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BREAKING **TOP STORY**

Campaigning in a pandemic, Van Drew and Kennedy are ready for anything

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Press archives

As they ramp up their 2nd District congressional campaigns in the midst of a pandemic and a national uprising over race, incumbent U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, R-2nd, and Democratic challenger Amy Kennedy are ready for just about anything.

If it's a mostly vote-by-mail election to avoid bringing people together at the polls in a time of COVID-19 restrictions, both are ready to intensify the campaign earlier. Those who vote by mail do so much earlier than Election Day, after all.

Gov. Phil Murphy is expected to announce how the election will be run by mid-August, and Van Drew said he has heard from many constituents who want to be able to vote by machine Nov. 3.

But he and Kennedy are prepared to make changes on the fly.

“Life is a series of adjustments, and these are the most profound I’ve seen in my lifetime,” Van Drew said of the need for avoiding getting close to people or being part of crowds — normally a big part of any political campaign.



Obama endorses Amy Kennedy for Congress

“You email a lot. You talk on the telephone a lot,” said Van Drew, a Dennis Township resident and former Democrat who in his freshman term in Congress gained national notoriety by opposing the impeachment of President Donald Trump and changing parties in December.

Kennedy, of Brigantine, a mental health advocate and former teacher, said she, too, is reliant on social media and online meetings.

“It feels like everybody’s at a heightened anxiousness toward not just this moment and this election, but kind of everyday life,” Kennedy said. “Things that seem like they should be simple just are not right now.”

She said there is a lot of interest in and engagement with the campaign.

“A lot of people are willing to volunteer at home and looking for ways they can still feel like part of what’s happening,” Kennedy said. “Of course, it’s not the same level of engagement publicly.”



GOP Senate candidate Singh seeks recount to highlight what he calls perils of vote-by-mail elections

Online communication leaves out those who are not tech-savvy, and just isn’t as satisfying as personal interaction, both candidates said.

The inability to personally interact with large numbers of people will also make an already expensive race more costly, said John Froomjian, executive director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

There will be even more need for advertising and mailings to constituents' homes, he said.

“An election at this level and intensity is going to be dominated by money, mailing and advertising,” Froomjian said.

Both candidates are well funded, but Van Drew ended the primary season with more money at hand because he didn't have to spend much in the primary race. Kennedy had five opponents, two of whom were considered possible winners.



Motivated Democrats drive up turnout for July 7 primary

“Van Drew ended with \$1.1 million in the bank,” Froomjian said. “Amy Kennedy had to spend quite a bit — \$1.4 million — and mind boggling for a primary in South Jersey. That also tells me she is able to raise money.”

It's not easy to raise funds in a presidential year, though, he said, when presidential candidates suck up so much of the donations.

“It just means they have to work harder,” Froomjian said, and do it without using the personal touch nearly as much.

All these changes are happening at the same time that the nation is going into one of its most divisive and emotion-laden elections.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the up-swell of demand for more equitable treatment of Black men and women by police are bringing many issues to a head, Kennedy said.



Shore, Cape Regional, Inspira get federal CARES Act funding

“These two issues really are entangled with all of the regular concerns we would face in a normal election,” Kennedy said. “The virus of course brings up health care and the economy — how we are a tourism economy and need to diversify. And how people are only one paycheck away from not affording their rent.”

Bias and racism are intertwined with how we structure our schools, criminal justice system and health care system, she said.

“I consider this the most important election since the Civil War,” Van Drew said. “The future of the nation is going to depend on the decisions made.”

The voters feel it, too, he said.

“I have run in 17 races or whatever. I have gotten more support, more calls, people praying for me literally,” Van Drew said. “People realize this is a really big deal, and there are a lot of serious issues.”



Lesson from NJ's first mostly vote-by-mail primary election: There's work to do

Both said they will participate in a debate sponsored by the Hughes Center, which Froomjian is working to put together. But its format, too, is uncertain, Froomjian said.

“We would love to invite the candidates to campus on stage with no audience, and broadcast that with a moderator and panelists,” Froomjian said. “Even though campus is open and we are bringing students back and staff back, I can’t guarantee that’s the way it could happen.”

A primary debate for Democratic candidates used a Zoom format, with candidates each in a separate location.

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In my first job after college got paid to read the New York Times and summarize articles for an early online data base. First reporting job was with The Daily Record in Parsippany. I have also worked in nonprofits, and have been with The Press since 1990.