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TOP STORY

Debate set for leading Democrats vying to oust Van Drew

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Longport's Brigid Callahan Harrison, left, and Brigantine's Amy Kennedy are in a hard-fought primary battle to run against U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, in November.

Charles Olson / for The Press

The three leading Democrats in the primary race for the nomination in New Jersey's 2nd Congressional District will debate June 25 in an online event sponsored by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

Vineland's Will Cunningham, Longport's Brigid Harrison and Brigantine's Amy Kennedy will debate for one hour starting at 6 p.m. Candidates will communicate via Zoom and it will be livestreamed on YouTube, the center said.

"This debate will give voters in South Jersey the chance to evaluate the Democratic candidates in one of the most closely watched House races in the nation," said Hughes Center Executive Director John Froomjian, who will moderate.



Kennedy criticized for link to Super PAC

It is happening as vote-by-mail ballots have arrived for most registered party members, and people are beginning to cast their votes. Gov. Phil Murphy ordered the July 7 primary be mostly vote-by-mail to avoid risk of spreading COVID-19 in polling places.

The Democratic winner will face the winner of the Republican primary, which is expected to be U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd. Van Drew switched parties to Republican late last year in a controversial move that lit a fire under the Democrats he had left behind.

Van Drew's GOP opponent Bob Patterson, who recently changed his permanent address to Ocean City, does not have much organizational support or campaign funding and is widely considered not much of a threat to the incumbent freshman.

Cunningham and Harrison have launched regular attacks on Kennedy over her husband Patrick's finances and his donation to a super PAC that has run ads against Harrison — while largely leaving each other alone.



Democratic Primary roundup: Candidates get creative campaigning in pandemic

The pair recently accused Kennedy of not supporting ending qualified immunity for police officers — a doctrine that stops many lawsuits from proceeding against police. The accusations are inaccurate, according to a Kennedy spokesperson who said Kennedy has long supported ending qualified immunity.

The confusion came following a statement at Monday's 100 Black Women of South Jersey forum when in response to a question, Kennedy said she wasn't sure if police unions should pay for insurance costs and settlements related to misconduct.

And on Tuesday, after joining Cunningham in criticizing Kennedy's answer, a spokesperson for Harrison said the question of who pays for insurance should be determined through union negotiations with municipalities.

The seeming alliance between Harrison and Cunningham may indicate they have internal polling showing Kennedy's support is stronger than expected, said Carl Golden, a former Republican consultant who is now a senior contributing analyst at the Hughes Center.



Will primary battle weaken Democrats against Van Drew?

“I don’t know if at this point she (Kennedy) is the front-runner,” Golden said. “Primaries are notoriously difficult to poll.”

But it could also mean Harrison has decided Cunningham will more likely pull votes from Kennedy than from her.

“It’s really hard to judge who Cunningham benefits,” Golden said. “It seems he and Harrison have something of an alliance. But political alliances are like motorcycles — eventually they all crash.”

The three were chosen from a field of five still in the race, because they raised and spent enough money to have to file a first-quarter campaign finance report with the Federal Election Commission, Froomjian said.



Amy Kennedy wins backing of Atlantic County Democrats at convention

West Cape May Commissioner John Francis, a motivational speaker and author, and former FBI agent Robert Turkavage, of Brigantine, who switched from Republican to Democrat late last year, did not file FEC reports.

Links to view the debate will be available the day of the debate at stockton.edu/hughes-center.

Harrison, a Montclair University professor, and Kennedy, a mental health advocate, are considered the front runners, with Harrison racking up early endorsements from six of the eight county chairmen in the 2nd Congressional District. She also has the backing of state Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland; U.S. Sens. Cory Booker and Robert Menendez; Assemblymen Vince Mazzeo and John Armato, both D-Atlantic; and a host of labor unions including the American Federation of Teachers New Jersey Delegate Assembly. She is considered the choice of Democratic South Jersey power broker George Norcross.

Kennedy won the vote of the Atlantic County Democratic Committee at its March convention, as well as that of the Atlantic City Democratic Committee. The former teacher is backed by the New Jersey Education Association, Martin Luther King III and the national campaign finance reform group End Citizens United. A large number of progressive leaders in South Jersey who oppose control of the party by Norcross and county chairmen have also supported her, as has Atlantic City and Pleasantville political organizer Craig Callaway.

Cunningham, a graduate of Brown University with a law degree from the University of Texas at Austin, left his job with the House Oversight Committee in Washington, D.C., to run. He also challenged then-Democrat Van Drew in 2018 in the Democratic Primary. He has the endorsement of the national progressive group Democracy for America, Congressman Elijah Cummings' widow Maya Rokeymoore Cummings, Collective PAC, Atlantic County Our Revolution, Progressive Democrats of New Jersey, Youth Climate Strike Force and the African American Tobacco Leadership Council.

Hughes Center staff will determine the questions posed, but members of the public may email suggested questions to hughescenter@stockton.edu by midnight Sunday, using the word “debate” in the subject line. Questions will not be accepted or posed by the public during the forum, Froomjian said.

REPUBLICANS

Incumbent: Jeff Van Drew

Congressman Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, made national news in his freshman year in Congress, which he started as a Democrat and ended as a Republican.

Long known as a moderate in the state Assembly and Senate, many thought Van Drew would continue to be a solid Democrat who occasionally deviated from the party on issues like gun rights, after he was elected in 2018 to fill the seat of longtime Congressman Frank LoBiondo, a moderate Republican.



Van Drew
Press archives

But right from the start, Van Drew set himself apart by voting "no" for Nancy Pelosi for Speaker -- fulfilling a campaign promise but confusing those on the House floor. He was supposed to call out a name of someone for speaker, so his "no" vote was recorded as "present."

Then he was one of the few Democrats calling for bipartisan compromise on a budget to end what became the longest federal government shutdown in history. Later, he visited the southern border and came back saying there was, indeed, a crisis there. He supported both some funding for a border wall, and increased funding for housing and services to undocumented migrants. Van Drew was also one of just two Democrats to first vote against proceeding with an impeachment inquiry, and to vote against both articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump.

And on Dec. 19, 2019, he announced his party change to Republican while sitting next to Trump in the Oval Office.

Dropped out: Brian Fitzherbert

Brian T. Fitzherbert (dropped out of race Jan. 24, 2020), 30, of Egg Harbor Township, founded the Atlantic County Young Republicans and ran in 2018 in the Republican primary, but withdrew before the primary that was won by Seth Grossman.



Fitzherbert
Provided

Fitzherbert stresses his knowledge of technology and aviation as an advantage for him to help develop those industries in South Jersey. He is a Program Manager for defense contractor L3Harris, working on multimillion dollar programs for military vehicles. Previously, he developed drones, ground control stations, electronic warfare testers, simulators, and area attack weapons supporting the Warfighter at Textron Systems.

He graduated from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and completed his graduate studies at the Whiting School of Engineering at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, studying systems engineering and project management.

He has racked up endorsements from a wide variety of local officials, including former Assemblyman and Cumberland County Freeholder Sam Fiocchi and Northfield Mayor Erland Chau.

Switched districts: David Richter

David Richter, 53, the former CEO of Hill International in Philadelphia, is an engineer, lawyer and businessman. He recently moved to Avalon from Princeton, but summered much of his life in the Cape May County town.

He switched races to the 3rd Congressional District, which covers Ocean and Burlington counties, on Jan. 27.

“I understand what it takes to get things built,” said Richter. “In Congress, I plan to work hard to ensure the federal government is investing in South Jersey’s infrastructure — expanding our transportation network, keeping our environment clean and maintaining our coastline.”

Richter earned two bachelor’s degrees and a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania, as well as master’s degrees from Oxford and Harvard universities, he said.

He and his wife, Michelle, have been married for 20 years and have four daughters.



Richter
David Richter / provided

Bob Patterson

Patterson has homes in Haddonfield and Ocean City, and ran in 2018 against Congressman Donald Norcross, D-1st, in the district that covers Camden and its surroundings.

Patterson, a strong supporter of President Donald Trump, said he is running for Congress to protect conservative values and make South Jersey great again. His priorities are protecting American jobs, restoring manufacturing in South Jersey, ending unfair trade deals, and securing the nation's borders.

Patterson recently worked in the Trump administration as a senior adviser and acting associate commissioner at the Social Security Administration. Prior to that he worked as vice president for government relations at the U.S. Business & Industry Council (USBIC), an organization committed to strengthening U.S. manufacturing and opposing unfair trade deals.



PATTERSON

Bob Patterson / provided

DEMOCRATS

Ashley Bennett

Ashley Bennett, 35, a Democrat elected to the Atlantic County Board of Chosen Freeholders in 2017, faces re-election in 2020 as she runs for the right to challenge Congressman Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd.

A psychiatric emergency screener at Cape Regional Medical Center, she decided to run for freeholder after the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, and in response to a Facebook posting by then-Atlantic County Freeholder John Carman. It was about the Women's March in

January that questioned whether the women would be home in time to make dinner. Bennett ran for and won Carman's seat.

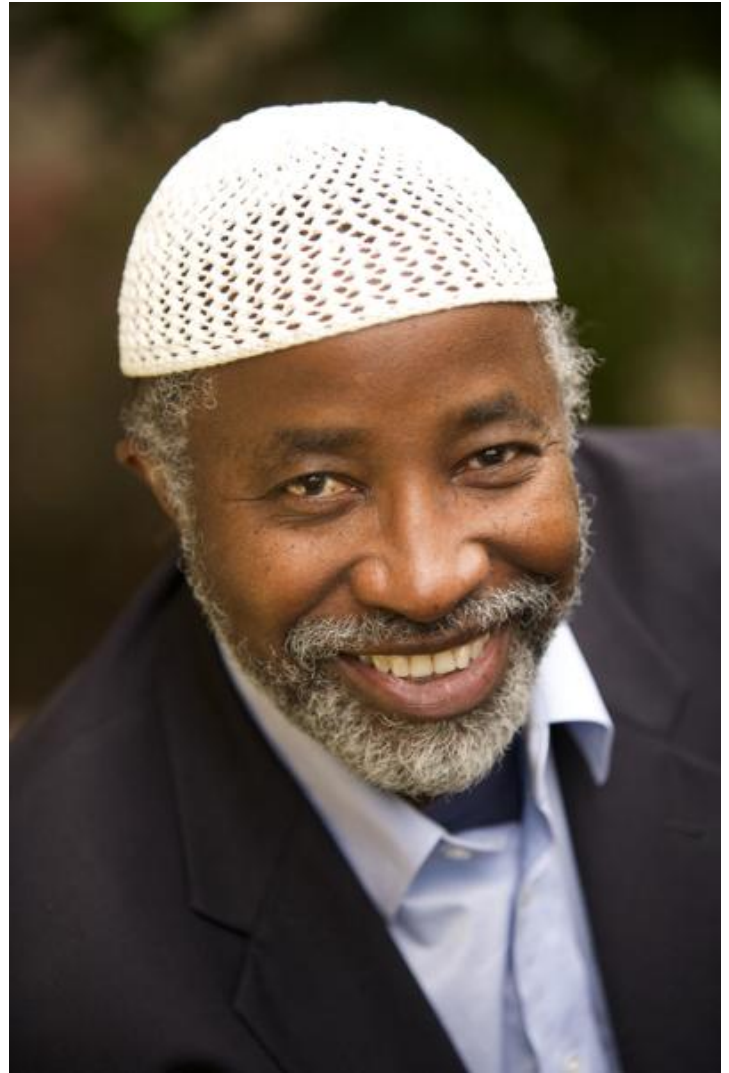


BENNETT
Provided

John Francis

West Cape May Commissioner John Francis, 73, has a colorful and unusual biography, and he wrote about it in a book published by National Geographic called, "Planet Walker: 22 years of walking, 17 years of silence." Francis spent many of his younger adult years refusing to ride in cars or other vehicles that use fossil fuels, after seeing the results of an oil spill on the Pacific coast. He also stopped speaking for 17 years, in order to learn to listen, he said. During that time, however, he earned a bachelor's, master's and doctorate, became an expert in oil spill cleanup, and worked for the Coast Guard. Now he travels the world as a motivational speaker, he said.

He learned in his silent travels about the interconnectedness of all issues, Francis said. "Really it's all about people and how we treat each other. It's going to manifest in the physical environment." So he said his focus in Congress would not just be on environmentalism, but on human and civil rights, gender equality and economic equity and human relationships "as the foundation for what happens in the environment. You have to be really interested in everything."



FRANCIS
BECKY HALE / provided

Brigid Callahan Harrison

Longport's Brigid Callahan Harrison, 54, is a professor of politics and law at Montclair State University in Essex County. She has been endorsed for by State Senate President Steve Sweeney, by six of the eight county Democratic chairs in the Second Congressional District, and by others.



Long a commenter in the media about New Jersey politics, this is Harrison's first run for office.

Brigid Callahan Harrison, Professor, Montclair State University at Murphy's Marks: The Governor's Freshman Report Card at the Atlantic City Convention. Nov. 14, 2018, (Craig Matthews / Staff Photographer)

Craig Matthews / Staff Photographer/

Amy Kennedy

Amy Kennedy, of Brigantine, 41, is a former teacher and the wife of former Rhode Island Congressman Patrick Kennedy, with whom she has five children. She announced Jan. 6 she will run in the 2020 Democratic primary.

Kennedy, now a mental health advocate, said she and her husband have supported Van Drew in the past, "but he has clearly lost his way."

"Our nation is in crisis. Our political system is in crisis. Our environment is in crisis," Kennedy wrote in a press statement. "We have serious unaddressed needs in our schools and in our mental health and addiction system. Our economy, though strong, is not meeting the needs of the underserved and middle class."



KENNEDY

Craig Matthews / Staff Photographer

Jack Surrency

Jack Surrency, of Bridgeton, is a Democratic freeholder in Cumberland County, was reported to be running for a time, but ultimately decided to run for re-election as a freeholder instead.

He was first elected to the Bridgeton City Council in 2010 as part of a slate headed by Mayor Albert Kelly, and served on the Bridgeton Board of Education from 2002-2010, according to his resume.

He attended the Tuskegee Institute from 1976-1978, majoring in chemistry with a business minor. He also holds a master's degree in Community and Economic Development from New Hampshire College in Manchester.



Freeholder candidate Jack Surrency at the Ramada Inn during Election Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2016 (Craig Matthews / Staff Photographer)

Craig Matthews / Staff Photographer

Robert Turkavage

Robert Turkavage, 64, is a former FBI agent and manager out of New York. He has recently switched parties to become a Democrat, after a lifetime in the GOP.

Turkavage last ran in the 2018 Republican primary for the 2nd District race, losing to Seth Grossman, and this time is running as a Democrat.

He changed his party affiliation because the Republicans have increased the national debt by \$3.1 billion as a result of tax cuts that benefited the wealthy, he said, and because of President Trump's attacks on the press and the intelligence community.



TURKAVAGE

Robert Turkavage / provided

“It’s going to be challenging,” Turkavage said Tuesday of breaking through in a crowded Democratic field. “I will be knocking on doors every day from January till primary day” on June 2.

Will Cunningham

Will Cunningham, 34, a native of Vineland who has worked for Sen. Cory Booker, D-NJ, and now works for the House Oversight Committee in Washington, D.C., announced Jan. 8 he was entering the Democratic primary for the 2nd Congressional District.

He ran against Van Drew in the Democratic primary in 2018, and said he has the most experience in Washington, D.C., of all the candidates in the race of either party.

Cunningham said he was homeless for a time as a teen when his mom lost her job. He said his mom is still an hourly worker in Cumberland County, making \$11.50 an hour. Yet with hard work and the help of government programs, he was able to get an Ivy League college education at Brown University. He also has a law degree from the University of Texas at Austin.

"Despite my accomplishments, I have not lost touch with how folks struggle to make ends meet," Cunningham said. "I don't have to look far."



Will Cunningham, a Vineland native and former staffer for U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, is running for the Democratic nomination for Congress in the 2nd Congressional District.

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Harrison requests federal oversight of primary, citing concerns about Callaway

Michelle Brunetti Post

Staff Writer

In my first job after college got paid to read the New York Times and summarize articles for an early online data base. First reporting job was with The Daily Record in Parsippany. I have also worked in nonprofits, and have been with The Press since 1990.