

Will primary battle weaken Democrats against Van Drew?

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South Jersey Democrats are highly motivated to beat freshman U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, this November in his reelection bid after switching parties.

They also appear poised for a bruising primary battle that could drain them of finances and good will.

“Obviously what we don’t want is a circular firing squad,” said Atlantic County Democratic Chairman Mike Suleiman. “At the end of the day, whoever wins the June primary, we will all have to support 100%.”

With the two leading Democratic candidates attacking each other — each have accused the other of being beholden to political bosses — it may be difficult to mend fences at the end of the day.

On Sunday, Brigantine’s Amy Kennedy, 41, won the support of Atlantic County Democrats at their convention, representing 40% of the district’s primary voters, while Longport’s Brigid Harrison, 54, has lined up the support of six smaller counties, including Cape May and Cumberland. Ocean County has yet to hold its convention.

In a statement Monday, Harrison’s senior adviser Matt Frankel credited Atlantic County political powerbroker Craig Callaway for Kennedy’s convention win.

“We anticipated that the strong winds of the Callaway political machine — bought and paid for by Amy Kennedy — would fill her sails,” Frankel said Monday.

Harrison is backed by high-profile politicians including U.S. Sens. Cory Booker and Robert Menendez, state Senate President Steve Sweeney and Assemblymen Vince Mazzeo and John Armato, both D-Atlantic, and by many labor unions.

In addition to Atlantic County Democrats, Kennedy is backed by the Atlantic City Democratic Committee, which has strong ties to Callaway — his sister Gwen Callaway Lewis is the municipal chair — as well as by Atlantic County Sheriff Eric Scheffler and the New Jersey State Council of the Communication Workers of America.

Kennedy’s campaign has said Democratic Camden County powerbroker George Norcross is behind Harrison and responsible for the backing she has gotten from party leaders, as well as many of Harrison’s union endorsements and high-powered political endorsements.

“We get that Brigid is angry her plan to rig the Atlantic County convention failed, making Amy the clear frontrunner,” Kennedy campaign manager Josh Roesch said in response to Harrison. “But throwing mud at the African American community because she couldn’t win their votes is pathetic, divisive and no better than the politics of the Trump Administration.”

Van Drew doesn’t have to fight a primary battle, said John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

“He had \$1.1 million at the end of 2019,” Froomjian said. “The president has urged his supporters to send him donations. He’s out raising money now, and Kennedy and Harrison are out spending money.”

There is still one other Republican in the race, Bob Patterson of Ocean City and Haddonfield, but he doesn’t have deep ties in the district and isn’t well funded. Van Drew’s best funded GOP opponent David Richter moved his campaign to the 3rd District at the urging of President Donald Trump. (Richter is in the middle of his own primary battle to challenge Andy Kim, D-3rd, in November.)

Harrison announced her candidacy in December 2019, and according to the Federal Election Commission she reported raising \$45,594.81 as of Dec. 31 last year. Kennedy announced in January and did not report raising anything in 2019, FEC records show.

“Certainly the fact they have a primary battle doesn’t hurt me,” Van Drew said on Monday. He said whoever wins, his approach will be the same.

“To a great degree I will have the same campaign. I will speak about the strength of America, how we have to maintain our economy, our borders,” Van Drew said. “How I’m not supportive of sanctuary states and cities, and other issues too like a strong military.”

Froonjian said the party fracture nationally between presidential candidates Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders may also affect Democratic turnout and enthusiasm.

“Right now it looks like Biden will be the nominee,” Froonjian said. “What happens if Sanders people sit out (the election) because they are mad? It could affect all the races.”

In the days leading up to the Atlantic County convention, Kennedy also accused Harrison of encouraging then-Gov. Chris Christie to run for president against President Obama in a 2011 op-ed for The Bergen Record; and Harrison said Kennedy was trying to deflect attention from a New Jersey Globe story. The story said another candidate, Vineland’s Will Cunningham, was “pushing” a 2018 Politico story about questionable finances at the Kennedy Forum, which employs both Kennedy and her husband, Patrick.

But Cunningham denied ever trying to push the story. He said someone from the Globe called him late at night, asking him if he was familiar with the Politico story. Cunningham said he only answered questions the reporter asked him, saying voters deserved to know more about the forum’s financing.

Despite it all, Froonjian said the desire to defeat Van Drew is strong.

“A lot of people really want to beat him after his (party) switch. I think unless it gets really nasty they will probably be able to come back together,” Froonjian said.

There is still a major factor yet to be determined: What happens with COVID-19.

“People’s attention can only be spread around so much,” Froonjian said. “Wherever I go, it’s all anybody is talking about is coronavirus. It crowds out everything else and makes it harder to get political messages out,” he said.

“It’s part of this whole unpredictability in politics,” Froonjian said. “Now we have a crisis overlaid on it.”