

SORTING OUT DISTRICT 2'S CROWDED FIELD OF CONTENDERS

HANK KALET | MAY 24, 2018

Seven candidates – four Democrats and three Republicans – are vying for a chance at the House seat opened up by LoBiondo's retirement



State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, is the Democratic frontrunner in the District 2 primary.

Voters in New Jersey's southernmost congressional district have a crowded primary field to choose from on June 5. Four Democrats and three Republicans are vying to replace longtime Congressman Frank LoBiondo, a moderate Republican who is retiring after 24 years in the House.

The race is rated as tilting Democratic by election-monitoring groups. State Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D-Cape May) is the frontrunner in both the primary and, as of now, the general election. He has secured the endorsement of all eight

Democratic county organizations, as well as the endorsement of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. He's raised nearly a half-million dollars, which is three times what the other three Democrats have raised all told, and is expected to have more than \$400,000 left over for the general election should he win June 5.

Political activist Taznie Youngblood, a retired teacher; William Cunningham, a former aid to Cory Booker; and activist Nate Kleinman are challenging Van Drew for the Democratic nomination. They have been critical of Van Drew's conservative record on guns and his background as a longtime elected official and political insider.

The Republican Congressional Committee has not endorsed a candidate, but Hirsh Singh, an engineer, has the backing of four of the district's eight county organizations and a significantly larger campaign war chest than the other Republicans in the primary. The RCC created a stir **last month**, when Ohio Congressman Steve Stivers, RCC chairman, called the second district "a recruiting hole," meaning the committee had not found a strong enough candidate to win the seat.

The NRCC (National Republican Congressional Committee) later backed away **from the criticism**, and NRCC spokesman Chris Martin also complimented Singh, but said his comments were not an endorsement.

"Hirsh Singh is running a strong grassroots campaign that's focused on solving real problems for the 2nd District," Martin said. "His compelling personal story and lifelong commitment to South Jersey would make him an excellent member of Congress."

Samuel Fiocchi, Seth Grossman, and Robert Turkavage are vying with Singh for the GOP nomination.

Scouting out the 2nd

The Second District encompasses all of Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem counties, and parts of Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Ocean counties. The district, physically, is the

largest in the state but also one of the least dense, with more than 80 percent of its land used for agriculture.

The 2nd is slightly whiter than the rest of the state: 75.4 percent of residents are white, compared with 72.4 percent of New Jersey as a whole; 12.2 percent of district residents are black (15 percent statewide), and 4 percent are Asian (9.8 percent for the state). Hispanics make up 16.4 percent of district residents (20 percent for the state), and a hair more than one in 10 – 10.5 percent – are foreign born compared to 20.8 percent for the state.

Family income is significantly lower in the district than across the state, though fewer families face poverty over the course of the year, according to census figures. Median household income is \$60,756 – 82 percent of the state median of \$73,702.

Of the 490,421 registered voters in the district, 148,532 are registered as Democrats and 132,479 as Republicans.

Who's in the money?

Van Drew has several significant advantages going into the June 5 primary, and a likely general election matchup, according to analysts with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University. He has money and institutional support, name recognition, and a record that matches the district's voting history.

Van Drew had raised \$488,845 as of March 31, the last federal reporting date, 79 percent of which came from individual donors. The rest, \$103,400, comes from union and business political committees, as well as from other candidates in New Jersey and around the country. He had spent just \$32,817.

Youngblood, in contrast, has raised \$88,308, including a \$23,000 loan she made to her campaign,. She has spent \$74,207, nearly all going to staff salaries, consulting, and technical services.

Cunningham has raised \$52,201 and has spent \$11,295. Kleinman has no listed contributions.

Profile: Van Drew

Van Drew was added to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's Red to Blue campaign, which the party says "arms top-tier candidates with organizational and fundraising support" in an effort to turn Republican districts into Democratic ones.

The DCCC says Van Drew "has long been at the top of Democrats' recruitment list" as a "lifelong advocate for South Jersey" who has "delivered real results for veterans, seniors, consumers and children."

This institutional support and the fact that he's run for state Senate and repeatedly won in a region that has leaned Republican, often by wide margins, makes him a favorite not just in June but in November, said Michael W. Klein, interim executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

"We think that it could flip because of the kind of Democrat that Van Drew is," Klein said. On social issues like guns and gay marriage, he has been one of the more conservative Democrats in the Legislature, and he has moderate ratings from most business groups.

Progressive groups, he added, have expressed some disappointment that the national party has weighed in and that a candidate like Youngblood, who is more in the "Bernie Sanders mold," is not receiving party backing.

Cunningham told **Politico** for instance, that the DCCC needs to be more concerned with its grass roots. They "need to take a look at themselves in the mirror and make sure (candidates are) reflective of who we're sending to D.C."

Van Drew, on his website, touts his moderation as a virtue.

“I want to be a Congressman for every resident of South Jersey, no matter what party,” he says. “We need to resolve our petty differences and work together. Moderation for the good of our nation and our children is a virtue. It seems obvious to most of us, but unfortunately, extreme elements on both ends of the political spectrum are preventing that in Washington. I have never known any other way to get anything done. We can do better, and we must do better.”

Progressive problems

Van Drew’s positions on gun control and gun rights have riled many Democrats. Youngblood told the [Ocean City Sentinel](#) that Van Drew’s record “speaks for itself.”

“You have a man who’s taken money from the NRA, you’ve had a man who was one of two Democratic senators who voted against marriage equality in the state Legislature,” she said.

Van Drew received \$500 from the National Shooting Sports Foundation in Newton in 2007, but has not received anything since, according to state Election Law Enforcement Commission data.

Youngblood, who lives in Gloucester County, told the Ocean City Sentinel that she is “about equality ... about fairness and ... about equity,” which makes her an unabashed progressive.

“The progressives said ‘we like her. Your platform and our platform are the same.’” she said. “They claimed me. If that’s what being a progressive is, then I’m claiming that title.”

Kleinman, a farmer turned candidate, released a video in May criticizing Van Drew’s votes against same-sex marriage, a minimum-wage hike, and for capital punishment. And he calls on Van Drew to denounce President Donald Trump, whom Kleinman calls an “ignorant, bigoted, un-American excuse for a president.”

Trump remains unpopular in the state, but he did win the second district by 5 percentage points over Hillary Clinton. LoBiondo won by 22 points in 2016 and by 24 points in 2014.

The Republican roundup

Three of the Republicans on the ballot promised to support Trump in Congress; the fourth, Robert Turkavage, said the goal should be “consensus,” and that he would work for smaller government.

“For over 23 years, Congressman LoBiondo has served all of the residents of southern New Jersey with honor and distinction,” he said, according to The Press of Atlantic City. “LoBiondo was a true believer in the notion that the private sector, not the government, creates jobs and fosters economic growth.”

Turkavage, who was endorsed by the Cumberland Republican organization, added that he would use “three benchmarks” in making decisions.

“Is it good for my constituents? Is it good for my country? And most importantly, is it good for our children?” Turkavage said.

Turkavage has been critical of Singh, the frontrunner and largest fundraiser, because of Singh’s calls to fire special counsel Robert Mueller. Singh has raised \$109,347 and Grossman \$10,733. Neither Turkavage nor Fiocchi had reported contributions by the March 31 deadline.

Singh, an engineer who ran in the Republican primary for governor last year, says on his website that he supports “the essence of President Trump’s Agenda.” He told [InsiderNJ](#) that the FBI’s priorities “are all wrong” and that Mueller’s team “is arguably treasonous being comprised of 13 Clinton donors scheming to find any little thing they can use to topple the President.”

Mueller is investigating possible connections between the Trump campaign and Russia, an effort that has come under fire from pro-Trump Republicans in Washington.

Turkavage told InsiderNJ (<https://www.insidernj.com/cd2-pro-trump-singh-versus-retired-fbi-agent-turkavage-presents-larger-dimensions-republican-party-fracture/>) that Singh was being reckless.

“My concern politically if Mueller were fired is it would ignite a firestorm such as we have not seen,” he said. “Republicans would lose control of the Senate and House. It would make the president less effective and could result in his impeachment. You have to be very careful with the rhetoric.”

Profile: Singh

Singh, in announcing his candidacy, according to [The Press of Atlantic City](#), described himself as “a conservative champion” who will “defend the president’s agenda, fight to bring our fair share of tax dollars back to South Jersey, and stand up to Nancy Pelosi and the radical left.”

“The president’s agenda of slashing regulations, cutting taxes and returning decision-making to state and local governments is working to grow the economy and must be supported,” he said.

Singh has the endorsement of the Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, and Ocean county Republican organizations. He also has the largest campaign war chest, though two loans totaling \$45,000 have come under fire from former Assemblyman Samuel Fiocchi. Fiocchi says Singh does not have the assets to secure the loans he reported and that he potentially skirted campaign finance laws by not reporting on who cosigned them.

“Singh needs to tell voters who cosigned the loans and explain if he did an end-run around campaign finance law,” he told the New Jersey Globe, the political website run by former Christie administration aide David Wildstein.

Fiocchi considered

Fiocchi, who won the Cape May County Republican endorsement, served one term in the Assembly, defeating incumbent Democrat Nelson Albano in 2013 by 928 votes after an ethics investigation was opened into Albano in the final months of the campaign. Albano was fined for ethics violations after the election but before leaving office. Bruce Land defeated Fiocchi two years later by 2,324 votes.

Fiocchi, an attorney and real estate agent, said when he [announced](#) that voters across the district had been contacting about running.

“This district needs a Republican who is unafraid to stand with President Trump because, like it or not, the president’s policies are working,” he said. “We can’t afford to send a Democrat to Washington who will simply stand with Nancy Pelosi and say ‘no’ to everything.”

Grossman, who is executive director of the conservative [Liberty and Prosperity organization](#) also cites his support of Trump, saying he would “forcefully defend and protect President Trump and his agenda every way I can.” In particular, he is calling for a reduction in legal immigration and enforcement of current immigration laws and allowing school employees to carry firearms as a way to maintain the safety of students.

Two candidates – Brian Fitzherbert, who won the endorsement of the Gloucester organization, and James Toto, who was endorsed by Salem – left the race.

