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# Democrats Divided As They Try To Flip N.J. House Seat

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Heard on All Things Considered

JOE HERNANDEZ

New Jersey has several Republican House seats Democrats would like to flip. In one, the Democratic primary involves a candidate who is moderate on gun issues and backed by party establishment figures.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

Democrats are trying to seize control of the House of Representatives in this fall's elections. But first they have to sort out their own disagreements over the direction of the party. Voters in a southern New Jersey district will settle one of those fights in a primary Tuesday. It's a seat Democrats desperately want to flip since the Republican now holding that seat has decided to retire. From member station WHYY, Joe Hernandez reports.

(SOUNDBITE OF KNOCKING)

TANZIE YOUNGBLOOD: Good morning. I'm Tanzie Youngblood, candidate for Congress. Can I talk to you just for a minute, please?

JOE HERNANDEZ, BYLINE: Right away, two things are clear about Tanzie Youngblood. She loves people, and she loves turning people into voters.

YOUNGBLOOD: This is what I got in this race for. I got in this race to help communities like this. Excuse me. Excuse me. Hi. Can I see you one minute?

HERNANDEZ: Youngblood is a political first-timer. She's a retired teacher from southern New Jersey who decided to get into politics after the election of Donald Trump. She's running for Congress in New Jersey's 2nd District which stretches from just outside Philadelphia across thousands of acres of farmland to Atlantic City and the Jersey Shore. It's a district that voted for Obama twice and then favored Trump in 2016. For the last 24 years, the seat has been held by Republican Frank LoBiondo, who is retiring. Michael Klein runs the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

MICHAEL KLEIN: It's considered more than a competitive race for the Democrats to try to pick up and put into their column in the national effort to try to swing the whole House of Representatives from Republican majority to Democrat.

HERNANDEZ: Tanzie Youngblood wants to be part of that, but it won't be easy not only because there are four Democrats running in the primary but because party leaders are lining up behind someone else. They're backing New Jersey State Senator Jeff Van Drew, a decision that's riled progressives. Van Drew is a dentist who leans conservative on some issues. For example, he voted against same-sex marriage. Here he is on New Jersey public television station NJTV.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

JEFF VAN DREW: I'm a Democrat, but if I really, truly believe there's a good Republican idea, I would vote for it and support it.

HERNANDEZ: What's angering progressives in New Jersey the most is Van Drew's position on guns. He voted against gun control bills in the state legislature, and the NRA gave him a 100 percent rating. That's caused Democrats to question why the party would support Van Drew over more progressive candidates like Youngblood. Here's sound captured by the Philadelphia Inquirer of constituents arguing with Van Drew over his support from the NRA.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

VAN DREW: I would.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Senator, you lie.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: No, I don't have anything because you're a hundred percent with the NRA - a hundred percent.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: They gave you \$1,000 in 2011 in the primaries. What do you say about that?

VAN DREW: Never ever...

HERNANDEZ: Van Drew's campaign was unable to fulfill our request for an interview. Supporters say his reputation in South Jersey politics and his ability to raise money and win tough races make him more electable against the eventual Republican candidate. But Tanzie Youngblood says it's that kind of top-down political calculus that's making rank-and-file Democrats sour on the party. And she's hoping she can tap into the same anti-establishment attitude held by many of the Trump voters in the district.

YOUNGBLOOD: See; people think, oh, they're so conservative. They didn't vote for Trump because he was conservative. They voted for Trump to send a message, and I know that the people are going to do the same thing. That's what's going to surprise - that's what the Democratic establishment doesn't get.

HERNANDEZ: In Tuesday's primary, Democratic voters will decide whether to send that message to the party establishment or not. For NPR News, I'm Joe Hernandez in Bridgeton, N.J.

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