 317). From an organizational perspective, Paul Abramson, John Aldrich, and David Rohde (2002) argue that “incumbents usually raise and spend more campaign funds than challengers, and they usually have a better developed and more experienced campaign organization” (2002: 211).



Finally, Richard Born (1991) explains that Senate incumbents also have increased chances to win elections, though they are not as secure in office as members of the House. Basically, the literature is clear that while other incumbents surely have an advantage over their challengers, it is truly only House incumbents that are the most entrenched and who have the most benefits come election season.

#### **D. Tom Perriello's Campaign**

During Tom Perriello's campaign, there was a plethora of media coverage. Most of the articles that came out had the same theme. Essentially, every news source from *CQ Today* to the *Martinsville Bulletin* was saying the same thing: that during the campaign, Tom Perriello's odds were looking better but the entire time it appeared as if the election would favor Virgil Goode. After the election the media reported, in an astonished way, that Perriello somehow managed to win the election by a small margin. Funding was another central focus of many news articles. While the media was primarily focused on polling data and who had raised the most money, some articles did contain information about how the candidates were running their campaigns.

Many articles focused on Tom Perriello's volunteer tithing initiative (Chris Cillizza 2008, Sarah Arkin 2008, Gail Chaddock 2008). This initiative focused ten percent of the volunteer hours worked on the campaign on community service projects, including everything from Habitat for Humanity to soup kitchens across the district. This initiative was meant to show Perriello's focus on giving back to the community. Some media sources reported that it was very helpful to the success of his campaign. Beyond that, Perriello also felt that the tithing initiative was in line

with his faith. This initiative may have not generated a lot of votes or funds for Perriello's campaign, but it certainly contributed to his ability to get the media to focus more heavily on him, something many challengers have a difficult time doing.

Other articles were more concerned with Perriello's ability to utilize the internet as means of amassing more support and more funds. While these articles also claimed that Goode was making efforts to utilize the internet as a campaign resource, it was clear that they felt Perriello put more effort and showed more skill in using the internet as a means to help his campaign. These articles explained that Perriello used Facebook, Myspace, YouTube, Twitter, ActBlue, and other internet resources much more effectively than Goode. These resources are what gained Perriello the title of a "netroots social entrepreneur" and many articles claimed that it was his ability to use these resources that allowed him to garner so much campaign funding (Chaddock 2008: 1).

Some authors also focused on Perriello's grassroots mobilization efforts. For instance, an article in *CQ Today* cited Perriello saying that "his campaign is striving to 'do things a little differently'" (Giroux 2008: 1). Many articles argued that it was clear from the onset of his campaign that Perriello was going to have a greater focus on the people of this district opposed to just running a typical campaign. Perriello opened many regional offices in an attempt to make sure that more individuals in the district were able to be reached by his campaign.

Eventually, Perriello was able to have numerous volunteers from different backgrounds volunteering for his campaign. Highlighting this trend, many articles focused on Perriello's ability to organize the African-American community in the

Fifth District. Other stories also highlighted the higher number of voters that had been registered during this campaign and attributed a portion of this to the Perriello campaign.

Many articles gave Perriello the title of “community organizer” as a way to emphasize his heavy focus on grassroots mobilization. Almost all of the articles that focused on this subject described Perriello’s campaign as working directly in communities, developing more than superficial relationships with individuals, generating a renewed excitement about political involvement and civic duty, and genuinely finding what the constituents of the Fifth District really wanted (Perriello 2009).

While the focus of most articles varied, there was a similar theme in almost all of them. That is, the coverage gave the impression that there were multiple factors helping Perriello’s campaign. As *The Washington Post* put it, “no single factor was responsible” for Perriello’s success (Shapira 2009: 1). The majority of media sources argued that his campaign used many different resources and utilized different tactics to achieve victory. These articles asserted that it was the combination of all of these things that allowed him to win.

### **III. HISTORY**

In this section of the paper, a short history of the campaign is provided. This section specifically focuses on the development of the Goode and Perriello campaigns, but it is not intended to cover all of the events in the campaign. Briefly, it can be seen that Perriello started with minimal support and slowly grew to gain more

backing from the constituents of the Fifth District. Polls that were taken during the campaign provide for an understanding of how support for the candidates developed. This section is broken down by months in order to explain the data from each of these polls and what this data explains about the campaigns and their utilization of different strategies.

#### **A. July**

Polls taken by the Benson Strategy Group in July of 2008 show Goode with a 25 point lead over Perriello (Pollster.com 2008). By July, the campaigns of both candidates were already underway and efforts on both sides were ongoing to secure favor in the district. Perriello had opened six offices across the district in an attempt to have as many points of contact with the constituents of the district as possible. It was in this month that the Perriello campaign announced record funding levels, raising more than \$300,000 in the second quarter, with 70% of that funding coming from small donors (*Martinsville Bulletin* 2008). The Goode campaign also raised a significant amount of money; during July, it was announced that the Goode campaign raised \$390,575 (*Martinsville Bulletin* 2008).

At this point in the campaign, Perriello had already begun to devolve a strong grassroots campaign. Goode had also been very busy working at several events across the district and making other public appearances. By July, Goode's stances on many issues, such as fighting illegal immigration, and his top priorities as a Congressman were already well established (Collins 2008).

## **B. August**

The next major polls were taken in August by SurveyUSA; these polls show that Goode had gained even more support, with a lead of 34 points (Pollster.com 2008). This was a particularly busy month for both campaigns. Both candidates, and their staffers, attended many late summer festivals and events in hopes of gaining more support. Perriello's ability to be a serious competitor against Goode was exemplified in August when the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee added his campaign to the Red to Blue program, which worked to aid Democratic challengers in close elections ("Perriello Campaign Gets Boost" 2008).

During this month, a public forum in Charlottesville was held; and while both sides seemed to claim their candidate as the "winner," it was clear that the district remained split on many issues. This forum also highlighted Perriello's strong commitment to registering new voters and his attempts to increase voter turnout for the election, causing even Goode to recognize Perriello as a difficult opponent who "is working to get new people registered" (Rhew 2008: 1). During this month, the major issues of the congressional election really began to surface, including drilling offshore, veterans' rights, economic issues in the district, health care, and other things that concerned the citizens of the Fifth District.

## **C. September**

September was a month that lacked any major polling data. In this month, both campaigns began to take a more negative stance toward one another. The Perriello campaign played up a Goode fundraising event held on September 11<sup>th</sup> that was hosted by lobbyists Tom Lankford, Jan Schoonmaker, and the lobbying group

Van Scoyoc Associates, Inc. PAC. The Perriello campaign also attacked Goode for rejecting offers to have debates in Danville and Farmville. Meanwhile, the Goode campaign attacked Perriello for not taking a stronger stance against illegal immigration and being a supporter of certain government regulations. The Goode campaign also released a very negative television advertisement that portrayed Perriello as a Northerner and provided an image of Perriello that was doctored to make him appear as a “dark figure.” Congressman Goode’s campaign continued to focus on events being held around the district in order to reach out to voters, while the Perriello campaign focused more on direct voter contact through extensive volunteer efforts.

#### **D. October**

In early October, polling data from SurveyUSA showed that Goode had slipped to a lead of only thirteen points (Pollster.com 2008). During October, both campaigns remained negative toward one another as they stepped up their efforts at voter outreach. The efforts made by the Perriello campaign over the summer to increase support through extensive grassroots work began to pay off during October as polling data showed Goode’s lead slipping. Meanwhile, Goode’s campaign worked to energize his Republican base and garner more support from independents. Polls taken by the Benson Strategy Group later in October showed Goode’s lead drop from thirteen points to eight points (Pollster.com 2008).

Part of Perriello’s success may also be attributed to his efforts at donating campaign time to work on community service. By October, Perriello’s campaign announced that it had recorded over 1,000 hours of community service; these hours

helped Perriello to develop the kind of support needed for a robust grassroots movement (Graff 2008). Goode's campaign manager also highlighted how Goode focused on community service efforts by donating money instead of time (McNeill 2008). Data from polls in late October taken by SurveyUSA illustrated that Goode had lost another large chunk of support putting Goode at only a three point lead over Perriello (Pollster.com 2008). Despite Goode's increased efforts to run an aggressive campaign, October proved to be a month where Perriello clearly began to close the gap.

#### **E. November**

On November 4, 2008, the election was held; but the results that followed were inconclusive. While media sources started reporting very speculative election results, it was clear from the vote tallies that no apparent winner had emerged. In the days that followed, the media and both campaigns waited to hear the official election results. Perriello was confident that he had taken the Fifth District and on November 7<sup>th</sup> he declared victory, though the results were still unclear. By November 24<sup>th</sup>, "the State Board of Elections certified Perriello as winner of the 5th District race" and on that same day Goode announced his request for a recount of the election results (Barto 2008). After the recount was conducted, the Virginia State Board of Elections declared Tom Perriello the winner of the election, winning by only 727 votes (Virginia State Board of Elections n.d.).

In the following pages, this paper works to explain how Perriello was able to achieve this victory. While many variables are relevant, this study argues that his grassroots mobilization efforts were essential.

## **IV. METHODOLOGY**

### **A. Research Methods**

This research utilizes a direct observation model of data collection. Specifically, I directly observed the Perriello campaign and the information presented in the following section largely comes from my observations. In 2008, I worked with the Perriello campaign as a campaign assistant. While working on the Perriello campaign, I kept a daily journal of the activities that the Farmville office carried out. My experiences with the campaign allows for data analysis that is based on an immediate examination of the campaign and its activities. To provide more information and to back up the findings of this direct observation model, other types of sources are utilized, such as newspaper articles, campaign funding data, voter data, and other scholarly sources. Most of these materials come from sources within the Fifth District and were written during the time of the campaign.

### **B. The Meaning of Grassroots Mobilization**

Grassroots is a term too often used without an established definition being present. It generically refers to political movements that come from everyday people instead of from political elites or other forms of political leadership. In order to understand how grassroots mobilization was imperative to Perriello's success, a clear and much more detailed definition of a grassroots movement must be established.



Generally, a grassroots movement is one that develops organically and in the lowest levels of political leadership. Unlike other political movements, a grassroots movement comes out of a community and is run and led by that community rather than by many of the traditional elites that direct political activities.

Political campaigns that utilize grassroots mobilization are very different from typical political campaigns. Campaigns relying on grassroots mobilization generally focus heavily on direct voter contact and have extensive volunteer networks that develop from the communities in which a candidate is running. Rather than receiving large amounts of support from national political parties, interest groups, political consultants, political action committees, or other traditional areas of candidate support, these kinds of campaigns focus on support from voters. Grassroots campaigns use most of their resources to run voter registration drives, direct voter contact efforts, and get out the vote drives. These campaigns spend most of their time on door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, attending events, and being involved with other community events. Funds for these kinds of campaigns primarily come from voters rather than national parties or other groups. This also means that fundraising efforts focus on the voters and their communities rather than on businesses or other groups that traditionally give funds to campaigns.

The individuals who work on grassroots campaigns are normally not campaign professionals and are generally not paid. These volunteers work for the candidate solely because of the excitement that exists for the candidate and his or her ideas. This means that grassroots campaigns often lack much of the professional campaign support that is seen in many successful congressional campaigns. In

general, grassroots campaigns exhibit more direct voter involvement in their campaigns than do traditional political campaign.

## V. CASE STUDY

### **A. Campaign Activities**

Tom Perriello's 2008 congressional campaign highlights many of the differences that exist between a grassroots campaign and a typical campaign. This can be seen in the activities that were conducted by his campaign and how they aided his development of a powerful grassroots organization. This grassroots organization helped propel Perriello forward and helped him to eventually win an election against a well-entrenched incumbent. Activities that were essential to the success of the campaign include direct voter contact, use of nontraditional media, a progressive tithing initiative, community organizing, and other grassroots tactics.

Direct voter contact is essential to any congressional campaign but it takes on a much higher priority and much more essential role in grassroots campaigns. While many traditional campaigns focus on direct voter contact as a way to tell the public about their candidate, Perriello's campaign used this tactic as a way to build relationships and engage people from diverse backgrounds to come together and act on their values. It was not simply communicating; it was organizing communities to act in their best interests and to support candidates and causes that would work to improve their lives. The traditional ways of contacting voters and engaging them to be more involved were used, such as door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, attending community events, aiding voter registration drives, and launching get out

the vote campaigns. But Perriello's campaign went far beyond these traditional tactics and utilized many different activities that allowed voters to be a part of his campaign and influence his decisions. These tactics are what made the difference for Perriello and allowed him to develop a large grassroots network that helped him to win the election.

Perriello's campaign did not simply rely on traditional media sources; and while radio, newspapers, and television were used, his campaign also utilized a great deal of nontraditional communication tactics. Specifically, his campaign was able to organize and spread on the internet. It was this ability to effectively integrate the web into his regular campaign activities that earned Perriello the title of a "netroots 'social entrepreneur'" (Chaddock 2008: 1). Through websites and networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, ActBlue, and countless blogs, a different type of grassroots was tapped into. The internet has greatly expanded people's access to information, and Perriello used it to allow voters to have greater access to politics.

This focus on using the internet as a tool to facilitate the development of his campaign allowed voters and constituents to play a greater role in Perriello's election fight. Many of the activities that are normally conducted during a grassroots campaign can be conducted or enhanced by using the internet. Voters were able to provide greater feedback and influence Perriello's campaign message; but beyond that they were also able to organize groups in support of Perriello and use websites to donate money. This kind of organizing allows voters to combat many of the traditional influences over candidates and take back much of the democratic power to which they are entitled. Many citizens of the Fifth District had felt marginalized by

politics and the internet gave these people a way to be influential and be involved. Essentially, the internet was used as a tool that lowered the barrier for the people of the Fifth District to be more involved in the election. In a newspaper interview during the campaign, Perriello said that it is essential “for everyone to get involved in politics and have their voices heard” (“Perriello Says His Campaign Aims to ‘Break Down the Barriers’” 2008).

The effectiveness of the utilization of the internet allowed the campaign to turn voters who had traditionally used blogs or other internet resources into activists who were volunteering to organize their communities. The increased connection between the voters and how the campaign was conducted illuminates how the campaign was able to utilize an expansive grassroots organization that aided Perriello’s victory. How the campaign conducted its online activities increased people’s connections to politics and allowed them to be more involved and influential.

The campaign also utilized many other grassroots activities. For example, voters were encouraged to write letters to the media both about Perriello and about many of the issues that they felt strongly about. This allowed voters to not only steer the direction of the media but also allowed them to influence the focus of both Perriello’s and Goode’s campaigns. This was accompanied by a large and ever growing grassroots network that caused many letters to flood into the mailboxes of local papers all over the district. While these letters’ effectiveness is hard to measure, it is clear from the letters to the editor sections in many local papers, that they had some impact. This network and the tactics that Perriello’s campaign utilized was able

to change a candidate who started with almost no name recognition into a candidate capable of winning an election against an incumbent.

In addition to these efforts, Perriello developed a tithing initiative to help his campaign. This idea is extraordinarily different from many of the traditional tactics that have been used by campaigns. Basically, the tithing plan involved donating ten percent of all of the volunteer hours worked on the campaign to be worked on community service projects. The initiative included work at food banks, soup kitchens, Habit for Humanity, and several other locations around the Fifth District. With this initiative, the Perriello campaign was able to tithe 1,000 hours to community service projects by October; and by the end of the election, the Perriello campaign had tithed near 1,300 hours. Not only did the initiative demonstrate a genuine focus on the communities in the Fifth District, but it also reminded everyone working on the Perriello campaign that the center of attention of the campaign was organizing people to act on their values and ideals. In a newspaper article, one citizen of the district explained that the initiative “might symbolize the kind of representative Perriello hopes to be – someone engaged in the community and willing to get their [*sic*] hands dirty to help people” (McNeill 2008: 1). This enterprise was very significant in Perriello’s grassroots campaign because the volunteering allowed the campaign to find more volunteers and spread the message of the campaign while also helping the district and developing a network of people who were willing to work hard for what they believed in. The tithing initiative allowed Perriello’s campaign to develop a larger network of grassroots activities and helped to create more

momentum for his campaign by generating a genuine positive image of both Perriello and his campaign.

Beyond grassroots organizing for the campaign, Perriello also made sure that his campaign was focused on community organizing and the development of power structures that could be utilized by the people of the district. Perriello's campaign was focused on helping younger voters, minorities, and rural voters regain their voice in the district. This caused political pundit Chris Cillizza to describe the campaign as being extremely effective in "organizing the black community district-wide" (Cillizza 2008: 2). Grassroots organizing was certainly part of this but this extended beyond the goals of getting Perriello elected. This gets to part of the Perriello campaign that focused on the development of communities in order to work for the change, both political and socially, that they needed. His campaign was not just focused on grassroots organizing; it was also focused on forming associations of people that would get the district as a whole more involved with politics.

The campaign's attempts at community organizing were facilitated by several programs. One of these was clearly the house parties that individuals held in the district, where people would discuss the future of their communities as well as the election. Perriello's campaign helped to set up and run these house parties, but it was the voters of the district that held and developed the parties themselves. Faith organizing was also a major part of community organizing, and should come as no surprise when one considers the large role that religion plays for many people of the Fifth District. Churches are often the centers of community for many people and Perriello's campaign focused on these centers to aid in the development of stronger

community organizations. Perriello's campaign attempted to go beyond increasing turnout and identifying the political affiliations of voters; through community organizing and faith outreach, the Perriello campaign made efforts to improve communities around the Fifth.

Tom Perriello also played a vital role in many of these activities and his own personality aided the development of a better grassroots campaign. Perriello worked to not only attend events and appear on different media outlets, as most candidates do, but to also make sure that he was a part of every activity that the campaign conducted. Perriello phone banked, canvassed, tithed his time and did every other activity that any of his campaign staff, interns, and volunteers did. This greatly increased the amount of contact he had with the voters and made him more aware of their issues; but more importantly, it allowed voters to have more contact with him. It is essential for a grassroots campaign to have a candidate who is accessible to the people working on the campaign and Perriello made sure to be present in many communities that other candidates had often ignored. People were willing to organize their communities and help the campaign because of Perriello's accessibility. He did not seem like a political candidate as much as part of the community in which he was running.

The development and use of the campaign's message reflects many of the tendencies that can be seen in most grassroots organizing campaigns. Basically, Perriello's message focused on the values of the voters and the specific issues that were personal to them or that affected them and the people they knew. While many campaigns develop a message and then tell voters what that message is, Perriello

attempted to listen to voters and allowed them to develop a message that Perriello would then support. His message was not being told to the voters; the voters were telling Perriello what his message should be. One example of this occurred during the campaign when Perriello began to focus on several local farmers' issues after attending several farmers' markets across the district and hearing their concerns. These issues included supporting the protection of unregulated direct farmer-to-consumer trade and supporting policy that favors small farmers over larger factory farms. This would not have worked to the extent that it did if it were not for the fact that Perriello was an exceedingly accessible candidate who spent much of his time working with and listening to the communities that he wanted to represent. One news article even quoted Perriello explaining that "if you're not in touch with the community... you're not in touch with what you need to be talking about in Washington" ("Perriello Says His Campaign Aims to 'Break Down the Barriers'" 2008: 1). This accessibility was combined with a grassroots network that relayed a large volume of feedback about issues to Perriello and allowed his campaign to let the voters develop a political platform that they wanted, not the other way around.

## **B. Campaign Personnel**

Another area that helps to highlight how Perriello's campaign effectively utilized grassroots organizations can be seen in the staff that the campaign maintained, as well as in the vast network of volunteers that developed as a result of the grassroots networks that were formed across the district. Traditional campaigns often rely on a medium-sized staff of professional campaigners, data analysts, political consultants, and some volunteers. Perriello's campaign did not rely on these



traditional campaign workers and instead consisted of a small group of local professional campaigners, a large group of interns involved in an intensive grassroots-based internship program, and most importantly an extensive network of volunteers. What was significant about all of these campaign workers was that they did not know much about working campaigns but instead knew a lot about the Fifth District.

Perriello's campaign did consist of a small base of local professional campaigners who were full time and paid. Unlike most campaigns, though, most of these individuals did not have backgrounds in campaigns or politics. Instead, the staff consisted of local people with diverse backgrounds who were passionate about the values that Perriello stood for and were passionate about energizing their communities to become more involved in politics. This worked to Perriello's advantage during the campaign because many of these individuals already had connections in the communities that they were helping to organize. This allowed Perriello's campaign to have a focus on the voters in specific communities instead of the traditional leaders that many campaigns go to. This staff had a greater knowledge of the district and greater links to the people, too. This made grassroots organizing across the Fifth District more straightforward and effective.

Another part of Perriello's staff consisted of approximately fifteen interns from his Common Good Summer Campaign Fellowship. The program was designed to provide college-aged individuals, from around the district, a crash course in grassroots organizing. For the summer that the interns worked, they operated offices and conducted much of the organizing that was essential to the success of the campaign. Much like the paid staff these interns were primarily from around the

district and were well connected with the area. The interns were the workforce that allowed Perriello's campaign to open six offices across the district and have as much face-to-face contact with voters as possible. These interns were coordinating most of the campaign activities and helped to develop the grassroots network that sustained the rest of the campaign. Many of the interns continued to work with the campaign extensively after the fellowship ended.

The most important group, and the largest, of individuals that worked on the Perriello campaign were volunteers. Volunteers had been essential to the Perriello campaign since its beginning and they played the most essential role in grassroots organizing. The actual people of the district organized their communities and broke down many of the perceived barriers to participation in politics that had been keeping so many from being active. The other workers of the campaign helped and they often set the groundwork up, but it was the volunteers and others who were committed to organizing their communities that developed the grassroots organization. Many of the classic problems for a challenger in an incumbent involved election were overcome because of these volunteers. Traditional issues, such as name recognition, were overcome by neighbors speaking with each other about Perriello and these conversations often turned into groups in support of the candidate. Other issues like fundraising were overcome by a large community based organization of voters who were all donating small amounts.

Volunteers in the Perriello campaign also perpetuated a cycle of getting and training volunteers, vital to developing a strong grassroots network. When volunteers started working with the campaign, they were trained how to do many of the basic

tasks involved with campaigning. As these volunteers actually worked doing these activities, they were able to then begin training other volunteers. Their own ties to the communities that they worked in increased awareness about the campaign and about the significance of volunteering and aiding in developing a grassroots network. This allowed a few volunteers to turn into a large network of people working to help in whatever way they could. The interns aided in recruiting the initial volunteers; but once they were involved, the volunteers began running the campaign itself. Thus, even after many of the interns stopped formally working on the campaign, there was a volunteer network helping to develop it. It was this base hundreds of volunteers that was consistently able to generate more volunteers, throughout the campaign, that developed such a strong community based grassroots organization.

Often the small-town politics that is prevalent in so many of the Fifth District's communities excludes some groups from participating. Volunteering to help brings a community closer together and helps it challenge local party leaders and town hall officials who have dominated and controlled much of the political organization of these communities. Many examples of this were evident during the campaign when people realized that they no longer needed to go through their local Democratic parties, often parties that no longer functioned or worked to represent the ideas of individuals in their area, in order to work for a Democratic candidate. People were able to overcome much of the traditional political leadership by realizing the strength that a better organized community gave them. Some communities that had been divided by different leaders in those areas were able to rise above insignificant disputes by coming together on issues that their communities needed to address. This

was seen when communities went beyond the figures that had marked traditional divisions in their communities in order to support Perriello, a particularly strong example of this was seen in the African-American community in Prince Edward County. The grassroots network that developed allowed these communities to lower the barrier of political participation and to have a greater say about the politics of their district but also their community.

### **C. Fundraising**

Another area in which Perriello's grassroots tactics can be easily seen is in how his campaign conducted fundraising. Several things were unconventional about the ways in which Perriello sought funds. His fundraising tactics were based in the same kind of grassroots tactics that made other aspects of his campaign so successful. The majority of the funds raised by Perriello's campaign came from individual contributors. According to data from the Federal Election Commission, Perriello received 85.13% of his total campaign receipts from individuals, while Goode only received 69.03% from individuals (Federal Election Commission n.d.). Perriello's campaign focused on receiving small contributions from many individuals, and this was facilitated by an extensive grassroots network that his campaign worked to develop. Goode also received greater amounts of funding from PACs, with 28.35% of his total campaign receipts coming from PACs, while Perriello only received 10.89% from PACs (Federal Election Commission n.d.). This is even more astonishing when accompanied with the fact that Perriello also raised more money than Goode. Perriello's campaign raised a total of \$1,866,782 and Goode's campaign raised a total of \$1,797,231 (Federal Election Commission n.d.). Thus, not only did

Perriello raise more funds than the incumbent candidate, but he also raised more of those funds from individual contributors.

There was a great deal of media focus on this subject. From a review of many newspaper articles, it appears clear that the majority of Perriello's donors were within the Fifth District and donated less than \$200. According to one article, as much as 70% of Perriello's donors contributed below that figure (*Martinsville Bulletin* 2008). Tim Fernholz notes, furthermore, "small-donor contributions, combined with Perriello's traditional fund-raising, a deep dedication to organizing, and several powerful performances, were enough to topple Goode" (Fernholz 2009).

The key to Perriello's fundraising success was in his campaign's tactics for raising funds. Specifically, his interns and volunteers focused exclusively on obtaining money from individual contributors and were instructed to turn away any money coming from corporations, PACs, lobbyists, or any other group. The funds that these workers generated came from the immense grassroots network that those workers helped to develop. Instead of relying on many of the traditional sources of campaign funding, Perriello again reached out to the communities of the district to aid his campaign. Perriello's team also utilized many nontraditional means of acquiring funds. For instance, his campaign used the internet to organize and generate campaign contributions. Websites such as ActBlue aided the Perriello campaign to raise funds from all over the district and focus specifically on the voters. The campaign also relied on fundraising events, as do most campaigns, to raise many of the funds for the campaign; but what made these events different was that they were often organized by individuals of the district, not the campaign. These events were

often successful because of the local support that generated them in the first place and the grassroots network that Perriello's campaign set up helped to facilitate this. It was Perriello's campaign success at grassroots organizing that caused such great success with fundraising.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

### **A. Summary and Analysis of Findings**

The 2008 congressional election for the Fifth District of Virginia was unique for many reasons. It is exceptional that a relatively unknown challenger was able to take on an entrenched incumbent and succeed in defeating him, breaking the trend of incumbent victory seen in almost all House of Representative elections. This research demonstrates that the Perriello campaign's ability to create an effective grassroots network was a significant factor in determining the outcome of the election. Through a detailed examination of the activities, personnel, and fundraising tactics that the Perriello campaign made use of, this research found that Perriello's victory was influenced by a successful grassroots campaign. This finding is significant because it highlights a case where a challenger was able to overthrow an incumbent without a major political scandal being involved.

Following the election, some reporters said that Barack Obama's campaign helped Perriello. After understanding that John McCain, and not Obama, carried the Fifth District in the presidential race, it becomes clear that this is not the case. The Obama campaign was weakly established in the Fifth District and it was not until the late months of the campaign that the Obama team even began to organize in the area.

Furthermore, Obama's campaign workers lived in Perriello's offices, relied on data from the Perriello campaign, utilized the grassroots networks that Perriello had developed, and benefited from the momentum generated by Perriello's campaign.

#### **B. Suggested Areas for Future Research**

Very little research has been completed on the subject of challengers facing incumbents and even less research exploring the success of challengers. The current consensus that incumbents generally win offers little on how challengers are able to overcome incumbents, unless a scandal is involved. While this research detailed one campaign where a challenger was successful, it is clear that more research needs to be done on this subject. More attention should focus on successful challengers and the tactics that their campaigns employ. The Perriello campaign offers a very interesting case study on this subject and it would be beneficial for more research to be done specifically on that campaign. More polling data about voters in the Fifth District and their opinions would be useful to further the research on this subject, and data from those who worked on both campaigns would be especially useful. This research primarily relied on a direct observation model of data collection and other forms of data collection would add depth to our understanding of the Perriello campaign.

Another area that the literature offers very little information on is how grassroots campaigns compare to more typical political campaigns. This paper was a case study on the effects of a successful grassroots campaign in a rural House district and thus its scope is limited. Other campaigns that attempted to run a grassroots style campaign should be studied on all levels of the United States political scale. More research on this type of campaign could be vital to understanding the impact that such

a campaign has on the success of a candidate. Considering that Perriello was able to overthrow an incumbent, it should be clear that this kind of campaign is effective and it would be beneficial to see more research on this subject.



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