

Greg Pason

Candidate for U.S. Senate



What motivated you to run for office?

Senator Robert Menendez was the incumbent and a traditional liberal who is a hawk on international issues. He is especially aggressive on intervention in Iran, is hostile toward Cuba and Venezuela and has given blind support to Israel. I felt this was an opportunity for the Party to focus on these issues while promoting democratic socialist ideas.

I was the Party's candidate for US Senate in the past and have a long history in anti-war and social movement work, so I hoped to use this opportunity to promote the Party and our ideas.

What kind of budget were you working with?

We had very little cash. The campaign raised approximately \$2,000, which went to promotional items, a website, transit and photocopied literature.

Did you run openly as a socialist?

I ran under the slogan "Socialist Party USA" on the ballot, and every palm card, bumper sticker and press release listed the Party. The entire campaign

was primarily focused on building the Socialist Party and providing a democratic socialist program, so Party promotion was even more important than promoting my name. It was important not only to run as an open "socialist" but also to run clearly as the candidate of the Socialist Party USA, to differentiate us from the various Leninist "socialist" parties as well as the openly (ideologically) anti-socialist Green Party. This worked well since we had the opportunity to debate the Green Party and put forward democratic socialist ideas.

What kind of help did you get? Who were the key supporters of your campaign?

We had a handful of volunteers. Members helped petition and table, and our allies were also very helpful. This was a DIY campaign with lots of tabling at street fairs, web and radio work, school appearances and face-to-face discussions. We also had support from members in NYC and non-member allies in NJ while petitioning, and members from across the state helped promote us.

What was your primary campaign strategy, and what was most effective?

I used social media, street fairs, school appearances, local forums, and any media we could get. I spoke at "Occupy" events, schools, "tent cities," and at lots of peace vigils and organizational fundraisers. Street fairs and forums were the best way to get ideas out to larger groups. Social networking worked in getting statements out.

What was your messaging and what were the responses you received?

The campaign was solely about building the party and prompting democratic socialism, and that message was received well or respected by most people. I was open and honest and didn't try to hide our message. We had some great debates with Greens in the state, and I think those debates highlighted the strong differences we have with them, but we also supported each other by sharing info on campaigning opportunities.

I'd say the most negative responses came from Democrats and liberal activists who either didn't like to acknowledge that they were supporting a candidate (Menendez) who represented many of the things they have protested in the past

budget, US imperialism), or didn't like that a Party to their "left" was allowed to exist. At one 4th of July parade, a local Democratic Party group tried to get us removed. But all in all, people were respectful and interested in democratic socialism.

Please describe the political climate in New Jersey.

This campaign was a statewide Federal campaign. New Jersey tends to be what they call a "blue state," although it has elected reactionaries (i.e. Chris Christie).

What are some of the main issues affecting your specific community? How did you address those concerns within a socialist framework?

Since this was a statewide Federal campaign, our message related to national issues. We were able to frame socialist alternatives to problems and compared them to the current Democratic administration and Senator Menendez.

We had some key issues that specifically fit this race: slashing the military budget by 50% and opposing US imperialism, a socialist alternative to "Obamacare," a true progressive tax system, and a national employment plan, which focused on local cooperatives and collectives as opposed to bailing out big business, etc.

I promoted these ideas at every event and had a few opportunities to contrast a democratic socialist position to ideas of the right and that of the Greens.

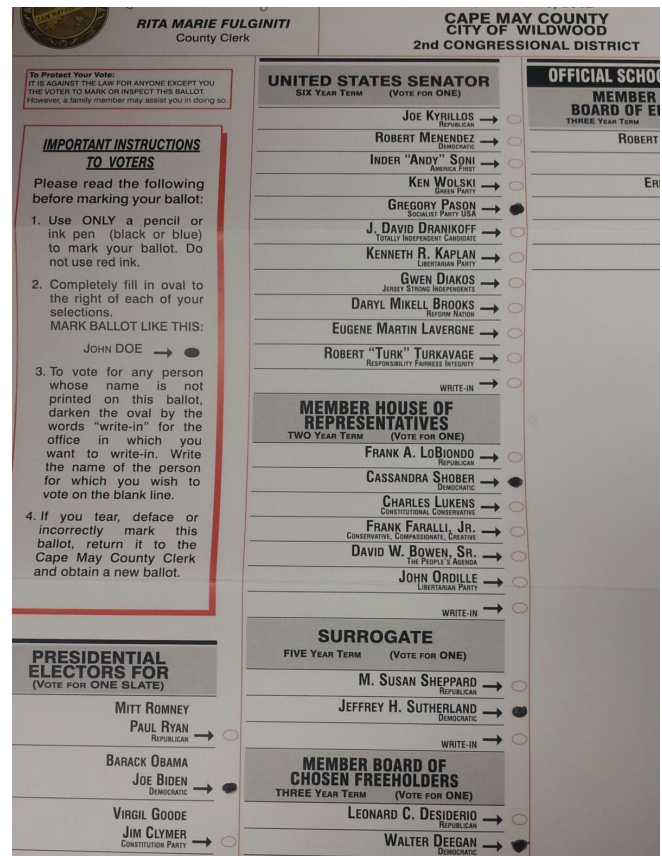
I believe my role in the anti-war movement and many past and present community coalitions and projects helped garner support. But the campaign was primarily about promoting the Socialist Party and democratic socialism -- not me as an individual. Having a long history of activism and coalition work does help, though. The key problem is that many activists who belong to trade unions and some movement organizations ended up having to campaign for a pro-war Democrat as part of their jobs (union work, LGBTQ, etc.). This is a serious issue any alternative party campaign will face. It also points out a clear reason for a break with liberal reformist ideologies. We had anti-war labor activists who were paid to organize workers to campaign for a candidate who represented ideas and issues they spent so much of their "free time" protesting.

Did people challenge your position? What did they say, and how did you respond?

I had many opportunities to interact with individuals who disagreed. Sometimes it was on principle, but many times I had the opportunity to dialogue. I think the best debates we had were those that included Libertarian Party and Green Party reps. Clear ideological positions were laid out, which contrasted to each other.

Please describe the kind of media outreach you did.

We did as much as possible. Press releases were sent to various media outlets, e-mails were sent and we had a handful of interviews (including the NY Times, although it was published on Election Day).



What were some of the greatest obstacles, and how did you overcome them?

The greatest challenge in the campaign was getting attention. There were 10 candidates on the ballot. This gave the major media an excuse to ignore all of us. We responded by focusing on local events, using social media and working with other candidates to set up our own events (debates and forums). This problem also carried over to Election Day. The ballot was crowded and

placement differed in each county. Voters had to hunt for us and find us (sometimes lined up with other candidates that did not match our ideology).

Another problem was that Hurricane Sandy struck during the last 10 days of the campaign and caused the cancellation of events and a general end of campaigning. Residents across the state were in crisis and many lost homes and were without power or access to any media. The focus needed to be on post-Sandy relief, so our campaign stopped a bit early.

Anything surprising happen during your campaign?

We got an endorsement from New Jersey NOW. This was overridden by the National NOW-PAC (which endorsed Menendez and didn't even interview me), but it was a great sign. Another surprise was the election of Pat Noble to the Red Bank Board of Education. I promoted this campaign everywhere I went, and Pat's election was a major victory for the Party. It will help us organize for the state election next year.

What are some things you would have liked to do, if you had more time and resources?

There was so much more we could have done with more resources. We would've attended many more events, advertised and sent out mass mailings. It's frustrating to not be able to respond to every situation and, worse, not be able to attend many events. I also wish we would have had the people power required to get the Alexander/Mendoza slate on the ballot.

How do you think the results of your campaign reflected the political consciousness of people in your community specifically and the American public in general?

It's tough getting through the lesser-evil mindset and disappointing to see so many "radicals" working directly or indirectly for pro-war Democrats. We run campaigns to promote ideas and our organization, but part of the campaign is to promote ideas like proportional representation, free media for candidates, and a break from capitalist parties. I was inspired by the interest in socialism and the rejection of capitalism from a growing group of people.

Do you plan to run for office again? If so, for what position? If not, why?

I hope to take a few elections off and re-focus on movement work. We hope to reorganize the "Take Back Trenton" coalition and hope for more local victories like Pat Noble's successful campaign for the Board of Education. The Party will most likely also be suing the state of New Jersey for a registration status so that voters can identify themselves with the SPUSA.

Any final thoughts, observations or anecdotes?

The campaign had clear goals such as promoting democratic socialist ideas and differentiating our ideas from traditional "left" liberal reformism and Leninist authoritarianism. We had the opportunity to put these ideas up against Green Party "small-scale capitalism" and the Libertarian Party's free-market utopianism, as well as the capitalist ideologies promoted by the Democrats and Republicans. Although we had very limited access to the rest of the public, the most important part of this campaign was to run an open Socialist Party USA member and to provide an alternative. The struggle to win people over may be easier than convincing voters to break from "lesser evilism," but we'll continue to campaign and grow in New Jersey.

