

Emotions run high

Paul Moses | Oct. 11, 2010



Republican congressional candidate Mike Fitzpatrick, center, campaigns at the Oct. 2 Community Pride Day in Bensalem, Pa.

LANGHORNE, PA. -- Mike Fitzpatrick says he received an automated phone call from his congressman that invited him to a meeting. So he dropped in on Rep. Patrick Murphy, a Democrat who represents Bucks County in the Philadelphia suburbs and, it so happens, the man Fitzpatrick hopes to replace by winning their Nov. 2 congressional election.

Murphy, a boyish-looking 36-year-old attorney who served as an Army captain in Iraq, had invited constituents to meet with him one-on-one on a Saturday morning last May at the Middletown Township Municipal Building in Langhorne. Tea party activists, angered he would not call a town hall that would allow them to confront him as a group, showed up with video cameras rolling, hollering demands for a larger forum.

?Come on out, you chicken,? one man shouted to the Iraq veteran in a husky voice. ?Bring him out! Bring him out!?

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With at least four video cameras recording the encounter, Murphy, dressed in a

navy jacket, white shirt open at the collar and khaki slacks, spoke back in a polite but somewhat exasperated voice.

The demonstration he faced was oddly similar to an ACORN action in which activists seized control of a government office and demanded to speak to the official in charge. In this case, though, there were no shouts to "speak truth to power," but instead demands for Murphy to hold a town hall meeting before the Fourth of July. When he wasn't being shouted down, Murphy responded that he just wanted to meet individually with constituents to resolve their problems.

"We've all got problems with you!" one man yelled. The boisterous activists chanted, "Town hall, town hall," and complained that Murphy didn't have the guts to hear their complaints.

At that point, Fitzpatrick, a lean, 47-year-old man with short, wavy dark hair and brown eyes, came forward from the back of the room, composed and grave-looking. When he held out his right hand in Murphy's direction and said, "Let him talk," the room fell quiet immediately; Murphy had a chance to speak in paragraphs.

But then Fitzpatrick insisted it was his turn to speak. "This is not your event, Mike," Murphy shot back.

Fitzpatrick turned to the audience. "Does anybody here insist on a one-on-one meeting with the congressman or do you prefer a town hall?" he asked. There were, in fact, a handful of people who had come to meet personally with their congressman, and they had been looking down blankly as the activists harassed Murphy, averting their eyes from the antagonists and the camera that produced a video later posted on YouTube and highlighted on the local tea party chapter's Web site. Several hands went up.

"Go to it, Pat," Fitzpatrick said to Murphy. The two men shook hands -- Fitzpatrick, with both hands. Afterward, Fitzpatrick spoke somberly to the demonstrators about the need to be respectful. "I know we're all emotional," he said.

* * *

If Democrats in the House of Representatives feel besieged these days, there is good reason for it. Experienced prognosticators, including political scientists who create sophisticated statistical models to predict the outcome of elections, expect the Democrats to lose their 39-seat majority in the House, and then some, to the GOP.

For many, it was a foregone conclusion months ago, if only because of the historical trend for such losses in the president's party during midterm elections. Adding to that the high rate of unemployment, President Barack Obama's below-50-percent favorability ratings and an anti-incumbent mood seals the Democrats' fate, in the view of many analysts.

Why?

Polls show that the Democrats' fortunes plunged because independent voters, who rebelled against Republican

incumbents in 2006 and 2008, have shifted back to the GOP. "The independents are frustrated, angry and larger in number than they've been," said Richard F. Moore, a retired senior official in the Philadelphia mayor's office and a former business consultant who now helps with the finances of his parish, St. Ignatius of Antioch in Yardley, Pa.

Moore, an independent voter, plans to vote for Fitzpatrick, the Republican candidate, but said it's not important to him which party holds the majority: He hopes an independent majority emerges out of both parties.

"I'm not a tea party person but the tea party represents a populist revolt against the establishment. It's not only purely a conservative kind of thing," he said.

The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that Republicans are heavily favored in House races because independents who say they are likely to vote went for the GOP, 49 percent to 36 percent for Democrats -- more than the edge Obama held among independents when he won the presidency two years ago.

Independent voters "are motivated by highly negative feelings about the government's performance and harsh judgments about the political status quo," the Pew survey reported. Little more than a third approve of their own congressional representative. Independents also have become more conservative, with more of the likely voters saying they agree with the tea party (36 percent) than disagree (29 percent).

A Pew survey taken in August traced the Republican surge to improved standing among three important swing groups: white Catholics, independents and senior citizens. All have shifted toward the Republicans and are more likely to vote, too. In 2006, for example, Pew reported that Democratic candidates for the House led Republicans by 10 percentage points among white, non-Hispanic Catholics. This year Republicans led by 5 percentage points.

The survey found in general that Republicans and independents leaning Republican are much interested in the congressional campaign; half of Republicans fall into a "high engagement" category, but just a third of Democrats.

That's the much-discussed "enthusiasm gap."

"It's almost the reverse. In 2008 you had a very enthusiastic Democratic base," said David Campbell, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and coauthor, with Robert Putnam, of the new book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*.

Campbell said the tea party movement is making a difference, and its jolt of enthusiasm is having an outsized effect because turnout tends to be lower in a midterm election than in a presidential year. Many independents sympathize with its outrage even if they don't agree with its agenda.

While Democrats such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi have held out hope that they will keep their House majority -- and Republican strategists don't count out that possibility, either -- political scientists studying the Democrats' chances in the election sound like classics professors explicating a Greek tragedy: It's all a matter of fate, and the Democrats are doomed. The question, though, is to what extent the House Democrats have brought this curse on themselves by failing to take actions to please voters, or whether the fateful winds of a bad economy have dashed them, unavoidably, upon the rocks.

Could they have made a difference by being less beholden to special interests from the start of the current term and more responsive to an election mandate for change?

John Green, a political scientist at the University of Akron, Ohio, said it was possible that if the Democrats had

been more transparent and regulated lobbying more seriously, ?it could have made a difference.? But, he said, ?politics is inherently messy.?

Others say that no matter what the Democrats did, the numbers would look bad for them now. Alan Abramowitz, a professor of political science at Atlanta's Emory University who builds forecasting models, noted that 87 House Democrats hold seats in districts that voted Republican in at least one of the past two presidential elections. Of these, 47 were in districts won by both President George W. Bush in 2004 and Sen. John McCain in 2008. Only six House Republicans face a comparable challenge, Abramowitz said, adding, ?The Democrats have a lot more of these marginal or high-risk districts.?

Walter Stone, a political scientist at the University of California in Davis who studies incumbency, said that even if the economy were better and Obama's approval rating were well above 50 percent, Democrats could expect to lose seats in the House to the Republicans.

He said it's true that voters' unhappiness with the economy's progress from the deepest recession of the post-World War II era is producing a pro-Republican swing. But another factor is often overlooked in the news media, he said: ?It's a corrective against the previous two elections, which had pro-Democratic swings.?



The seat Murphy holds in Pennsylvania's 8th Congressional District is

among 55 the Democrats added in the past two elections. Buoyed by opposition to Bush and his war in Iraq, Democrats won many districts that had long been Republican-controlled, providing their current edge of 255 seats to the Republicans' 178 (with one seat vacant).

Still, some say that the House Democrats could have taken steps early on to protect themselves from having anti-incumbency fervor turn on them so quickly.

?Some of the policies which the Democrats pursued in Washington, some pieces of legislation, turned out to be very, very unpopular,? said Green. ?The best example of that is the health care bill. It remains unpopular even after becoming law.?

One key reason, he said, is that the public was turned off by the political deals made to pass the legislation. ?When the history of the health care bill is finally written, I suspect that the politics around it will have more to do with it than the bill,? Green said, adding that day after day of news coverage on how special interests affected the process helped to create ?a generalized feeling that things aren't going well in Washington.?

John K. White, professor of politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington, said a quicker resolution to the health care debate would have helped Democrats. ?That debate went on far too long, and Obama was hoping to get Republican support that never materialized,? he said. ?There was a way to get legislation passed there more quickly, and I think the president should probably have been more forceful in saying what he wanted.?

* * *

Just about missing from the campaign trail these days is the fevered debate over abortion and other culture war issues that featured prominently in recent elections. It's scarcely heard in the 8th Congressional District race, even though there is a stark difference between the two candidates.

Both candidates are Catholic, with Murphy calling himself pro-choice and Fitzpatrick describing himself as pro-life. Murphy has accused Fitzpatrick of being "extreme on this issue" because he opposes funding stem-cell research that uses human embryos.

The heated debate on whether the health care overhaul will permit backdoor federal funding of abortion also seems to have made an exit, at least for now. One is much more likely to hear politicians debate whether the law is bad for small business than to rehash whether it might lead to federal funding of abortions.

"The traditional culture war issues don't seem to be much in play here," Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, said of this year's campaign.

"This election is different than some in the past because the focus is just relentlessly on the economy," said Green of the University of Akron. But, he added, "that doesn't mean that the cultural issues, the moral issues, have disappeared."

Polls have shown that voter concern about the economy is by far the major issue, and responsible for a Republican lead in House races. The Franklin & Marshall College Poll found that in the 8th Congressional District, some 57 percent of the voters surveyed said that the economy or their personal finances was the most important problem in their own lives, and nationally, polls show that voters now believe that Republicans would be better able to deal with the economy than Democrats have.

That added up to an edge for Fitzpatrick in the Franklin & Marshall Poll -- 46 percent to 36 percent as of Sept. 19, with a plus-or-minus margin of error of 4.5 percent. (Murphy has responded that Franklin & Marshall's poll in 2006 showed Fitzpatrick leading by a wide margin.)

It's a matchup that has surprised people before. But if the seat -- and the House elections across the country -- go to the Republicans, it won't surprise those who study politics most closely.

The University of Notre Dame's Campbell says that the usual narrative in a midterm election is about an embattled president struggling to meet high expectations.

"George W. Bush was going to be the bipartisan president, and Clinton was going to usher in a new era," he said, describing Obama's pattern as similar to Reagan's in 1982. "You come in with high expectations and things don't quite work out the way your supporters wanted."

Whether that betokens a long-term shift to the Republicans is another matter. "I think that they are poised for some very significant short-term gains," said White. "The problem is that they're not ready for the longer haul, in my judgment." He pointed to the hard line many Republican candidates are taking on immigration, an issue dear to the tea party. "The country is really changing in its demographic composition," White said. "Some of the things that they're doing to win short-term victories in 2010 will come back to haunt them in 2012 and beyond."

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Fitzpatrick stood before an audience of 60 people on a warm, sunny September afternoon in the clubhouse of Heritage Creek, a 55-and-over residential community in Warwick Township, Pa. The community was built in 2001, one of many residential developments that have gradually changed Bucks County from a rural locale into

a suburb in which quaint town centers, cornfields and rustic stone houses seem to shrink before big shopping malls and their parking lots. Politically, development meant that more Democrats moved into the 8th Congressional District, and an area that once was moderate Republican now has more Democrats than Republicans.

The district remains politically moderate -- when Murphy ran for Congress as a Democrat in 2006, he said he supported the Patriot Act and acknowledged voting for Bush in 2000. It is a swing district in a swing state, one of many that experts believe could elect a Republican challenger and help give the GOP a majority in the House.

The spacious room where Fitzpatrick spoke had big, shiny chandeliers, exposed rafters and a view of a golf course through the panes of a large window. There was no questioning that jobs and the economy were on voters' minds: Dozens of yellow posters for an upcoming 55-and-over job fair were stacked in the back of the room, ready to be posted on front lawns of the Heritage Creek homes.

Fitzpatrick ticked through his main points: that he opposed all of the measures his Democratic opponent had supported in an effort to save the plummeting economy in 2008 and 2009. "I'm against bailouts," he said. "Nobody's too big to fail."

Inevitably, he was asked about health care.

Fitzpatrick, who said he would vote to repeal the health care legislation if elected, offered what he said was a simpler alternative. He discussed his own experience with the health system as a cancer patient who received chemotherapy and radiation treatment. He learned, he said, that fear of lawsuits drove doctors to order many more tests than needed, raising costs.

So first, he said, a bill should be passed to limit medical malpractice lawsuits. Another bill would permit health insurance to be purchased across state lines, thus increasing competition. And a third one would fund a network of free clinics for the uninsured.

By insisting first on tort reform, Fitzpatrick picked up on one of the critiques of the health care overhaul -- that campaign donors to Democrats in Congress had an undue influence on the outcome. "Harry Reid said they would not put tort reform in the bill because the trial lawyers would not support it," Fitzpatrick said.

Still, the three-step process Fitzpatrick outlined would leave insurance companies free to deny benefits as they pleased. Bob Ohl, a 71-year-old retired Social Security administrator, noticed this.

"What do you do if a company cuts off benefits to a family because a child is ill?" he asked. "What are you going to do? Are you going to send them to this free clinic?"

Ohl discussed it further with Fitzpatrick after the meeting broke up, and came away saying, "I thought he did a nice job." He wasn't ready, though, to say how he will vote. "There are some things in government that have to be changed. Everybody knows that," he said, adding that he was looking for the best candidate, regardless of party.

The fact that Fitzpatrick offered a plan rather than simply opposing the health care legislation impressed Nancy Kane, a retired public-school principal. "He is not a person who says no," she said. "He is a person who has alternatives, and viable ones."

* * *

After the session, Fitzpatrick sat at a table in a quiet corner of the clubhouse and answered a reporter's

questions about his race with Murphy, which is often portrayed as a grudge match because the Democrat had defeated him -- by less than 1 percent of the vote -- to take away the seat in 2006. "It is an appreciable difference in four years," he said. "The issues are all domestic in 2010, centering around the economy."

In 2006, the Iraq war was the No. 1 issue in his campaign with Murphy. Fitzpatrick had to keep reminding people that he wasn't in Congress when it voted for the Iraq war. Murphy, who was based in Baghdad as an attorney with the 82nd Airborne Division and who won the Bronze Star for Service, was portrayed as an antiwar candidate -- possibly a misnomer. When Chris Matthews questioned Murphy on MSNBC on whether he would have voted for the war, Murphy had refused to answer -- which Fitzpatrick highlighted in his television advertising. Murphy said he wasn't antiwar, but "pro-troops."

But Murphy offered a clear plan to get out: a phased withdrawal of most troops over the course of a year, with a force of 30,000 left behind. Fitzpatrick eventually announced that he disapproved of Bush's "stay the course" approach, but didn't get much more specific than that.

Throughout the campaign in 2006, he labored to escape the president's shadow -- much as Murphy, an early supporter of Obama, is doing now. After doing a campaign event with Bush during the 2006 race, Fitzpatrick later told a Philadelphia Inquirer reporter, "Why don't you ask the president if he's comfortable being beside one of the members of the majority who most often voted against him?"

As a moderate Republican, he often broke with his party on environmental matters. For example, he opposed drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

That was in the days before "Drill, baby, drill!" Nowadays, he opposes cap-and-trade restrictions on air pollution emissions -- an important issue to the tea party -- and stresses his record as a fiscal conservative who wants to reduce the federal budget deficit.

Fitzpatrick leaned forward and recalled a line that stood out for him during his appearance in the Heritage Creek clubhouse. "A fellow in the front said, 'Washington is out of control.' I think that is a widely held opinion of a good cross section of this district."

* * *

There is a whiteboard on one wall of Murphy's storefront campaign headquarters in a row of brick buildings in Bristol. "Why Patrick?" is marked on the top. Scrawled below: "He's brought back 3,000 jobs to Bucks County."

The words "3,000 jobs" also appear on a sign taped high up on the opposite wall, and around it are pieces of paper listing the kinds of jobs Murphy claims to have saved for Bucks County: firefighters, teachers, police officers and transportation workers.

In reality, Murphy is campaigning on his support for the unpopular \$800 billion stimulus bill without mentioning the word "stimulus" -- as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, passed without a single House Republican's vote and signed into law in February 2009, is known. The legislation is having what could be a long-term impact on Bucks County by helping to make it a center for solar energy; for example, a brownfield is being converted into a solar power plant with help from stimulus funds. In another case, a \$40 million tax credit is helping establish AE Polysilicon Corporation, a four-year-old company that makes silicon for solar energy panels at an industrial park in Fairless Hills.

It's interesting to see the response the tax credit received from a reader at the Web site PhillyBurbs.com, though: "I know some guys that work at AE Polysilicon. They get drunk and brag they are all gonna be

multimillionaires in a few years because of stock options they received. If the plant receives all these tax credits, why should the employees get rich off the taxpayers dollar??

Such sentiments have made it difficult for House Democrats to defend their votes for the stimulus -- even though it has produced some immediate benefits. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, required under the stimulus law to report on its effectiveness, found it was responsible for lowering the unemployment rate between .7 and 1.8 percentage points, and that it has increased the number of people who are employed somewhere between 1.4 million and 3.3 million.

Public hostility to the stimulus is so widespread that Democrats often don't even try to counter it by pointing to its results. In a televised debate with Fitzpatrick, Murphy said he voted for the stimulus "to clean up the mess of eight years of the Bush administration."

His response is similar when he defends his vote for the Troubled Asset Relief Program, or TARP -- the bank bailout that Bush signed into law in 2008. That bill also can be argued as a success -- on grounds that it stabilized the world financial system and that the cost to the public was far less than projected -- well under the price tag for the savings-and-loan crisis, according to The Wall Street Journal.

But many still loathe the idea that taxpayers had to buy big corporations out of their reckless business deals -- especially since executives continue to get kingly bonuses.

"I had to vote for that and it was horrible," Murphy said in his debate with Fitzpatrick. "The Bush administration came to us on their knees begging, "We need this or it will be a global disaster." ?

The partisan distinctions that Murphy is making don't matter to voters such as Elyse Coleman, who operates a business from her home in Yardley, Pa., providing personal assistance services such as shopping or help with technology. She called the bank bailout "horrible," and said she favors smaller government. "Look at all these solutions the government has promised," she said. "When you go back and look at these results, what the government has done doesn't stand up to scrutiny."

Murphy still stresses his military service. In Congress, he is known for his efforts to repeal the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. He advertises himself as "A Soldier for Bucks County" -- and his strong support for veterans' benefits is important to voters such as Brandon McFadden, a Newtown resident who is assistant vice president of a bank and has many relatives who are veterans. But, McFadden said, it's obvious that the difference with past elections is that the public's interest now is in jobs and the economy.

Murphy, who has strong union support, has responded to the beating Democrats are receiving on economic issues by charging that Fitzpatrick "voted to send jobs overseas" while he is "fighting to protect American jobs by fighting bad trade deals." His case is based on Fitzpatrick's 2005 vote for the Central American Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA, which passed the Republican-controlled House by the narrowest margin possible, 217-215, and was signed into law by Bush. Murphy says that Fitzpatrick was the deciding vote, which Fitzpatrick denies.

There was strong pressure on members of the Republican-controlled House to support the bill. According to Congressional Quarterly, Bush visited Capitol Hill that morning to lobby for the bill, holding a rally with Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman. Fitzpatrick was part of a group of eight holdout Republicans who didn't cast votes in a count taken at 11 p.m. because they either opposed the bill or were reluctant to vote for it. Congressional Quarterly quoted Portman as saying Republican leaders then had to work out "who gets to vote no" while still collecting enough votes.

After midnight, Fitzpatrick was one of three who voted in favor of the bill.

When Fitzpatrick spoke at Heritage Creek, a questioner asked him if he regretted supporting a free trade agreement that sent American jobs overseas. He responded that CAFTA was needed for national security reasons -- to prevent Venezuela's Hugo Chávez from gaining influence in Central America.

* * *

Fitzpatrick has been eager to portray himself as independent of party leaders. He frequently notes that Murphy voted 97 percent of the time with his party. (Murphy's staff did not respond to requests for interviews made in phone calls, e-mail messages and a visit to Murphy's campaign office -- apparently in keeping with a strategy of avoiding national media so that the campaign does not appear to be a referendum on Obama policies.)

Some of the key constituents Fitzgerald and other Republican congressional candidates are courting -- independents and some tea party members -- are watching closely for measures of a candidate's independence from party leaders.

A top-down type of Republican organization is becoming less accepted, said David Steil, a Republican from Yardley who left the state legislature in 2008 after serving a district in Bucks County for 16 years. He said people getting involved in Republican Party politics are more independent and expect to be able to make their own choices. And then there is the influence of the tea party as well.

I think it is a factor, Steil said. The very simple reason is that they're hard workers. They're hard workers and they're passionate about what they do. And it's a younger group of activists than those of us who've been around for a while. That is also appealing -- new faces, new names.

Members of the tea party movement insist they are independent, and not an extension of the Republican Party. Rob Boysen, who is an assistant Republican committeeman in Middletown Township and who heads the Lower Bucks County chapter of Philadelphia Tea Party Patriots, says that Fitzpatrick convinced him he will support the group's drive to get back to a constitutional government. On his chapter's Web site, he says, Every Republican candidate in this country is looking for support from the tea party movement and we are making them jump through the hoops to get it.

Boysen, 60, who coordinates a GED program in Trenton for New Jersey's Department of Corrections, has sought in various ways to confront Murphy. He said he showed up in his congressional office in Washington in July 2009 to oppose health care legislation. He wasn't able to meet Murphy.

He was also part of the group that confronted the congressman in the Middletown Township office building on May 22. Unable to persuade Murphy to hold a town hall meeting on the spot, he put his name down on the list to meet with him one-on-one. But when he got to me, I passed on my chance to talk to him, Boysen said. Anything I would have said at that point -- I wouldn't have made good statements, let's put it that way.

Boysen said he is in constant contact with Fitzpatrick, who has come to four of his group's meetings. We've helped out the campaign doing literature drops, and we've supported him with individual contributions to his campaign, Boysen said, adding that the particular tea party organization he is aligned with does not make campaign contributions or use a political action committee. We've been at, I would say, 70 percent of his functions in support of him.

Craig Motyka, 32, who is with the Levittown 912 group, is another activist who has sought to confront Murphy. His video of Murphy's face-off with Fitzpatrick in May was featured prominently on the Web site of Boysen's

local Tea Party Patriots group. It has received more than 27,000 visits on YouTube.

Motyka said he went to Fitzpatrick's office several days before to hand over some of his videos of Murphy, and was encouraged by a campaign staffer to tape Murphy when he held his session with constituents in Middletown Township's municipal building. "They kind of put it to everybody, we want as much a presence there to rattle them," he said. (Boysen said his tea party group did not coordinate with Fitzpatrick's staff on this.)

Motyka switched his voter registration last year to become a Republican, and serves on the county Republican committee. He said he is a "constitutional libertarian," and has problems with both candidates. (He opposes expanded surveillance that Fitzpatrick has supported as an anti-terrorism precaution.) Democrats, he said, would not be in so much trouble "if the extreme liberal agenda in the House hadn't been pushed right away."

While tea party activists have helped Republicans energize opposition to House Democrats, some voters are concerned about the angry undercurrent in this year's race. Rita Cummins Sappenfield, a business consultant from Newtown, said she questioned whether she would vote for Fitzpatrick, a friend of hers, because of the tone of the campaign. (She would not vote for Murphy, she said.)

"I'm very disappointed in all of the politicians, including my friend," she said. "They seem so hostile and negative."

Emotions, it seems, will play a major role in shaping the outcome of the Nov. 2 elections.

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