

# Cordial debate between Van Drew, Kennedy turned on racism, defund the police

IAN T. SHEARN, CONTRIBUTING WRITER | OCTOBER 8, 2020 | [NJ DECIDES 2020](#), [POLITICS](#)

Unlike the presidential debate, Thursday's contest in this closely-watched South Jersey race hewed close to the rules



Oct. 8, 2020: Republican Rep. Jeff Van Drew debated Democratic challenger Amy Kennedy at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

If you were looking for a fistfight in the 2nd Congressional District debate between U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, the Republican incumbent, and Amy Kennedy, the Democratic upstart, you were likely disappointed.

Unlike recent debates with the nation's presidential and vice-presidential candidates, the two candidates kept the dialogue courteous and issue-oriented in the event co-sponsored by NJTV and the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy; they even respected ground rules and time limits. They also found themselves agreeing on a variety of issues: maintaining and improving Obamacare, universal background checks for gun owners, the decriminalization of marijuana, continuing flood insurance — even climate change.

But the discourse did become contentious when the topics turned to their views on voting by mail — Van Drew was adamantly against, and Kennedy fully supportive — and systemic racism in America and police funding.

There was one combative moment when the candidates discussed the national movement to defund police, a subject Van Drew in his campaign has emphasized that Kennedy supports.

“Democrats think we should defund the police,” Van Drew said on the debate stage. “I stand tall with my police.”

“I have been cut and pasted into the Republican talking points,” Kennedy said, while denying she supports defunding. She made a comment to the NAACP, saying that police funding is a subject that “merits conversation.”

“You took that and spun it,” she said to Van Drew. “You’ve used that in every mailing.”

## **Far apart on issue of systemic racism**

The two also were far apart on whether they believed there was systemic racism in America. Van Drew said racism exists only in “small pockets,” suggesting it is the exception and not the rule. Kennedy said racism is ubiquitous in our policies and institutions — criminal justice, education, housing and employment.

Last year, Van Drew, a lifelong Democrat, turned New Jersey politics on its head when as a freshman in Congress he refused to support President Trump’s impeachment. Van Drew then 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 swing district with 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 Kennedy, to run.

Van Drew was asked about a recent Monmouth University poll that reported half of the district voters are bothered by Van Drew’s defection.

“I don’t buy it,” Van Drew said. “our internal polling doesn’t say that at all.”

## What the polls say

Both [Inside Elections](#) and the [Cook Political Report](#) consider the race a toss-up. But an independent [Monmouth poll](#) released Monday gives a slight edge to Kennedy, who entered the race as an underdog. It shows Kennedy holds a 50% to 44% edge in a high-turnout scenario, and 51% to 44% if turnout is low. (These leads are within the margin of error.)

The poll also 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 also within the margin of error.) Trump outpaced Hillary Clinton by five points in the district in 2016.

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 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.

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.

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.

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