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**Uphill battle expected as Democrats vie to take back Duffy’s seat**

Political handicappers say Democrats face an uphill battle to win back the 7th Congressional District no matter when Gov. Tony Evers calls the special election to fill Sean Duffy’s northern Wisconsin seat.

Duffy, who has been in office since 2011, [is set to resign later this month](https://www.wispolitics.com/2019/duffy-announces-he-will-resign-in-september-child-due-in-october-has-heart-condition/) to spend more time with his family after learning his yet unborn child has been diagnosed with a heart condition.

Two recent WisPolitics.com stories illustrate what Democrats are up against:

* With U.S. Rep. Sean Duffy, R-Weston, announcing that he will resign Sept. 23, the Cook Political Report has moved the 7th Congressional District to ‘likely Republican’ from ‘safe Republican’ for the expected special election.
* [U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan questioned Democrats’ chances of winning](https://www.wispolitics.com/2019/pocan-questions-dems-chances-of-winning-7th-cd-seat/) the 7th Congressional District in an upcoming special election, saying the northern Wisconsin district has been gerrymandered to the GOP’s benefit.

So, while Democrats may be thrilled with an open seat in the area where Rep. Dave Obey long held power, analysts say they must be realistic and acknowledge that under Duffy the district has become very Republican.

It’s similar to the calculus that followed House Speaker Paul Ryan’s decision to pass on a re-election bid leading up to the 2018 elections. Democratss got excited about the prospects of taking back the 1st Congressional District. But even in a pretty Democratic year, Republicans kept the GOP-leaning seat via a victory by Bryan Steil.

Pocan, co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, says the 7th has become a “tougher district” for Democrats to win through Duffy’s tenure. And he blamed the practice of allowing politicians to pick their voters for leading to a situation in which “there isn’t a competitive district” in the state.

“Anything is possible, I guess, but probable and possible might be two different things,” the Madison-area congressman told reporters in Madison after being asked if he thought Democrats could win the district.

Meanwhile, the list of possible candidates has grown.

On the Republican side: state Sen. Tom Tiffany, Sen. Jerry Petrowski, Rep. Romaine Quinn, and conservative activist Luke Hilgemann.

On the Democratic side: state Sen. Janet Bewley, former state Sen. Pat Kreitlow, and state Rep. Nick Milroy.

Wausau attorney and Democrat Christine Bremer Muggli said she will consider a bid only if no one else “I believe will carry the progressive banner” gets into the race.

Departing now will take Duffy out of the House spotlight, some say, though he can keep his star power shining among conservatives with regular appearances on Fox News, where he’s been an ardent defender of Trump. He also had $2.2 million in the bank to end June, money he could hold onto in case he decides to make another run. Thus, you can’t write him off, Republicans argue.

And Duffy fueled speculation that he’s not done politically. He writes in a tweet after the response to his announcement, “I so appreciate all the kind messages from everyone but I’m not dead. Feeling hopeful and looking forward to what the future holds.”

Duffy breezed to re-election in recent years, and President Trump won the district by 20.3 percentage points in 2016. So, if Democrats could pull off a shocker in the special election, insiders say, it would be a serious blow to the president — though perhaps short-lived because it could flip back next fall. The 7th Congressional District, a largely rural, blue-collar, white district, is the kind of seat that Trump needs to win big not just to win Wisconsin but also nationally to have a shot at re-election.

If Evers could call the election solely to give Democrats their best shot, analysts say he would likely look at matching it up with the already scheduled spring election in April of next year. It’s a decent bet that the race for the Democratic presidential nomination will still be going come April. Should that scenario hold up, that would mean a lot more Democrats than Republicans heading to the polls on April 7.

But nothing happens in a vacuum and matching up the special election with the spring races could have a spillover effect with the state Supreme Court contest.

Democrats have been optimistic about their chances to beat conservative Justice Daniel Kelly with the expected presidential primary turnout on their side. But put an open race for a strongly GOP seat on the ballot, too, and that would likely pull out more Republicans than would turn out otherwise, election watchers suggest. That would give Kelly’s chances a boost.

And seeing a left-of-center candidate win a 10-year term on the state Supreme Court would have a whole lot more impact in Wisconsin than taking a GOP House seat — particularly since it would likely be temporary. Considering the district’s GOP tilt and Trump being on the ballot in November 2020, it’d be an extremely difficult hold even if Democrats found a way to pull off a shocker in the special election, handicappers say.

A second option, some say, would be for Evers to schedule the special election primary and general election for different dates than the spring elections. If Democrats have more energy and enthusiasm in a low-turnout race with nothing else on the ballot, it could provide a path to win. But that also would require taxpayers to pick up the costs for two elections.

A third option would be to schedule the general election for the same day as the already-scheduled February primary. That would put the primary in early January. Yes, taxpayers would have to cover an extra election, but it’d ensure the race wouldn’t impact the Supreme Court contest.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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