

U.S. Rep. Richard Neal backs Progressive Democrats of America legislation

Written by Ben Storrow | Daily Hampshire Gazette
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In a move to shore up his progressive credentials in advance of an electoral challenge from the left this fall, U.S. Rep. Richard Neal confirmed on Wednesday that he will cosponsor five pieces of legislation backed by the Progressive Democrats of America, a liberal advocacy group.

That announcement comes amid frequent criticism from the two challengers Neal will face in a Democratic primary this fall that the Springfield congressman is too conservative to represent the new 1st Congressional District. Much of that district has been represented by U.S. Rep. John Olver, D-Amherst, for the past two decades. Olver is retiring at the end of his current term in January.

Political observers said Neal's decision to support the progressive bills was not a stretch from his past positions. But they did not rule out some election-year motivation in his backing of the proposals.

"It's not like a snake shedding its skin," said Ralph Whitehead, a professor of media and politics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. "But maybe it is a wisely conspicuous way of demonstrating his positions on bread-and-butter domestic and foreign policy issues." The package of bills includes proposals to establish a single-payer health care system and to end the United States' military mission in Afghanistan, along with two jobs bills requiring major government investments in the economy. The final proposal is a constitutional amendment seeking to overturn the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in *Citizens United v. the Federal Elections Commission*, which extended constitutional rights to corporations. The proposed amendment would limit constitutional rights to people.

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The bills have almost no chance of passing the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. But Neal's endorsement nonetheless represents a symbolic victory for liberal grass-roots activists in the Pioneer Valley, who have long sought the Springfield Democrat's support for their legislative agenda.

"The important thing is that we are making progress," said Tim Carpenter, national director of the Progressive Democrats of America. "If we can't count on our Democratic members of Congress on these important questions today, we won't have any chance of getting them passed in the future."

Neal had previously rebuffed PDA's repeated approaches over the last two years to cosponsor the organization's legislative package, Carpenter said. The organization held 21 rallies in front of Neal's Springfield district office in hopes of swaying his opinion, he said.

Carpenter informed the Gazette Wednesday that Neal had recently agreed to back the PDA agenda before a planned public announcement today. Neal's office later confirmed the decision.

Neal's challengers greeted news of the announcement with a heavy dose of skepticism.

"Where has he been all these years?" asked Alford writer Bill Shein. "It's hilarious and embarrassing to see someone pander so transparently in an election year. The last thing we need is more election-year followers."

James Pollock, a spokesman for former state Sen. Andrea Nuciforo's campaign, struck a similar tone.

"If a primary challenge forces him to vote like a Democrat then we applaud the congressman for making the right decision," Pollock said. "The new district represents ideals that are more progressive than his voting record suggests."

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William Tranghese, a spokesman for Neal, said the decision to back the PDA legislation is consistent with the congressman's past positions.

"I think he has been very outspoken on all of these issues for years," Tranghese said. To the criticism that Neal is not progressive enough for the new district, Tranghese said, "Look at his record. It's not different than John Olver's, John Kerry's or Ted Kennedy's."

Carpenter, a Northampton resident, attributed Neal's change of heart to PDA's persistent campaign, a primary challenge and the new congressional district where he will run for re-election this year.

"The primary challenge with Shein and the state senator will turn up the heat on Neal and force him to lead on progressive issues," Carpenter said. Progressives have little quarrel with Neal's voting record, but would like to see more leadership from the Springfield congressman, he said, adding, "It's one thing to vote the right way, it's another thing to lead."

Nicole LaChapelle, an Easthampton resident and state Democratic Party committee member, said she is supporting Neal this fall because of his defense of social programs such as Social Security against Republican attacks. She said she was not surprised to hear of his backing for the PDA bills.

"I don't think this is a big pivot when you consider his record," LaChapelle said. "I think these are the issues that are coming up in communities across the country."

The new 1st Congressional District includes all of Berkshire and Hampden counties, the western halves of Franklin and Hampshire counties and a southwestern portion of Worcester County.

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