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# In a Purple District, Perry Runs a Red-Meat Campaign

The House Freedom Caucus stalwart has been redrawn into swing territory, but he's not moving to the middle.



GOP Rep. Scott Perry listens to speakers at a party rally with volunteer canvassers in Harrisburg, Pa. on Saturday

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**S**USQUEHANNA TOWNSHIP, Pa.—Rep. Scott Perry is knocking on doors in this sleepy middle-class suburb and so far, it's off to a rough start.

The conservative Republican is introducing himself for the first time to this Harrisburg-adjacent town, and to his surprise, he's recognized at the first door he knocks by an African-American woman in sweats.

"I know you. You used to work down at the [Pennsylvania State] Capitol," she tells the state-representative-turned-congressman.

"In the food court, or where?" he guesses, as she laughs heartily.

"Come on, man. The food court?," she crosses her arms, a look of displeasure comes over her face, but still, she laughs. "No. I work for the Dem House Caucus. This is my 18th year."

"So this is probably not going to go well, huh?" he quips.

Perry is in a race for his political life. In February, the state Supreme Court redrew Pennsylvania's congressional map after finding that the districts were illegally gerrymandered, placing Perry, a leader in the House Freedom Caucus and an avowed supporter of President Trump, in a significantly less-friendly district for Republicans.

Roughly 40 percent of his district will be seeing his name on the ballot for the first time. What's more, the court erased the southern portions of reliably Republican Adams and York counties from Perry's domain and added instead the entirety of Dauphin County, which supported Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the past two presidential contests.

In all, voters in the new district supported Trump by only 9 points, in contrast to Perry's old district, which went for Trump by more than 20. The district now includes all of Harrisburg and its adjacent suburbs, meaning Perry will

be representing a large amount of establishment political aides and operatives who work in and around the statehouse.

“The district is R+5, Perry’s more like R+25,” said one Pennsylvania Republican, speaking anonymously because Perry is a friend. “He may as well be running in Siberia.”

### **Playing to the base**

Just as surely as Perry was swept into office in the tea-party wave of 2012, he risks becoming a casualty of the expected blue wave of 2018. But rather than shying away from his conservative reputation, Perry is going on the attack, betting that he can hold onto his seat with a firebrand style of retail politics that he hopes will gin up the GOP base.

Earlier in the day, riling up supporters at the Dauphin County GOP headquarters, Perry’s speech plays like a list of talk-radio greatest hits: Democrats are socialists who want to turn the country into Venezuela, the media is a wing of the Democratic Party, conservative ideas have been banned from social media, and his opponent is a minion of House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi and Sen. Bernie Sanders. The roughly 100 supporters who showed up to canvas on his behalf eat it up with rousing applause.

“In these midterm elections, the party in power tends to have less enthusiasm, so Scott understands what we all understand: The key for us is to turn out our base,” says Val DiGiorgio, chairman of the Pennsylvania Republican Party.

“Democratic intensity is baked in. ... I don’t know that a moderate congressman who’s not hitting on those themes gets the base out.”

Democrats are betting on the opposite. To counter Perry, they’ve nominated a soft-spoken Lutheran pastor, George Scott, and recently, election trackers have been increasing the chances that Perry will lose. Scott has a surprisingly similar biography to Perry: Scott is also a veteran and also lives in Dillsburg, Pennsylvania, which has not gone unnoticed by Perry.

“He wants everyone to see him in uniform and say, ‘That guy’s just like Perry. Heck, his name’s almost the same!’” Perry tells his supporters.

Unlike Perry, though, Scott is running as a moderate, trying to replicate the success of another high-profile Democratic veteran from Pennsylvania, Rep. Conor Lamb. But Perry bristles at the notion, seizing on the fact that the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee recently started running ads in the district.

Back in the Susquehanna Township neighborhood, Perry engages a man working in his driveway.

“I don’t think you’re going to agree with many of his positions, unless you like what you see in Venezuela,” he says of his opponent.

Across the street, Perry approaches a multi-family garage sale as he, his wife, and his aides buy \$1 cups of lemonade from a boy sitting behind a folding table set up in the driveway.

One of the women manning the sale confronts Perry about the news of the day: the Senate will soon vote to confirm Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court despite allegations of sexual misconduct against him, and she’s apoplectic.

“This is embarrassing,” says the woman, who identifies herself as a retired educator. “They’re saying women do not have a voice. How can you put someone like that on the Supreme Court, knowing what he did?”

“I don’t know that we do know what he did.” Perry replies. “Now, you know the FBI did an investigation and they said none of it was corroborated.”

“What can you find out in a week? Let’s be realistic,” she retorts.

“So you don’t believe the FBI,” he answers. “OK.”

## **A personal story**

Later, Perry is at the East Pennsboro Pumpkinfest, a sprawling annual two-day fall jamboree held in an 82-acre park in Enola. He's glad-handing at the Pennsylvania Republicans booth, tucked among more than 200 stalls with vendors selling everything from handcrafted cutting boards to sweet-potato funnel cake, atheism to flat-earth theory, and, of course, Democratic and Republican politics.

Perry is more in his element amid the carnival atmosphere, and as a cover band plays hits from Blondie, Boston, Tom Petty, and Elton John, he is swarmed by well-wishers, including families, veterans, and a couple of policemen in uniform.

"Thank you for everything you do," says one lady.

"Good luck," says another.

"Keep at it, Scott," a man says.

"Where do you need volunteers?" a woman asks.

"Everywhere," Perry answers. "We need them everywhere."

It is clear that Perry does have a sizable and intense fan base. Part of his appeal is his up-from-the-bootstraps success story: The grandson of a Colombian immigrant single mother who fled an abusive relationship, he was raised in poverty by his own single mother before enlisting in the Army. He put himself through school, opened a mechanical-consulting firm, and went on to command an Army aviation battalion in Iraq before entering politics full-time.

It's also his personal touch that appeals to his constituents. Perry is known to personally respond to constituent letters, a trait that wooed Keith Zook, a young man who brought his friends from his martial-arts classes to Pumpkinfest to meet Perry. That, along with Perry's outsider status, has made

him a hero to Zook. Although many in the community don't know what the Freedom Caucus is, they do know his reputation for bucking even his own party, and they like it.

“Neither side likes me, my side sometimes and the other side definitely doesn't. But this is my deal: I'm going to tell you what I do and then I'm going to go do it,” Perry tells the group. “If I say I'm going to go and vote against too much spending, you can count on my voting against too much spending.”

“That's why he's had no primary challengers the last two times around: Because he protects us over his job,” Zook tells his friends, proudly. Zook's friends nod approvingly.

Of course, his outsider status comes with notable downsides: The national party is not spending in his district and party leaders hadn't visited until House Majority Whip Steve Scalise came through Thursday. Instead, the conservative outside group, Heritage Action, recently started running ads thanking him for his vote for the GOP tax law. Freedom Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows plans to visit the district and stump on his behalf, Perry says.

“The power doesn't like to be challenged,” he laments. But when asked whether it's worth it, he's ruffled.

“Is it worth it? What, trying to save my country? Yeah it's worth it. I know you think that's hokey, but that's where I am,” he says.

### **Aiming for the middle**

In the next aisle over at Pumpkinfest, George Scott is shaking hands in front of a life-size cardboard standee bearing his image. At recent debates, Scott has seized on the Freedom Caucus and tried to paint Perry as an obstructionist, even quoting former Speaker John Boehner and Trump to make his case.

“The Freedom Caucus as an organization has an established record of obstruction. That’s just a fact. I’m not the only one saying that as a Democrat, fellow Republicans say that repeatedly about the Freedom Caucus,” he says.

Meanwhile, Scott laments the negative tone the Perry campaign has taken.

“It’s really unfortunate. It’s kind of this demonization of the other side that’s really unhealthy for our political culture. I obviously disagree with him on several issues. I’m not trying to demonize him,” he said. “I try not to make the race about my opponent and what people should not vote for. I’m trying to give people something to vote for.”

Scott made waves in the Democratic primary with an ad in which he disassembled and burned an assault-style rifle while calling for common-sense gun reform. Since, however, he has taken a hard turn to the center. He still advocates for changes to gun laws, for instance restricting the sale of assault-style weapons, but the ad, and any mention of it, have been removed from Scott’s social-media profiles.

Scott says his party needs new leadership, but stops short of calling for Pelosi’s head. He acknowledges that Perry is trying to tie him to Pelosi, but he says he doesn’t want to take the bait. “It ends up trying to turn something positive into something negative and that’s not what I’m about,” he says.

Sarah Lightner, wearing all white and walking with a cane, approaches. A retired Air Force veteran, she tells Scott that she just moved up from Wilmington, North Carolina, to escape the hurricane and decided to stay. She’s never voted for a Democrat before and supported Trump in the last presidential election, but that’s about to change. She looked up Scott’s positions and will support him.

“His party doesn’t matter to me. His attitude, his demeanor do. And he seems to be a great man,” Lightner says of Scott.

## **Slamming his opponent**

As the sun sets, Perry drives a few miles west to mingle at Carlisle Barracks Oktoberfest, a beer-soaked celebration with carnival rides and deep-fried Oreos for the kids and World War I reenactors huddling in tent encampments.

Again Perry is in his element; after all, he graduated from the U.S. Army War College, which is on the premises. An elderly parking usher recognizes him immediately and asks for a photo.

“Who are you running against anyway?” the usher asks.

“I’m running for the position,” Perry answers, “But some socialist named George Scott is running too.”

The bar is selling 32-ounce steins of Hefeweizen, but apart from a few times in the military, like when German bar patrons forced him and fellow G.I.s to take Jägermeister shots, Perry doesn’t drink. Over a Pepsi, he does an interview with a local newspaper reporter.

“This race, it’s always been kind of low key. But with redrawing, which has brought in [George] Soros, Nancy Pelosi, Michael Moore, Tom Steyer, you know that whole West Coast crazy liberal wing, the people here see the results of that and the majority of people don’t agree with it,” he rants.

He’s again confronted with the assertion his opponent is a moderate.

“Go to his website and read all his Bernie Sanders, Keith Ellison socialist agenda and tell me he’s moderate. He’s not moderate. A guy who throws a gun on a fire like he did in his ad is not moderate. A guy who goes to a protest at the Capitol like Resist and Antifa is not moderate,” Perry goes on.

As the night falls, Perry makes his way off to knock on more doors in the new part of his district. They know him there, he says, because he used to represent it when he was in the statehouse.

They may not know his opponent, but if they answer the door, Perry will be happy to fill them in.