

Politics

# Hottest N.J. primary features a Kennedy vs. a pundit for right to face party-switching Trump fan

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By [Jonathan D. Salant | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

South Jersey's [2nd Congressional District](#) was already expected to feature one of the nation's hottest congressional races.

That's because angry Democrats promised an all-out fight against rookie Rep. Jeff Van Drew, who switched to the Republican Party after refusing to back Donald Trump's impeachment and then pledged his "[undying support](#)" for the president.

Political pundit Brigid Callahan Harrison, a Montclair State University political science professor, quickly lined up the backing of six county chairs and state Senate President [Stephen Sweeney](#), D-Gloucester, and entered the race.

Then Amy Kennedy, wife of former Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I., and the most recent candidate from the iconic political family, also jumped in the [July 7 Democratic primary](#).

So there's indeed a street fight in this district — a few months early.

"I don't think this primary would get as much attention if there wasn't someone named Kennedy in it," said Nathan Gonzales, editor and publisher of [Inside Elections](#), which rated Van Drew as a slight favorite for re-election.

Kennedy used campaign donations from her family to help surpass Callahan Harrison in [campaign contributions](#), \$566,253 to \$158,345, through March 31. In addition, two super political action committees have spent more than \$115,000 on her behalf. A political committee with ties to South Jersey powerbroker George Norcross is backing Callahan Harrison.

She is making her first try for public office, though her father, Jerry Savell, served on the Absecon City Council.

"I had no intention of getting involved in politics," Kennedy said. "I saw Jeff Van Drew switch parties and co-sign to everything that this administration is representing in terms of hate and rhetoric. To me, that was the time I decided I wanted to do more."

Callahan Harrison had started first, saying she had been urged to run once she wrote an [op-ed](#) criticizing [Van Drew's opposition](#) to an impeachment inquiry.

"When he voted against the impeachment inquiry, I was incensed," Callahan Harrison said. "In 2018 he was elected as a Democrat. The most important issue that year was people, myself include, wanted a check on President Trump. When he voted against the inquiry, I viewed it as a failure of leadership and he failed the litmus test of a generation."

While aiming most of their fire at Van Drew, the two leading Democrats have swapped vitriol with each other as well.

“I never had the luxury of a Kennedy last name, so I have received my support by not assuming things, by asking people’s support, and having the guts to call out Jeff Van Drew before anyone else did,” Callahan Harrison said.

Kennedy sought to tie Callahan Harrison to Norcross, a Sweeney ally who has feuded with Gov. Phil Murphy and who has been accused of profiting from lucrative tax incentives to help the city of Camden. Norcross endorsed Van Drew two years ago.

She just received the endorsement of Murphy, who also has clashed with Sweeney.

“The same New Jersey machine that sent Van Drew to Congress as a ‘Democrat’ doesn’t want Amy to win this race,” the campaign said in a recent fundraising email. “They’ll pull out every dirty trick in the book to stop us and preserve their hold on New New Jersey’s voters.”

Callahan Harrison countered with her endorsements from both of New Jersey’s U.S. senators, Robert Menendez and Cory Booker, in addition to Sweeney. She has the organizational ballot line, a major advantage in New Jersey elections, in most of the counties in the congressional district.

She also has gone on the attack, taking aim at Amy Kennedy’s campaign fundraising and spending, pointing out that Parity PAC, a political action committee that Patrick Kennedy co-chairs and he and his wife have contributed to, has supported Republican lawmakers.

In addition, Patrick Kennedy contributed \$500,000 to the Blue Organizing Project, its only donor, which in turn spent \$75,000 against Callahan Harrison, its only expenditure.

That led Callahan Harrison to file a complaint with the Federal Election Commission and Kennedy to disavow the PAC.

At the same time, Kennedy was endorsed by End Citizens United, which supports stronger campaign finance regulations and helped rookie Reps. Andy Kim and Tom Malinowski oust Republican incumbents in 2018.

And the Parity PAC supports lawmakers of both parties who support the Kennedy Forum’s goal for mental health and addiction treatment to receive the same health coverage as other illnesses. The forum was founded by Patrick, who has struggled with addiction, with Amy serving as education director.

Especially as the [coronavirus](#) requires people to stay home, “there’s increasing rise in depths of despair around the country,” Kennedy said. “It’s this tsunami that’s building in terms of mental health issues.”

The [pandemic primary](#) has forced both candidates indoors and online rather than door-to-door, the closure of the district’s casinos and beaches has elevated economic issues, and the death of George Floyd while in the custody of Minneapolis police has heightened calls for overhauling the criminal justice system.

Callahan Harrison called that “a real sea change” while Kennedy said that inequality must be at the front.”

Despite their clashes, the two see eye-to-eye on key issues. They support moving to 100% clean energy by 2050, banning oil drilling off the Jersey Shore, a \$15 a hour federal minimum wage, allowing Medicare to negotiate for drug prices, providing a public option to the Affordable Care Act, and limiting corporate, union and individual spending on campaigns.

Likewise, neither has embraced either the [Green New Deal](#), which calls for 100% clean energy by 2030, or [Medicare for All](#), which would replace private health insurance with a single-payer, government-run plan.

Both have strong union support. Kennedy is backed by the New Jersey Education Association and the Communications Workers of America. Callahan Harrison has the endorsement of the American Federation of Teachers and [Unite Here](#) Local 54, which represents [Atlantic City’s casino workers](#).

And both said the attacks on each other won’t prevent the party from unifying after the primary and are nothing compared to what they expect from the Republicans.

“We all know how important this election will be in changing the direction of the country,” Callahan Harrison said. “While we may disagree and have some personal differences, there’s a bigger calling here for our district to stand up to this administration.”

The other Democrats seeking their party’s nomination are Will Cunningham, a veteran congressional aide who lost to Van Drew in the 2018 Democratic primary; former FBI agent Robert Turkavage, who [ran as a Republican](#) for the seat two years ago; and John Francis, an environmentalist and professor.

Callahan Harrison, Kennedy and Cunningham are scheduled to meet Thursday in an [online debate](#) sponsored by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

Van Drew, rated as a [slight favorite](#) to win re-election this fall, [faces a primary of his own](#) against Bob Patterson, a former acting associate commissioner of the Social Security Administration under Trump.

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