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House, Senate races in New Jersey find both parties on defensive

JOHN DeROSIER Staff Writer Oct 29, 2018



Republican Seth Grossman, left, shrank a deficit to Democrat Jeff Van Drew in the most recent congressional poll conducted by Stockton University.

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Long overlooked on the national stage because of its reliably Democratic majority in the northern part of the state and its smaller, yet loyal, Republican majority in the south, New Jersey has landed front and center in this year's election for both parties.

Democrats see their path to taking the U.S. House of Representatives going through two Republican districts in South Jersey.

Republicans, meanwhile, see a rare opportunity to steal a U.S. Senate seat from incumbent Bob Menendez, who has struggled to shake off a corruption trial that ended in a hung jury last year.

To take control of the 435-member House, Democrats must add 23 seats. To take the 100-member Senate, they need to add two seats.

“It is interesting because this time last year no one would have thought New Jersey would be this important,” said Mike Klein, interim director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University. “Both parties seem motivated heading into the election because there are so many seats in play.”

Democrats will be leaning on experienced politician Jeff Van Drew in the 2nd Congressional District and first-time candidate Andy Kim in the 3rd Congressional District to flip two Republican South Jersey congressional seats.

Van Drew is running against former Atlantic City Councilman Seth Grossman, while Kim is running against incumbent Rep. Tom MacArthur.

The playbook, however, is much different than that of other Democrats around the country who have fed off progressive-wing furor since Trump’s election in 2016.

Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, fought off a very loud, but ultimately small, group of progressives who challenged him on his record in the state government on gun control, the environment and health care, among other issues.

For his part, Van Drew told The Press of Atlantic City he believes real change comes from people solving issues in the middle, and added he feels more comfortable in a moderate district.

In the end, the Democratic voters in the moderate 2nd District overwhelmingly made Van Drew their nominee in the Democratic primary in June.

In the 3rd District, which includes southern Ocean County, Kim has also struck a moderate tone, calling for protecting and strengthening the Affordable Care Act but stopping short of calling for the single-payer health care plan that has become a popular talking point with several Democratic candidates around the country.

Kim, who sat on the National Security Council in the Obama White House, committed to not taking any money from corporate super PACs during the campaign, a promise he has kept so far, with a week left until the election.

Republicans in these two districts have spent most of the campaign on the defensive.

In the 2nd District, the National Republican Congressional Committee pulled its support of Grossman after previous inflammatory comments and Facebook posts he made were dug up and released by opposition research.

The comments and posts largely centered on race and diversity and sometimes took aim at Affirmative Action, which Grossman generally doesn't support. Grossman has insisted his previous comments have been taken out of context, saying he believes everyone in America deserves equal opportunities regardless of their race or religion.

Still, the controversies have led national and state Republicans to all but write off the 2nd District. Frank LoBiondo, the outgoing Republican congressman in the 2nd District, has not specifically endorsed Grossman but did give \$2,500 each to the Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Salem county Republican committees for candidates on the ticket.

State Sen. Chris Brown, the second-highest ranking Republican behind LoBiondo in Atlantic County — Grossman's home county — has also been mum on support for Grossman.

Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, said the institute didn't bother to conduct a poll in the 2nd District this year because they expect it to be a landslide.

A Stockton University poll, released Thursday, found Van Drew ahead of Grossman by 17 points.

Grossman has said he believes the race is closer than the polls indicate and that his conservative views will bring Republicans home on Election Day.

In the 3rd District, MacArthur and Republicans have been playing defense over his yes vote on the GOP tax cuts and his involvement in writing the GOP health care bill that passed the House in 2017.

Both issues, particularly the health care bill, have become political nightmares for MacArthur, who is running for his second term in the House.

After the health care bill, MacArthur took a verbal beating from constituents at two town hall meetings in the 3rd District that each lasted several hours.

Kim has capitalized on MacArthur's issues with the health care bill, and several polls now see the race as a virtual tie heading into Election Day.

The U.S. Senate race between Menendez and former pharmaceutical executive Bob Hugin has seen the roles reversed.

Democrats have been on the defensive over Menendez's corruption trial and a scathing bipartisan ethics report from the Senate that said Menendez "violated Senate rules, federal law and applicable standards of conduct."

Hugin has spent millions of his own money on attack ads against Menendez, and national Democrats have had to reallocate money to New Jersey that could have been used in other national races to help the senator keep his seat.

To make matters worse, Gov. Phil Murphy, the top Democrat in the state, is in Israel instead of stumping for Menendez.

A poll released by the Rutgers University Eagleton Institute of Politics on Wednesday found Menendez holds a five-point lead over Hugin, with Democrats generally not excited to cast their vote for the incumbent senator.

Twenty-nine percent of Menendez voters are "very enthusiastic" to vote for the senator, compared with 58 percent of Hugin voters who say the same about their candidate. Independents prefer Hugin by a seven-point margin, the poll found.

"After his recent onslaught of attack ads against Menendez, Hugin is making this race much closer than it should be for an incumbent in a blue state," Ashley Koning, assistant research professor and director of the Eagleton Institute, said in a statement. "But what's most responsible for the narrow margin here is the corruption charges against Menendez that have haunted his entire re-election campaign. Mistrial or not, the charges have dampened support where Menendez needs it most — with independents and even a handful of his own base."

Klein said the key for Menendez will be whether Democrats decide to vote the party line because of their dislike for Trump.

“Trump isn’t popular in New Jersey, and I really think that could play a big role here,” Klein said. “Menendez has held a consistent lead in all sorts of different polls, so it seems that the party is more important than politics.”

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Van Drew, Grossman's differences speak loudly at Stockton debate



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Jeff Van Drew

Health care: Supports the Affordable Care Act but is open to repeal and replace if a new law is better for South Jersey residents. Cautions against single-payer health care because of high costs.

Immigration: Is not in favor of sanctuary cities or states and believes there needs to be more security at the Southern border. Has not supported building a wall.

Taxes: Does not support the GOP tax cuts signed into law last year, but voted against the gas tax in New Jersey.

Guns: Supports universal background checks and letting people carry concealed weapons if they pass a safety test.

Environment: Supports efforts to move to renewable energy and generally supported the Paris Climate Accord. Said the accord was not tough enough on China, the largest polluter in the world.

Offshore drilling: Does not support offshore drilling.

Infrastructure: Believes a congressman's role is to help secure federal funding for local infrastructure projects.

Seth Grossman

Health care: Supports a full repeal of the Affordable Care Act. Believes in a free-market system.

Immigration: Supports a wall on the Southern border and much stricter regulations against illegal immigration. Also supports a reduction in legal immigration.

Taxes: Supported the GOP tax cuts signed into law last year.

Guns: Supports expanded concealed carry in New Jersey.

Environment: Believes in climate change, but also says people should not be allowed to build homes in vulnerable places and then be subsidized after a disaster.

Offshore drilling: Believes it should be put to a public vote.

Infrastructure: Believes the federal government should be cutting spending. Believes local infrastructure projects should be funded locally.



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Stockton poll finds wider gap between Menendez, Hugin