

## Long before election, political fires spark heated NY congressional races

In 19th and 21st congressional districts, candidacies bloom as electoral excitement grows



IMAGE 1 OF 4

[Buy Photo](#)

U.S. Rep. John Faso speaks to the Times Union editorial board on Monday, May 1, 2017, at the Times Union in Colonie, N.Y. (Will Waldron/Times Union)

KINGSTON — A wall of mirrors inside the Broadway Lights Diner reflected traffic along the city's main drag on a recent Friday as a quiet clanking of silverware and dishes set the melodic tone for a late breakfast.

A dozen, mostly retirement-age residents from around Ulster County sat at a cluster of tables pushed together on one side of the room, picking at omelets and club sandwiches between sips of coffee and iced tea.

This is where the resistance fuels up.

The group, Indivisible Ulster, is one of numerous politically active cadres in the 19th Congressional District that envelops New York's Catskill Mountains region. Like other similar groups of residents in New York and across the country, they have taken to protesting Republican leadership in Washington.

The Kingston group and others who support them convened that day for a "Faso Friday" event outside U.S. Rep. John Faso's nearby office, underscoring the political brush fires that have spread since last year's election.

But perhaps more striking than the consistent protests is the number of people willing to run for office in the 19th district and to the north in the 21st district that stretches from northern Saratoga County to the Canadian border. There are 15 candidates and two incumbents poised to take part in elections in the two districts.

Why are they running? Part of the answer is seated at the Broadway Lights Diner.

"We would hope so," said Steve Busch, a New Jersey transplant who lives in rural Accord, when asked if it's become a rite of passage for candidates to break bread with the group. "They have to get out and meet people. It's good practice for them."

From Kingston to Kinderhook and Watertown to Wilton, these types of groups have popped up in both the 19th and 21st congressional districts since last year, apparently sparked by the election of President Donald Trump. Their focus has turned to Reps. Faso and Elise Stefanik, R-Essex County, as months have passed in the newest era of Republican control in Washington.

In turn, the candidates have racked up as well. In the 19th district, eight Democrats, most of whom are political neophytes, have begun bids to oust Faso. In the 21st, six Democrats and a Republican, also newcomers to the political scene, are challenging Stefanik, a two-term congresswoman.

"I think it's the same call to action that has us meeting here every week," said Teresa Lepore, who has been taking time from work to attend the "Faso Friday" events in Kingston. "We're just all on the same mutual footing. They're just actually running for office and then we're showing up at a diner once a week."

In few other congressional districts in New York have the politically inclined shown so much interest in the \$179,000-a-year job of representative. Notably, in the 11th district on Staten Island, six Democrats have lined up to challenge Republican Rep. Dan Donovan. In the 23rd district, there are five challengers to Republican Rep. Tom Reed.

There is a national trend afoot. Consider campaign fundraising as a metric: [A Brookings Institute study](#) of July filings showed there were 209 Democratic House challengers who raised at least \$5,000 through June 30, creating questions about whether the early filings predict a Democratic wave in 2018.

The nine candidates, including incumbents, who filed July reports in the 19th and the 21st districts showed more than \$5,000 raised.

Of course, campaigns in competitive districts are [multi-million-dollar affairs](#) when candidate spending and outside money is combined. And in the same way that \$5,000 won't cut it financially, big money does not always correlate with a strong candidacy. That's particularly true in the 19th and 21st districts, where candidates [strive to prove that strong local connections](#) to the region — not out-of-area contributors — are evidence they are right for the job.

Still, the fundraising is evidence of political excitement among donors and voters, the two driving forces of which are obvious.

First, there is Trump, a lightning rod among Democrats and Republicans, who showed an ability to inspire fierce support last year in the same way he now inspires fierce opposition.

"I'm still not encouraged by voter turnout and all the usual indicators of apathy, but I think the Trump presidency has really been a motivator," said Gerald Benjamin, a longtime political scientist and director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz. "Also, it was a demonstration of how mobilization can be achieved. ... On his side of the aisle, a demonstration of mobilization and on the opposition side a shock and an ongoing provocation — to say the least."

Trump was a motivator in the run up to last year's election as well. But the anti-Trump or pro-Hillary Clinton (or both) waves didn't wash over the 19th district, as Democrat Zephyr Teachout lost by eight points in what was otherwise a tight race against Faso. Stefanik outperformed Trump in the 21st district.

"In 2016 I would say Republicans and Democrats were equally enthused because they were fighting over the presidency," said Alexis Grenell, a political consultant who worked on Teachout's campaign. "So now it's like, OK, the presidency was

decided. Now it's about saving something or restoring something and doing that locally. "

The other key driver of enthusiasm is the polarizing vote on health care in the House earlier this year. Both Faso and Stefanik voted in favor of an Obamacare repeal-and-replace, something that left-leaning voters are striving to ensure isn't forgotten. In both districts, candidates cite health care as a top issue that they hear about from potential voters.

In Stefanik's case, health care also has manifested into a challenge from the right.

"What happened to repeal? What happened to just flat out repeal and then work on tort reform and buying across state lines and all the other things they promised us?" said Russell Finley, her only Republican opponent so far. "You listen to all the Republican congressman now and what do they say? 'Well at least we put up something, we put up something.' Well, what you put up was horrible."

The excitement on both sides is not as unprecedented as the new era of politics ushered in by the Trump presidency makes it seem.

Consider 2009 and 2010, when constituents hurled acrid barbs at Democratic representatives who dared take on health care with the Affordable Care Act — the same bill Republicans have now tried unsuccessfully to undo.

The Brookings study on campaign finance filings showed that 78 Republican House challengers had raised at least \$5,000 as of June 30, 2009. Report author Michael Malbin, a University at Albany political science professor, noted that the early GOP challengers foreshadowed Republican gains nationwide.

Former North Country Rep. Bill Owens, a Democrat who retired in 2014, said he sees parallels between the Tea Party fervor of the 2010 mid-term cycle and the election of Trump, which has energized Democrats this cycle. He said he has spoken to eight or nine people interested in Stefanik's seat who have essentially the same message: Their friends, neighbors, Democrats, independents and even some Republicans are so opposed to Trump that they have focused their energy on Stefanik.

Still, he cautioned that short of a momentous event like the 2009 special election that Owens won, or Stefanik showing support for a major controversial Trump action, it would be difficult to unseat an incumbent.

The major caveat to the political excitement is this: With about 10 months until federal primary elections and more than a year until the mid-terms, any number of variables, from the White House to legislative action, could make any of the candidacies more or less viable.

What's more, national Democrats are **still trying to pin down** their message. Though applying a blanket platform to local candidates in every district nationwide isn't necessarily a winning formula, finding a way to reach those who aren't as energized as those who gather at Broadway Lights Diner is crucial.

Veteran Albany political consultant Bruce Gyory said that in addition to the anti-Trump and health care narratives, the third leg of the opposition platform will likely be a convincing economic narrative tailored to each district.

"I think right now you have three camps," Owens said. "You have the very in favor of Mr. Trump, you have the very opposed to Mr. Trump, and you have a lot of fence-sitters — people who are kind of waiting because in truth they're not happy with Democrats and they're not happy with Republicans. The major issue for Democrats is they don't have a platform that addresses the concerns of those voters, who are on the middle or on the fence."

Back at the diner, Busch, Lepore and a few others who lingered before heading to Faso's office sought to drive home a key

point: Their democratic involvement isn't driven by party allegiance. Some within Indivisible Ulster even voted for Faso last year, they said.

"It's not Democrat or Republican," Busch said. "We're reacting to how they behave and what they're doing. It's what they're doing. I mean, I don't care if they're Republicans or Democrats. I care about what they're doing to the country."

*mhamilton@timesunion.com • 518-454-5449 • @matt\_hamilton10*

© 2017 Hearst Communications, Inc.

**HEARST**