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Hugin looks to stymie 'Blue Wave,' pull major upset in U.S. Senate race

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Dale Gerhard / Staff Photographer

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — U.S. Senate candidate Bob Hugin estimates he has been in South Jersey more than two dozen times during his campaign and figures he will be back here at least two dozen more times.

"I'd say that is probably more times than Bob Menendez has been here in many years," Hugin said. "I think he thinks he needs a visa to come down here."

Hugin, a former U.S. Marine who is the Republican running against Menendez in this year's general election, said while speaking with The Press of Atlantic City at the Smithville Inn on Wednesday he feels South Jersey has been forgotten by both the federal and state government, which is a big reason he is dedicating many campaign hours in the region.

"You have (U.S. Rep.) Frank LoBiondo who has been a tireless advocate for South Jersey, and he has done a great job, but he is one guy," Hugin said. "There are real economic challenges in many spots down here that need to be better served by Washington D.C. and Trenton."

Democrats scoffed at the idea Menendez has ignored South Jersey and pointed to recent visits to the Stockton University campus in Atlantic City and initiatives helping secure a SAFER grant in Atlantic City.

"It's desperate and silly," Atlantic County Democratic Chairman Mike Suleiman said Wednesday. "(Hugin) should be talking more about what he stands for than just throwing stones."

Hugin, a former pharmaceutical executive who has loaned his campaign \$15 million of his own money, is looking to upend the Democrats' hopes for a "Blue Wave" this November.

Running as a Republican in a state that has been in Democratic control for three decades, a win for Hugin would almost certainly guarantee Republicans keep a majority in the U.S. Senate.

But beating Menendez, the Democratic incumbent, will be a tall order for the Republican first-time candidate, even as Menendez tries to shake off the baggage that came with a years-long corruption investigation and trial that ultimately ended in a hung jury.

"It would be an upset of seismic proportions if a Republican were to win a Senate seat here," said Mike Klein, the executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University. "Even with the trial, Menendez hasn't been identified as one of the Democratic incumbents in danger of losing, that's been reserved for Democrats in red states where (President) Donald Trump won in 2016."

Still, New Jersey Republicans see hope in this race, particularly after Menendez's primary opponent, Lisa McCormick, won about 38 percent of the vote despite raising little money and having little name recognition.

To bolster Republicans' hopes, the most recent poll conducted for the race, by Farleigh Dickenson University in late May, found Hugin was only four percentage points behind Menendez, with the corruption trial playing a large role in the race.

About 46 percent of the electorate, however, still said they were undecided.

"Senator Menendez's recent federal trial and bipartisan admonishment by his Senate colleagues are clearly taking their toll," Krista Jenkins, director of the poll and professor of political science at FDU, said in a statement when the poll was released. "It's not uncommon for incumbents to cruise to re-election, but these numbers suggest he's going to have to woo voters like he hasn't had to in a long time."

Last fall, Menendez stood trial on accusations he accepted more than \$600,000 in political contributions, a luxurious hotel suite at the Park Hyatt in Paris, and free rides on a private jet from a wealthy ophthalmologist, Dr. Salomon Melgen, in exchange for political favors.

The trial ended with a hung jury, and prosecutors declined to re-file the charges. However, the Senate Ethics Committee issued a letter to Menendez saying he "violated Senate rules, federal law, and applicable standards of conduct." The panel, which consists of three Republicans and three Democrats, also ordered Menendez to repay all of the impermissible gifts he received.

The residual effects from the trial have made local Republicans feel hopeful Menendez is vulnerable.

"Of course, it's no surprise Senator Menendez is vulnerable when his own Democrat colleagues on the Senate Ethics Committee said he 'broke Senate rules, federal law, and applicable standards of conduct,'" state Sen. Chris Brown, R-Atlantic, said Wednesday. "For crying out loud, Democrats, like everyone else, are tired of greedy, out-of-touch politicians who use their public

office for personal gain, which is why I'm confident New Jersey families — Democrats, Republicans and Independents — will chose a self-made marine over a bought-and-paid-for politician come November."

But Hugin, who has run several attack ads against Menendez, has also taken aim at Trenton.

"New Jersey is positioning itself for a very bad future based on the policies it is putting forward today," Hugin said. "The biggest problem with New Jersey is the unaffordability for young people to live here, for seniors to live here ... and even people with good jobs struggle to live here." Klein said the campaign against Democrats in the state government could be effective for Hugin, saying Republican Christine Whitman used the same strategy in 1990 when she nearly beat incumbent Democrat Bill Bradley.

In 1990, the state government implemented over \$2 billion in tax increases. This year, the state government passed tax increases for corporations, ride-service apps and wealthy individuals, among other increases.

"It's definitely an interesting model to talk about the state government as well," Klein said. "It almost worked for (Whitman) in 1990, and it could help Hugin in this race."

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