

# Vermont's Progressive Candidates Blur Party Lines to Win

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*Rather than nominate a candidate for mayor, Burlington's Progressive Party decided in early December to endorse Carina Driscoll, who had announced in advance her intention to run as an Independent. This is the second time since 2012 that the Party has gone without a standard-bearer in the race. One reason is that neither Driscoll, the step-daughter of Progressive "godfather" Bernie Sanders, nor her insurgent opponent, Infinite Culcleasure, wanted the Party's nomination.*

Instead, Driscoll at first expressed interest in seeking additional Party endorsements, from local Democrats and even Republicans. Although she has since abandoned that idea, the underlying strategy of crossing, and sometimes blurring party lines has been effective for the independent coalition that supports Bernie Sanders and other Progressives.



Anthony Pollina

In 2010, for example, Anthony Pollina was elected to the state Senate, joining Tim Ashe as the second Progressive leader to run successfully as a fusion candidate with both the Democratic and Progressive nominations. It was his first term in office. But Pollina had entered statewide politics with a splash many years earlier. In 1984, he won an insurgent victory in the Democratic primary for US Congress, then decisively lost in the general election to Jim Jeffords, the popular incumbent.

Unlike Bernie Sanders, who rarely misses an election cycle, Pollina didn't run again for years, but did serve during the 1990s as Senior Policy Advisor to then-Congressman Sanders. Returning to electoral politics as the Progressive's candidate for governor in 2000, Pollina received 9.5 percent in a crowded field with Republican Ruth Dwyer, who received 37.9 percent, and incumbent governor Howard Dean, who won with 50.4.

Two years later, in the race for Lt. Governor, he received 24.8 percent in a three way race, behind Peter Shumlin, with 32.1 percent, and Brian Dubie, who won with 41.2. Dean had

retired, and was planning his race for President. Michael Badamo ran for governor as a Progressive – but without much support from the Party — and got only .6 percent. Jim Douglas was elected.



Peter Clavelle

In the midst of his last term as Burlington's Progressive mayor, Peter Clavelle returned to the Democratic Party in 2004 and challenged Douglas's first re-election bid. Douglas won again, this time with 57.8 percent. Clavelle received 37.9. The Progressive Party didn't field a candidate for governor that year, or in 2006.

In 2008, however, Pollina ran for governor again. Yet at a July press conference the Progressive Party leader announced that he would appear on the ballot as an Independent. It was "by far the best way" to build a coalition, he claimed. The decision raised questions about his reasons and the future of the party.

Both Sanders and his predecessor Jeffords had been embraced as Independents, Pollina argued. But Sanders became an Independent in the late 1970s after several disappointing runs as a third party candidate. At the time he publicly announced that the timing wasn't right for a new Party. He had since served four terms as Burlington mayor and eight as a US Congressman, before running for the US Senate in 2006. In every race, until his 2016 bid for President as a Democrat, he ran as an Independent.

Jeffords, on the other hand, was a life-long Republican, serving in the US House and Senate for decades. He left the GOP in 2001, citing deep differences with the Republican leadership and the Bush administration. It turned out to be his last term, and there is no way to know how Vermont voters would have responded had he attempted to seek re-election as an Independent.

Pollina's reasons were different. He had devoted years to building Vermont's Progressive Party, and had declined to enter the Democratic primary earlier the same year, saying he had no intention of running as anything but a Progressive.

"You know, I'm a Progressive," he told columnist Peter Freyne. "I'm not going to leave the Progressive Party to become a candidate of another party."

Doing so "would undermine people's faith in me and also in the process," Pollina said, "I wouldn't be too surprised if there were Democrats who would accuse me of being opportunistic in switching parties." Once he announced the

intention to change his status to Independent, some Democrats did exactly that. “This is about opportunistic decision-making,” Democratic Party Chair Ian Carlton told The Burlington Free Press.

The underlying question raised by Pollina’s move was whether it was more important for progressives to build a party or win races. Thirty years earlier Sanders faced the same choice, made it, and held office almost continuously since 1981 – as an Independent. Although also wielding considerable influence as the unofficial head of the state’s progressive movement, he never joined a Party and didn’t feel accountable to any political organization. At times he was criticized for not doing enough to build an alternative to the Republicans and Democrats. He simply ignored such criticism and, if pressed, explained that he was just too busy doing his job in Congress.

By running as an Independent in 2008 Pollina claimed that he hoped to build on his Progressive base, then possibly as high as 25 percent, attracting voters who had no firm allegiance to the other parties. Driscoll is making a similar calculation in her mayoral campaign.

Pollina’s 2008 gubernatorial race won the support of the three largest unions in the state; the Vermont-National Education Association backed an independent candidate for governor for the first time. He also received support from the Gun Owners of Vermont, a “libertarian” connection Sanders also made in his campaigns. But when the votes were counted, Pollina came in with 21.8 percent, just a tenth of a percentage ahead of the Democrat. Douglas won again, this time with 53.4 percent.

Two years later, Pollina ran for the state Senate –and won — as a Progressive and Democrat. Since then State Auditor Doug Hoffer and Lt. Gov. David Zuckerman have taken the fusion path to victory as candidates of both parties.

In his 2011 campaign for mayor, Tim Ashe sounded similar to Carina Driscoll when he defined himself as the person “who can bring people together and end the partisan fighting.” But his approach to Fusion was to seek the nomination of both the Progressive and Democratic Parties. Driscoll didn’t want the former and can’t win the latter.

Ashe’s pitch was that looming threats, combined with Burlington’s unique political dynamics, called for someone able to unite a “new majority.” However, fusion wasn’t a familiar concept for many local voters. Candidates sometimes won multiple endorsements, and even ran as Republican/Democratic candidates. But this was usually due to a lack of competition or the nature of the office. A few Progressives in the legislature had already run with Democratic support. But as a political tactic, fusion was an unfamiliar, mainly urban tool.



Tim Ashe

Ashe faced two hurdles: convincing enough Progressives that attending a Democratic Caucus wouldn't undermine their Party. And, at the same time, persuading wary Democrats that this wasn't just a Progressive ploy, that he truly wanted to be more inclusive and less partisan. Hundreds of Progressives did show up for that caucus, but not quite enough to beat Miro Weinberger. After Ashe's defeat, local Progressives opted not to nominate or endorse anyone for mayor.

"I've taken an unusual path," Ashe acknowledged at the time.

However, he felt that his successful Senate run, with the support of both Democrats and Progressives, had "changed the culture of the Senate" and created the possibility of a "new era of collaboration."

He also had a message for his Progressive base. By joining forces with past opponents, Ashe suggested, they would be in a better position to preserve "a legacy we can be proud of" – meaning the projects and achievements of three Progressive administrations. Driscoll's candidacy so far suggests a similar objective.

Back in 2008, the endorsement of Progressive Party Chair Martha Abbott indicated that the movement's leaders backed Pollina's decision to go Independent. As he argued then, they didn't want to let a label get in the way of a possible victory. On the other hand, Progressives had misjudged their base before. A prime example was Burlington after Clavelle, when some pragmatic leaders backed Democrat Hinda Miller. Unsatisfied with that move, the Party's grassroots recruited an upset winner, Bob Kiss, who served two terms.

Whether running as an Independent rather than a Progressive will expand Driscoll's appeal, especially given her close association with the movement and its leader, is currently a very open question. The answer will come on March 6.

*Material in this article is adapted from "Progressive Eclipse: Burlington, Bernie and the Movement That Changed Vermont." Greg Guma is the Vermont-based author of "Dons of*

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