

Look for Primaries to Be No Holds Barred in NJ's 2nd and 3rd Districts

IAN T. SHEARN | JUNE 25, 2020 | [PRIMARY 2020](#), [POLITICS](#)

It's already gotten ugly between Democratic hopefuls in the 2nd Congressional District; it's no better between GOP contenders in the 3rd



Top row, L to R: Democratic challengers in the 2nd District, Brigid Callahan Harrison and Amy Kennedy; bottom row, L to R: Incumbents, Republican Jeff Van Drew of the 2nd District and Democrat Andy Kim of the 3rd District

A lot has happened since rookie Congressmen Jeff Van Drew and Andy Kim rode a Democratic blue wave into office two years ago. The alliance ended in their freshman year, when Van Drew switched parties and got behind President Trump. The move also disrupted the vulnerable tectonics of South Jersey politics.

The two men never had much in common, ideologically or otherwise, but they now share this: Both are expected to win their party's nomination for reelection, and each has the luxury of watching prospective opponents spend large sums of money to bludgeon one another in closely contested primary campaigns closing in on a July 7 election.

While it is unusual in New Jersey to find a competitive congressional primary race — or general election, for that matter — political winds shift quickly these days. In 2018,

Democratic newcomers flipped four GOP House seats in New Jersey, the worst Republican defeat in a congressional election in the state party's history. They are among five Democratic incumbents who face tough reelections in November.

It's not surprising that two of those districts — Van Drew's 2nd and Kim's 3rd — are up for grabs in the July 7 primary. President Barack Obama won both districts in 2008 and 2012; Trump won them in 2016. The [2nd District](#) seat was held for 24 years by Republican Frank LoBiondo, who retired in 2018.

Gaining the most attention is Van Drew's sprawling 2nd District, which includes all of Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Salem counties, as well as parts of Gloucester, Ocean, Camden and Burlington. Always conservative-leaning, Van Drew became a national story last year when he defied his party by voting against President Donald Trump's articles of impeachment, and then defecting to the Republican Party shortly after.

Democratic challengers in the 2nd

Two Democrats have emerged as viable challengers to fill the void he created. First was Brigid Callahan Harrison, a Longport resident and political science professor at Montclair State University, and then Amy Kennedy, a former teacher, a current mental health advocate, and most notably, the wife of former U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, the son of Ted Kennedy.

While there are no distinct policy differences between the two, Kennedy has framed her campaign as the more progressive of the two.

“The 2nd District is emblematic of what's going on in the Democratic Party,” said Matthew Hale, a political science professor at Seton Hall University. “You have a more centrist, labor-backed candidate in Brigid Harrison, a much more typical New Jersey Democrat, going up against Kennedy who is, well, a Kennedy — wealthy and progressive on several issues.”

Kennedy has a decisive edge in fundraising, having accrued more than \$560,000 while loaning herself an additional \$250,000, [according to Federal Election Commission](#) filings. Harrison, by comparison, has raised only about \$158,000 while loaning herself \$100,000.

Just to the north is the 3rd Congressional District, which covers Burlington and Ocean counties, where newcomer Andy Kim narrowly beat Tom McArthur, a rising GOP star who had served two terms, two years ago.

No safe haven for Democrats in 3rd

The long-safe GOP district has become mercurial since the retirement of longtime Republican congressman Jim Saxton in 2009. The seat has been filled by Democrat John Adler, Republican Jon Runyan, Republican Tom MacArthur and now Democrat Kim. Trump won the district by six points in 2016, but Kim defeated MacArthur in 2018 by a razor-thin margin to become only the second Democrat in over a century to serve the district.

Two GOP candidates have emerged in what is becoming an increasingly rancorous race — a labor executive and former Burlington County Freeholder Kate Gibbs, and David Richter, the wealthy former CEO of Hill International, who now owns an investment firm. He too is a Trump loyalist, who was intending to run in the 2nd District until Van Drew jumped parties, which prompted him to switch districts.

“It has become an extremely bitter race,” says Carl Golden, a veteran political insider and an analyst for the Hughes Center. “Each side went negative early and often.”

At first, it appeared Harrison had the Democratic nomination locked up in the 2nd District. Appalled by Van Drew’s impeachment vote, she decided to challenge him in the Democratic primary. She won the blessing of Senate President Steve Sweeney, and with it, the backing of powerful South Jersey political boss George Norcross. She then promptly nailed down the endorsements of six of the eight county chairmen in the district.

“The Norcross machine attempted to clear the field early, rapidly and with an overwhelming show of organization support for Harrison,” Golden said. “They whiffed on that one.”

According to Harrison, when she was lining up her political ducks in early December, she called her high school guidance counselor, Jerry Savell — the former councilman in Absecon and Pleasantville, who happens to be Amy Kennedy’s father. More importantly, he is also the father-in-law of Patrick Kennedy, the former seven-term congressman from Rhode Island who served as chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Harrison was looking for an introduction to

Patrick, to seek his support, and with it, his fundraising prowess. In late December, the two met privately at the Linwood Country Club. It went better than Harrison could have hoped for, she said.

Quarreling with a Kennedy

“I walked out there ebullient; I called the (Atlantic County) chairman, and said, ‘Patrick Kennedy’s on board,’” Harrison told NJ Spotlight. Not only did he promise his support, but also he said “he will help me with money in D.C. and serve on my finance committee ... At no point did he say, my wife is actually thinking about running,” Harrison said.

Patrick Kennedy has publicly denied he ever offered his support to Harrison. Harrison said she confronted him about that rebuff, and he repeated his denial to her. Harrison is standing by her account.

Eight days later, she was on her way to the Army-Navy football game in Philadelphia when her phone started blowing up. National reporters were calling her with the news — “Van Drew was switching parties ... are you running?” Suddenly her path for the Democratic nomination had been cleared — but not for long.

It was when Van Drew became a Republican that Amy Kennedy decided to run, she said in an interview with NJ Spotlight. Indeed, two days later, she announced she was forming an exploratory committee for her candidacy in the suddenly wide open Democratic primary. She would formally announce on Jan. 5.

And while Harrison had a formidable head start on Kennedy, there was one critical endorsement still up for grabs — Atlantic County, which holds 40% of the district’s total voters. That was Kennedy’s only path to victory.

And if you want Atlantic County, you’d better get Atlantic City which has about half of the county’s voters. And if you want Atlantic City, you’d better get the blessing of Craig Callaway, the former city council president and a convicted felon. He is now a campaign strategist who has made himself a political power to be reckoned with by virtue of his ability to generate strong mail-in ballot results.

In the mail ...

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, mail-in ballots will dominate voting on July 7.

In May, Gov. Phil Murphy ordered that the primary be conducted primarily by mail, with most registered Democrats and Republicans automatically getting a ballot and everyone else registered receiving an application for a mail-in ballot.

Just two weeks after she announced her candidacy, Kennedy won the endorsement of Callaway and the Atlantic City Democrats, whose chair is Callaway's sister, Gwendolyn Callaway-Lewis. That all but insured Kennedy the Atlantic County endorsement, which she won in March. It was now a horse race in the 2nd.

In February, the campaign started heating up. Kennedy rolled out a policy statement to fight political corruption, which garnered the support of End Citizens United, an electoral reform group. On the same day, U.S. Sen Robert Menendez endorsed Harrison.

"It's ironic that on the day Amy Kennedy lays out her aggressive policy to end corruption in New Jersey's elections, George Norcross flexes his political muscle to bring in an endorsement for Brigid Harrison," wrote Kennedy campaign manager Josh Roesch. "Brigid's name may be on the ballot, but we all know who's pulling the strings."

In March, things started turning nasty. Kennedy's campaign released an online, heavily photoshopped ad, which depicted South Jersey political boss George Norcross as a "Game of Thrones" villain who was "twisting arms and rigging the primary with back room deals for Brigid." It would become a constant refrain of the Kennedy campaign — that Harrison had sold out and become part of a corrupt political machine.

"That ad illustrates what we've seen for a long time in South Jersey," Kennedy said, emphasizing how Harrison was the "pre-ordained candidate" this year after the "hand-picked" candidate backfired two years ago. Kennedy said she never sought Norcross's support. She said she did not know if her husband did.

But Kennedy's alignment with Callaway left her vulnerable to a similar criticism.

"We've been consistently told that they've paid about \$100,000 to the Callaways," Harrison said — which if true, may be questionable, but is perfectly legal.

Kennedy told NJ Spotlight she never met with Craig Callaway, and refused to say whether or not she had retained his services. "I'm not going to talk about the strategy for our campaign, but I will say I'm thankful for the support I got in Atlantic County."

The two candidates will square off Thursday in a debate presented by the William J. Hughes [Center for Public Policy](#) at Stockton University.

Joining them in the debate will be candidate Will Cunningham, a former staffer for Sen. Cory Booker, who won the endorsement of Democracy for America, a progressive political action committee.

The old switcheroo?

Things were looking rosy for Kate Gibbs and David Richter last fall.

Gibbs, the former Burlington County freeholder, was considered the favorite to win the GOP nomination to run against Andy Kim, the rookie congressman who won a razor-thin election in 2016. Richter, a wealthy businessman with a stacked resume, was viewed as the Republican favorite to take on Jeff Van Drew, the Democrat who also won in the 2016 blue wave. By all accounts, Richter and Gibbs would be running mates in neighboring districts.

That all changed on December when Van Drew switched parties. In the blink of an eye, Richter lost his party's support, which he had so carefully cultivated for two years. His solution was simple: He withdrew from the race and in January announced he would run instead in the neighboring [3rd District](#).



Vying to become the GOP congressional nominee in the 3rd District are Kate Gibbs and David Richter.

“What was I supposed to do?” he said. “Every district is important this year.” In the 2nd, he saw what he perceived as a weak field. And he liked his chances.

He remains an ardent Trump booster, even though the president had snubbed him in favor of Van Drew.

Gibbs reacted to Richter’s move by immediately labeling Richter a carpetbagger who had registered to vote in four different congressional districts over the previous 18 months. Burlington County Republican chair Sean Earlen said he was “district shopping.”

Richter’s late entry into the race put him at a disadvantage. Gibbs had already locked up support in Burlington County, which provided nearly 60% of the district’s votes in 2018. She nailed down some key endorsements from GOP leaders such as New Jersey Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick and state Sen. Tom Kean Jr.

On Feb. 15, it appeared she had locked up the race when she won the endorsement of the Ocean County Republican Committee. Normally in New Jersey, the screening committee’s decision foretells the county organization’s support. The vote was unanimous, despite a story in the Asbury Park Press two days earlier, which revealed Gibbs had several run-ins with the law.

Wrong side of the law

At the age of 20 on Nov. 21, 2006, Gibbs was charged with shoplifting after police said she stole various articles of clothing valued at about \$80 from a Kohl’s department store in Cherry Hill. Gibbs placed the clothes in a shopping bag and left the store without paying, according to a police report of the incident. In 2008, when Gibbs was 22, she was charged in Long Beach Township with possessing less than 50 grams of marijuana and 5 grams of hashish with intent to use drug paraphernalia. Under the first-offender law, the case was conditionally discharged and ultimately dismissed. In 2014, when Gibbs was 28, she was charged in Sea Bright for prohibited possession of alcohol on the beach. She pleaded guilty and paid a \$283 fine.

“I made some bad choices as a college kid,” Gibb said. “People make mistakes. But your mistakes don’t define you ... Learning and growing from them, and what you do afterward is what’s important ... It’s helped me become a more empathetic person.”

A week later, Richter's campaign posted a video on YouTube, which became known as the [Snooki Ad](#).

It begins with the soothing tones of a narrator: "Our Jersey Shore Values: Family, Community, Hard Work," while displaying images of a family walking on a beach, an aerial view of Ocean County's northern barrier island and a pizza maker spinning dough. "Kate Gibbs?" the narrator then asks, "She's more that Jersey Shore, showing a headshot of Gibbs with quick-cut video clips from the reality TV show, "Jersey Shore," and mostly Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi. The narration connects the dots: "Gibbs parties hard, and she's got the criminal record to prove it."

What happened in those three weeks between the screening committee's vote and the county GOP convention has become a matter of speculation by political insiders. "Had Gibbs prevailed, it would have been rocket fuel for her campaign, and probably enough to put her over the top," Golden said. But on March 6, Richter won a close vote by the Ocean County GOP committee — 68 to 60.

Gibbs said she came out on the losing side of a power struggle between the current and former County GOP chairmen. At that moment, the race became a tossup. Gibbs said had she won the endorsement, the race would have been over.

In the money

Between the two candidates, Richter is far ahead in fundraising, last reported \$772,275 raised to date — \$600,000 of which came in loans from himself. Richter told NJ Spotlight last week he is now close to the \$1 million mark.

Gibbs, raised \$76,440 during the last quarter, bringing her fundraising haul up to \$219,343 since she kicked off her bid in November. Her campaign spent \$102,572 during the first three months of this year, leaving it \$112,271 in available cash. Her campaign also reported bringing in \$49,940 from individuals, compared with Richter's \$19,295. Gibbs also received \$21,500 from political action committees, notably the Republican Main Street Partnership PAC, which has traditionally supported centrist Republicans. She is also getting some backdoor help from her employer, the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 825.

When it comes to policy, it's hard to find any distinct differences between the two candidates. Reporting on a public debate between the candidates earlier this month, one reporter wrote they "spent 25 minutes agreeing on every issue." Their

most glaring disagreement may be who is the [more loyal supporter](#) of President Trump.

As for their credentials and experience, the two are distinctly different.

“I am not a career politician,” Richter boasts, “I spent my entire life in the private sector.” He was the CEO of Hill International, the Philadelphia construction firm, which he says he turned around after it was on “the verge of bankruptcy ... We had about 300 employees when I took over. When I left 22 years later, we had 4,300 employees and were listed on the New York Stock Exchange ... I created jobs, and more importantly public works and infrastructure jobs all over the world.”

Richter also points to his “ideal resume” — a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania, a business degree from Oxford University and a master’s from Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Gibbs has emphasized that Richter’s experience at Hill International is nothing to brag about. “I don’t begrudge anybody’s success ... but he did some really questionable, immoral business practices.”

Last month, a stinging attack ad was issued in a mailing by Stronger Foundations, a super PAC run by Local 825. It was titled “The Shady Dave Dispatch.”

The hard-hitting direct-mail piece, which would later be condensed in a Gibbs TV ad, condemned Richter’s business ventures in hostile countries — China, Syria and Libya — as he expanded Hill International. It also accused him of hiring James Biden, brother of the Democratic presidential candidate, to gain influence in the Obama State Department and land a construction project in Iraq.

“I did not hire him and he did not report to me.” Richter said of Biden. “I was totally against investing in that business as I expected it would fail, and it did fail. I pushed hard for several years to end that business and eventually I was successful.”

“Dave takes all the credit for all the successes of the company ... and then blames all the failures on his dad,” who founded the company, Gibbs countered. “And he wants to judge me for some things I did as a college kid.”

Richter said the Local 825 mailing reveals how “she is bought and paid for by that labor union ... They’ve spent several hundred thousand dollars on her campaign ... They know they will control her vote in Congress.

As for her own experience, Gibbs notes she was raised by a single, working mother, and she was the first person in her family to get a college degree. It was actually two — an MBA from Drexel University's LeBow College of Business and a B.A. from American University, majoring in communications and political science.

"I'm proud of my record as a freeholder. I've earned everything I got by hard work, as opposed to my opponent. I've been working with the Republican Party right here in this district for a decade ... while David Richter has been running around looking for anyone to take him." she said. "The choice is clear."

As for who will prevail, it will come down to Burlington vs. Ocean, Gibbs said, and "Who can execute a better ground game."

CONGRESSIONAL

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