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Internet-only primary debate just one in long line of firsts for July 7 election



The three top contenders for the 2nd District Congressional Democratic Primary race will debate Thursday in an online forum.

As always, the three candidates will try to make a case for why they are the best candidate to go up against Congressman Jeff Van Drew, the likely Republican nominee.

But this is not the typical primary, as Gov. Phil Murphy ordered it to be a mostly vote-by-mail election to cut down on the possibility of spread of the novel coronavirus.

And the debate will not be typical either — it will be online with the candidates not in the same room or interacting in person.

Also, because of the vote-by-mail order, many people have already voted, said Carl Golden, a former Republican consultant who is now a senior contributing analyst at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

“With only two weeks to the election, by this time in primaries most minds are already made up — organizations have already committed troops and money,” Golden said. “It’s going to be a helpful chance to get out there and try to pick up a little bit here and there ... (but they have to be) careful they don’t

Brigid Callahan Harrison, a Montclair State University professor from Longport, has the support of the largest number of county organizations. Six of the eight county chairmen in the district support her.

But Amy Kennedy, a mental health advocate and former public school teacher from Brigantine, has the support of the Atlantic County Democratic Committee — the county organization with the most voters in the district. It voted to endorse her at its March convention.

The Ocean County Democratic Committee did not vote to support a candidate in the race, after county Chairman Wyatt Earp decided delegates would not vote on whom to back in the race. There had been a power struggle between Kennedy and Harrison supporters, according to people on both sides of the fight.

While Vineland's Will Cunningham, who left his Washington, D.C., job with the House Oversight Committee to run, does not have any county organizations' support, he does have endorsements from some leading progressive groups and the widow of his former boss, the late Congressman Elijah Cummings, D-Maryland.

If the results are tight, there are likely to be requests for a recount or even election challenges, Golden said.

“It could be the ‘hanging chads in Florida’ all over again,” Golden said. “Unless there is a really clear, decisive winner, if it's close there is going to be a lot of litigation.”

The three candidates answered questions about police and healthcare reform and other issues at last week's forum sponsored by the NAACP of Atlantic City, and it was clear they are more alike than not from their answers.

All three said they support the Justice in Policing Act of 2020, eliminating qualified immunity that has been used to shield police officers from some lawsuits and making choke holds and no-knock warrants illegal.

“For me it's a personal issue. When I was 13, my Black body was thrown on the ground and handcuffed,” Cunningham said. “It's always the right time to treat people humanely. It occurred. Here in South Jersey, I have driven through neighborhoods followed by cops an inordinate amount of time. When I ran in 2018 people called the police for me knocking on doors.”

Harrison pointed out that U.S. Senator Cory Booker, who endorsed her, is a co-sponsor of the act.

“I support all of those components,” Harrison said.

“I’m happy to support the Justice in Policing Act as a lifeline first piece of legislation we need to see to move forward right now,” Kennedy said. “I was at a march in Brigantine ... and the couple in the car next to me were holding hands and saying a prayer. ... It showed the strength of the community. Even when people are intimidated and scared they are still showing up because it’s the right thing to do.”

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