

# How Trump-Biden loom large over must-watch 2nd District race

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Newly minted Republican Jeff Van Drew faces a Kennedy with deep ties to this sprawling South Jersey district



Clockwise from top left: President Donald Trump, former Vice President Joe Biden, Amy Kennedy and Rep. Jeff Van Drew

New Jersey may be indelibly blue these days, but its sprawling 2nd Congressional District deep in South Jersey — site of the state’s most watched House race this year — has long been as purple and mercurial as they come. But never quite as fickle as it is now.

Since the birth of the GOP in the mid-19th century, 14 Republicans and 11 Democrat have occupied this House seat — for the most part taking turns over the past 150 years. Last year, Rep. Jeff Van Drew, a lifelong Democrat, condensed that timesharing history into a stunning, single moment, when he refused to support

President Trump's impeachment in his freshman year, converted to the GOP and pledged his "undying support" to the president.

Whether it was a matter of principle, as Van Drew insists, or merely a survival tactic in a district that has a conservative bent remains a matter of debate. Nonetheless, his defection enraged the Democratic hierarchy, as well as many of the voters who had swept him into office in 2018 in an historic, anti-Trump blue wave. And it was that betrayal that incited his opponent, Amy Kennedy, to run. The schoolteacher with a legendary surname, stunned all the experts with the enormity of her landslide victory in the Democratic primary.

Both [Inside Elections](#) and the [Cook Political Report](#) consider the race a toss-up. But an independent Monmouth University [poll released Monday gives a slight edge to Kennedy](#), who entered the race as an underdog.

**WATCH MORE:** [Kennedy edges Van Drew in 2nd District poll](#)

Most experts agree you can strip away all the analytics and ignore the lure of political intrigue, of which there is plenty to be had. The outcome of this high-profile general election will likely be most influenced by the top of the ticket.

## Van Drew and Trump

Like many House races across the country, "the specter of Trump looms large over this race," says John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University. "And the congressman has gone all in with the president, for better or worse."

The Monmouth poll shows Democrat Joe Biden with a small lead over Trump in the district — 48% to 45% among all registered voters, and 50% to 45% among likely voters in a high-turnout election. (Both are within the margin of error.) Trump outpaced Hillary Clinton by five points in the district in 2016.

If Trump can match that margin this year, Froomjian believes it could be enough to carry Van Drew to victory for one simple reason: Trump loyalists are highly unlikely to stray from the GOP for an unapologetic progressive Democrat, who married into one of the country's most fabled and liberal political families. Kennedy is married to former U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, who represented Rhode Island from 1995 to 2011.

On the other hand, Van Drew, a moderate South Jersey political fixture, could steal some Democratic votes because he is well-known. “In the 2nd District, even the Democrats are kind of conservative,” Froomjian said.

Froomjian said that for Kennedy to win, she will need another blue wave (like the one that helped Van Drew in 2018) led by presidential candidate Joe Biden. And there are signs that could happen, he adds. Over the past year, Democrats have been outpacing Republicans in registering new voters, as well as luring unaffiliated voters to join the party. Democrats now hold a 20,000 advantage over Republicans in the district.

## **The candidates debate Thursday, Oct. 8**

It’s a safe bet there will be some fireworks Thursday, when the two square off in a [debate](#) sponsored by NJTV and the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University and NJTV.

Since his switch, Van Drew has gravitated toward Trump’s playbook.

[“I’m a Republican now,”](#) he told NJ Spotlight News. “The reason I left is because the Democratic Party is lurching to the left.” Kennedy is in that camp, he said, which is “appealing to the super progressive people.”

In that recent interview, Van Drew became more strident as he spoke: “... many of whom ... want to dismantle America and change it fundamentally... What is wrong is wanting to destroy the American ethic, the America we love. What is wrong is allowing or condoning violence. What is wrong is defunding police. What is wrong is open borders.”

Kennedy, in the meantime, has sent out mailers, saying “Jeff Van Drew sold his soul to stay in power.”

For his part, Van Drew sent out a mailer, saying “Amy Kennedy treats her non-profits like a personal piggy bank.”

In January, Kennedy doubled down on her progressive bona fides, speaking at an Indivisible rally in Wildwood with Martin Luther King III at her side.

“This work needs to go on,” she said, echoing the famous words of her husband’s late father, Sen. Edward Kennedy, who said at the 1980 Democratic Convention, “For all

those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures.”

“We are sick and tired of corrupt politicians and backroom deals,” Amy Kennedy continued. “I know it is not OK for our students to be doing drills, hiding under their desks because they’re afraid of guns,” she said. “It’s not OK to give big tax cuts to corporations. I know it’s not OK to have kids in cages instead of cribs.”

Kennedy has also embraced the national Democratic strategy of saving Obamacare.

## **Turnout and money**

Second after the Trump factor, is turnout, which is often determined by money in political campaigns.

Kennedy demonstrated her fundraising prowess by spending \$1.4 million in her primary. She turned heads again recently when her campaign announced she had raised more than \$2.2 million in the 3rd quarter, an incumbent-like performance.

With the luxury of an uncontested primary, Van Drew began the race with over \$1 million in the bank. He has not announced what he has raised since then. And while his long-standing list of Democratic donors is now moot, he now seeks money from the Trump faithful. Trump threw a rally for Van Drew in Wildwood in January, and then gave him a nationally televised speech at the Republican National Convention in August.

[The Monmouth poll](#) shows Kennedy holds a 50% to 44% edge in a high-turnout scenario, and 51% to 44% if turnout is low. (These leads are also within the margin of error.)

## **What many voters seem to care about**

Van Drew’s party switch is more of an issue for district voters than Amy Kennedy’s famous in-laws, according to Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute.

“Kennedy was born and raised in the district and that connection is apparently what most voters are judging her on rather than her last name,” Murray said.

Nearly half of the district voters are bothered by Van Drew being elected as a Democrat but now running for reelection as a Republican.

Two-thirds of voters (68%) said they are aware that Kennedy married into the famous political family from Massachusetts. Most voters (60%) say this connection has no impact on them while 20% see it as a positive and 17% see it as a negative.

“Trump embraced Van Drew after he voted against impeachment and switched parties,” Cook’s House editor, David Wasserman, wrote. “But now Biden is running neck and neck here and Van Drew may be paying a price.”

The district is the state’s largest geographically, encompassing all of Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem counties, and parts of Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Ocean counties.

Before Van Drew, moderate Republican Rep. Frank LoBiondo (1995-2019) represented the district, where more registered voters have been Democrat than Republican. The current split among registered voters is 33% Democrat, 29% Republican and 36% unaffiliated.

The district also has the oldest population of the state’s dozen districts — the median age is 43.3 years old — and the second-lowest median household income, \$63,145.