

Democratic Party establishment prevails in Virginia, New Jersey primaries

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The candidates backed by the Democratic Party establishment won gubernatorial primaries in Virginia Tuesday and New Jersey last week, confirming that the Democrats will offer conventional, pro-corporate candidates in the only two statewide races on the election calendar for 2017.

The more high-profile contest was in Virginia Tuesday, where Lt. Governor Ralph Northam defeated former congressman Tom Perriello for the nomination, winning 55.9 percent of the vote to 44.1 percent, an unexpectedly wide margin. Virginia limits governors to a single four-year term, so incumbent Democrat Terry McAuliffe could not run again.

McAuliffe, Senator Mark Warner and Senator Tim Kaine, the three top statewide elected Democrats, all backed Northam, as did all but one of the state's Democratic representatives in Congress. Perriello had the support several prominent national figures, including Bernie Sanders and Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, and raised most of his campaign funds out of state as well.

Northam, born on the rural eastern shore of Virginia, served in the United States Army as a physician between 1984 and 1992, and later became a pediatric neurologist in Norfolk. He first ran for public office in 2007, when he was elected to the state senate in a district that including parts of Hampton Roads and the eastern shore. He was elected Lieutenant Governor of Virginia in 2013, running with McAuliffe. In the 2017 campaign, he had the support of Democratic Party chairs in each of the state's 95 counties and 38 independent cities.

Perriello was a one-term congressman from a southside Virginia district that stretches north to include Charlottesville, home of the University of Virginia, where he grew up. After a law degree from

Yale, he worked for a UN war crimes investigation in Sierra Leone and then as a legal consultant in several countries, before winning a congressional seat in 2008 in the Obama landslide. He was defeated for reelection, and went on to serve three years in the Obama State Department, working as a long-term planner and then as US special envoy to the Congo and the Great Lakes states of Africa.

With this record of service to US imperialism and the Obama administration, Perriello hoped for Obama's backing for his race in Virginia, but the former president declined to offer his support. Perriello then turned to Bernie Sanders, running as the Virginia incarnation of the former presidential candidate although his past political record showed no such radical posturing.

Until this year, Perriello had been viewed as on the right of the Democratic Party, following the conventional wisdom that he had won his seat in Congress in a conservative district by running as a "moderate," endorsed by the National Rifle Association and, as a fervent Catholic, adamantly opposed to abortion rights. He was one of the main proponents in Congress of the Stupak-Pitts Amendment to the Affordable Care Act, which would have prohibited the use of federal funds to cover abortions under Obamacare.

This record allowed Northam to present himself to primary voters as equally liberal, even suggesting in debates that Perriello was a "Johnny-come-lately" who recast himself as a left-wing Democrat to ride the Sanders wave. Perriello sought to combat this by pointing to Northam's voting for George W. Bush for president in both 2000 and 2004, before he entered electoral politics in 2007 as a Democrat.

Both candidates freely pledged their support to a

\$15-an-hour minimum wage and free community college—standard talking points for Sanders that are purely rhetorical given Republican control of the state legislature. Both also competed for the most vituperative insults directed against President Trump, with Northam winning headlines by describing Trump as a “narcissistic maniac.”

Following his win, Northam told the press that Perriello had agreed to support him throughout the rest of the election, stating, “we agreed that we’re going to bring all Democrats under the tent starting tonight. This is too important an election. This is the bellwether of the country.”

Voter turnout in the primary suggested widespread and deep popular hostility to the Trump administration. Some 540,000 voted in the Democratic primary, nearly double the total of four years ago, and dwarfing the 360,000 who voted in the Republican primary, narrowly won by the former chairman of the Republican National Committee and George W. Bush aide Ed Gillespie.

Gillespie edged Corey Stewart, former chairman of the Trump campaign in Virginia, by barely 4,500 votes, and Stewart refused to support the candidate he had vilified as “Establishment Ed” during the campaign. Stewart told media, “There is one word you will never hear from me, and that’s ‘unity.’”

Stewart’s campaign was directed at whipping up ultra-right and fascistic elements, focusing mainly on denouncing efforts to remove monuments to Confederate generals like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, and hailing every action taken by the Trump administration against democratic rights, particularly the travel ban directed against Muslims.

In the New Jersey primary election, held a week earlier than Virginia’s, on June 6, Lt. Governor Kim Guadagno easily won the Republican primary to succeed Governor Chris Christie, who is limited to two four-year terms. Christie leaves office as the most unpopular governor in all 50 states, with the state budget in disastrous condition, widely hated for repeated cuts in social spending, pensions and infrastructure.

The Democratic Party primary for governor was won by Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive and US Ambassador to Germany under the Obama administration, who easily defeated three under-funded

rivals. Murphy is heavily favored to win the general election in a state where Trump’s approval rating is only 28 percent, and Christie’s is even lower.



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