

CD 5 race: Cho, Garrett clash on issues at sole face-to-face debate

By Mark Bonamo

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WASHINGTON TWP. – Republican incumbent Congressman Scott Garrett and his Democratic challenger Roy Cho met face-to-face on Friday in the sole debate between the two candidates for New Jersey's Fifth Congressional District.

After leaving their cars next to a horse pasture, Garrett and Cho walked past a working AP teletype in the lobby and descended into the basement studio of WRNJ, a Morris County-based radio station yards away from the boundary of CD 5. The five people in the studio besides the candidates soon watched Garrett and Cho come out rhetorically swinging, highlighting the deep ideological differences between the two.

Prompted by panelist Rob Jennings, a New Jersey Herald reporter, Cho laced into Garrett regarding one of his main critiques of the six-term incumbent: Garrett's record in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

"This is a credibility issue," said Cho, 33, an attorney who lives in Hackensack, stating that Garrett hesitated to support federal aid for Sandy victims in the wake of the storm. "A letter was presented to the leadership of both parties to be able to say that everyone should come together and that we need support from the federal government. I don't care what your idea of government is, but we live in a civilized society and there has to be a role that government can play sometimes. Out of all of the members of the New Jersey legislature, Congressman Garrett did not sign that letter. But for him to put out a mail piece to the members of the Fifth Congressional District claiming that he led the effort to get Hurricane Sandy relief I believe is misleading."

Garrett countered Cho's assertions about his post-Sandy credibility.

"I sponsored the very first bill to bring Sandy relief to the citizens of New Jersey," said Garrett, 55, a former state Assemblyman who lives in Wantage. "I was on nine other letters to try to get relief to the people of the state of New Jersey. On the final appropriations bill, I voted yes. I was there, and I got it done."

"The part that [Garrett] favored and put his name on was actually the least controversial part of the Hurricane Sandy relief bill. The part that he favored considered out-dated flood maps, and he made sure that people had insurance pay-outs for the people that had flood insurance. But what about the thousands of other New Jerseyans that didn't have flood insurance? These people were basically left out to dry."

"You're right – this bill was to make sure that there would be money there for the people for actually bought flood insurance," Garrett replied. "If you paid for flood insurance, you got your payment."

Sparks flew again between Garrett and Cho regarding recent questions raised about Cho's residency.

Garrett listed a litany of personal events that all took place in the Fifth Congressional District, which is made up of parts of Bergen County, a few Passaic County municipalities, and most of Warren and Sussex counties.

"I've lived my life here. That's contrary to my opponent here. We're really not sure what his history is with the district," Garrett said. "First [he said] he moved here two and half years ago, and then when we questioned on that [because of Cho's voting record], he said he only moved here a year ago."

"We've had [a Rutgers-Eagleton Institute associate director and an election lawyer] who independently confirmed that what I have done is neither illegal nor uncommon. Let's talk about the issues and Congressman Garrett's voting record, because that's what is impacting the district," Cho said. "Congressman Garrett was one of nine members of Congress who voted against the re-authorization of the Violence Against Women Act. He voted against the re-authorization of the Voting Rights Act, considered by many to be one of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation. He voted against the extension of federal funding for transportation projects to invest in infrastructure. These issues impact everybody. Congressman Garrett realizes that this is a close race and it's going to come down to the wire. He's playing political games to distract [people] from his voting record."

Garrett and Cho continued to exchange verbal blows during the 60-minute radio debate on a range of issues, including education, the federal Affordable Health Care Act and the role of special interests in politics.

One issue flashpoint underscored the considerable ideological rift between Garrett and Cho: the question of whether or not to raise the minimum wage.

“A strong middle class is the backbone of this country’s economy. The people in the top income brackets are investing their money, and the people in the middle-income bracket are the people who are spending money and who are keeping the economy going,” Cho said. “This isn’t about playing class warfare or vilifying rich people. It’s about what’s in our nation’s collective economic self-interest. This is a stimulus that we need.”

“When I talk to people who are out of work or not making as much money as they need to support their families, they’re not looking for yet another government handout or top-down approach,” Garrett replied. “What they really want for themselves is a good, paying job. People talk about austerity in the country today. Maybe we need a little more austerity in the spending down in Washington, as opposed to...putting so much austerity on the American taxpayer.”

The breadth of WRNJ’s frequency broadcast reach might lie far to the west of much of the Fifth Congressional District’s territory, including the Bergen County sections of the district. Yet in their closing comments, Cho and Garrett amplified their differences loud and clear with 11 days to go before voters go to the polls.

“The election is about credibility,” Cho said, after noting what he referred to as the “sophistication and intelligence” of CD 5 voters during the debate. “Being forced to vote for something because you realize that your initial reluctance to vote for Hurricane Sandy aid may be a political liability for you down the road, that’s not leadership. This is a campaign where we should be focusing on the issues.”

“I appreciate that [Cho] just moved to the district a few months ago...the Fifth Congressional District is a really great district to live in,” said Garrett. “Having grown up and lived here my entire life, I’ve appreciate the support from constituents from Hackensack to Hackettstown. My pledge is to continue to fight and represent their views in Washington.”