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

JOHN DeROSIER Staff Writer Jul 11, 2018



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

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