


## Battle brews among Democrats over primary in South Jersey's 2nd District

By [Joe Hernandez](#) · May 31, 2018

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 Congressional candidate Tanzie Youngblood holds up a Time magazine with her photo on the cover as Will Brant uses his phone to record a Snapchat story. Youngblood was campaigning at an apartment complex in Bridgeton, New Jersey, on May 26, 2018. (Bastiaan Slabbers for WHYY)

Tanzie Youngblood wanted to run against a Republican.

The retired school teacher, a Democrat, entered the race for South Jersey's 2nd Congressional District last year, setting her sights on incumbent Rep. Frank LoBiondo.

The Republican has held the seat since 1994, the same year the "Contract with America" catapulted dozens of conservatives into Congress and Newt Gingrich into the House Speakership.

To Youngblood's surprise, LoBiondo announced in November that he was retiring after more than two decades in office, saying it was time to move on.

Democrats heard opportunity knocking. The 2nd District would be an open seat for the first time in 24 years, a period in which LoBiondo had fended off Democratic challenger after Democratic challenger.

But that was also when the Democratic field changed.

A few weeks after LoBiondo publicized his plans to step aside, state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, who has served in the Legislature since 2002, announced he would run for the seat.



📷 New Jersey state Sen. Je Van Drew, D-Cape May Court House, is seeking the Democratic nomination to represent the state's 2nd Congressional District. He is shown speaking at a meeting of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee on Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

Van Drew, a dentist by trade, would bring with him a long-developed reputation in South Jersey politics and an remarkable ability to raise money and win races. He also has a conservative streak that has riled some in the party's more progressive base. Van Drew has cast votes against gun control and same-sex marriage.

What Democrats saw as a chance to take control of a moderate district that had long been in GOP hands would first become a battle within the party over money, beliefs, and political power.

## **Early challenger**

On a muggy Saturday morning in May, Youngblood knocked on doors at the Amity Heights apartments in Bridgeton, a South Jersey city of about 25,000 people an hour's drive from Philadelphia.

Bridgeton is in the middle of the sprawling 2nd District, which stretches from outside Philadelphia across thousands of acres of farmland to Atlantic City. It contains all or part of eight counties.

Despite the weather and the early hour, Youngblood seemed to be in her element.


"This is what I got in this race for. I got in this race to help communities like this," she said, before training her eye on a passerby — another possible voter. "Excuse me! Hi! Can I see you one minute?"

Bridgeton is mostly black and Hispanic, and one-third of its residents live in poverty. As we leave the apartment complex, Youngblood suggests that the lives of people there have not improved much under the tenure of Rep. LoBiondo.

"When you look at that area we just came from, what has [LoBiondo] done for those people?"

LoBiondo declined our request for an interview.



 Tanzie Youngblood speaks to campaign volunteers at a Get Out The Vote event at Villa Fazzolari in Buena, New Jersey, on May 26, 2018. (Bastiaan Slabbers for WHYY)

Youngblood says she is running a grassroots campaign, fueled by a cadre of volunteers willing to cold call voters on a weekend and passionate donors making small contributions.

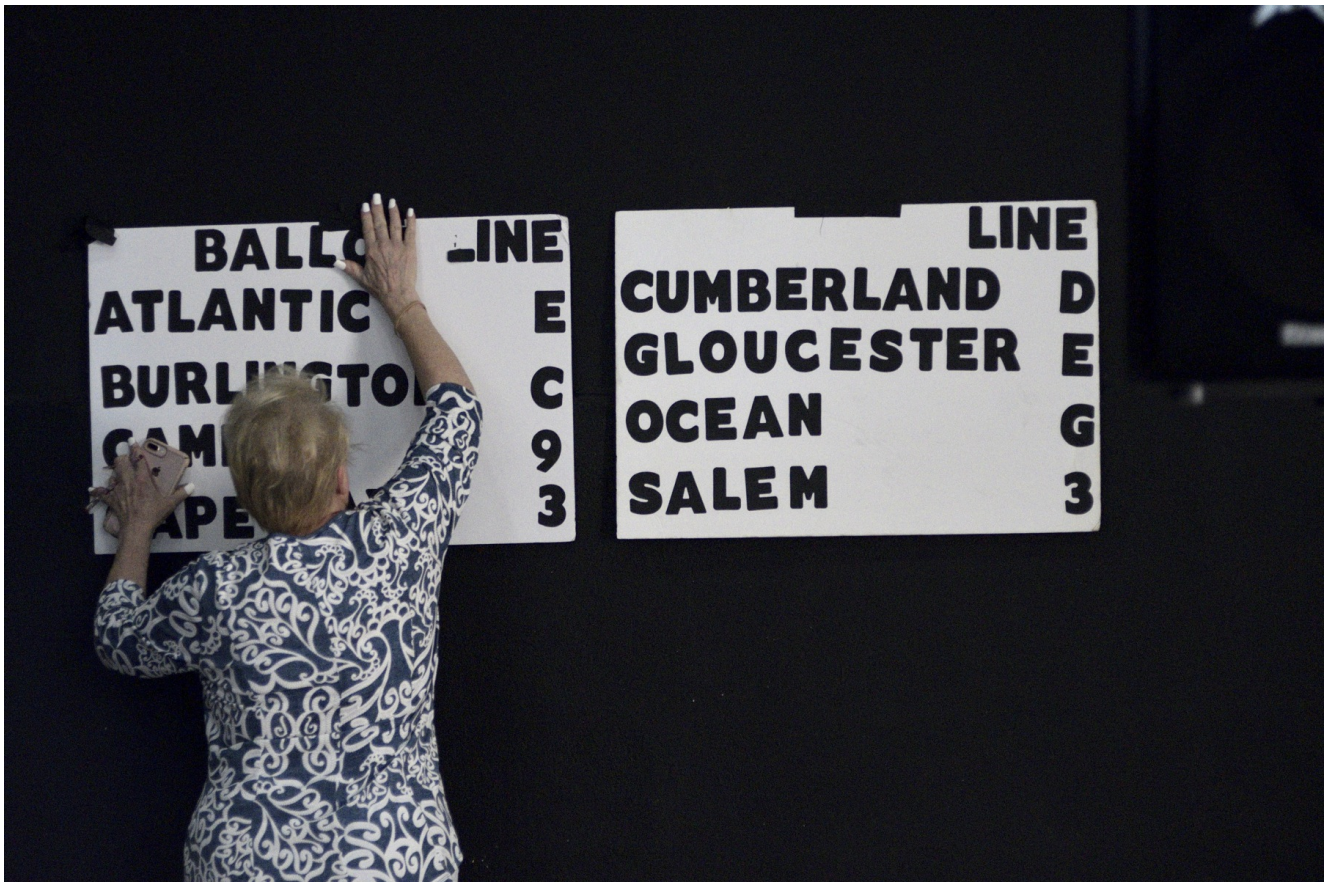
The chief issue on her mind is health care. In the past five years, her husband died of cancer and her mother died of Alzheimer's disease, both of which made her acutely aware of the pros and cons of the U.S. health care system.


Youngblood also says she supports more funding for public education, investments in rural communities, and tighter restrictions on guns, including a federal assault weapons ban.

The former civics teacher thought, as a black woman with her political views, she would be welcomed by the Democratic establishment in South Jersey. But after Van Drew's entrance into the race, she said, she was met with "such harshness."

Youngblood said she wrote to all eight of the county Democratic Party chairs in the district, hoping to secure their endorsements. That would give her the "county line" on each ballot, meaning she would be placed on the left under the party banner with the other endorsed candidates, like U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez.

Instead, Van Drew secured all eight county party endorsements right away, leaving Youngblood and the other two Democrats in the race — Will Cunningham, a former staffer for U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, and farmer Nate Kleinman — off to the right.



 Campaign volunteer Helen Duda mounts a board indicating Youngblood's position on the eight different ballots for the upcoming 2nd district congressional primaries. (Bastiaan Slabbers for WHYY)

Youngblood claimed the county conventions, where party members vote on their endorsements, were set up to favor Van Drew. She said one county chair even told her directly that she wouldn't have a shot at winning.

"It was so blatant and so unfair and so un-democratic," Youngblood said, of the process. "You think to yourself, this is America in 2018?"

### **'A known quantity'**

Others argue Van Drew became the frontrunner for different reasons.

"He's got a track record that people know," said Michael Klein, director of the William J. Hughes Center at Stockton University. "He's a quintessential retail politician — he's at every event you can think of. He's a known quantity."

Van Drew also has the backing of the nationally-focused Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which included Van Drew in its “Red to Blue” program, an effort to flip the House to Democratic control during the 2018 midterm elections.

Although he has the support of party leaders, Van Drew has drawn the ire of many Democrats who see themselves as more progressive. Those voters say Van Drew’s conservative leanings should disqualify him from getting party endorsements.

And his critics say the race comes down to one question: Why would leaders in the Democratic Party support someone like Van Drew over more progressive candidates like Youngblood, who supports gun control and same-sex marriage?

His campaign was unable able to fulfill our requests for an interview, but Van Drew has addressed this criticism before.

“It is important to work for your country and not your political party,” he said [in a 2017 appearance on NJTV](#). “I’m a Democrat, but if I really, truly believe there’s a good Republican idea, I would vote for it and support it.”

What many progressives say they find most objectionable about Van Drew is his position on guns.

The Democrat supports the Second Amendment, and reportedly has a few guns of his own. He also has a 100 percent rating from the National Rifle Association, [according to VoteSmart](#), and has received at least \$1,000 in contributions from the group. In the Legislature, Van Drew has voted against gun-control bills.

Parkland, Florida school shooting survivor and activist David Hogg called out Van Drew [in an April tweet](#). “Remember both Democrats and Republicans take #NRABloodMoney,” Hogg wrote. “Just look up New Jersey state senator @JeffVanDrew, he’s a Democrat with An A rating from the NRA.”

Still, Van Drew received a “distinction” from the group Moms Demand Action, an advocacy organization that pushes for stricter gun laws. (Candidate Will Cunningham received an endorsement from the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.)

Van Drew says he is an independent thinker, and points to a host of other traditionally Democratic issues he has voted in favor of, such as medical marijuana and funding for women’s health care.

And his supporters say, if Democrats want to take advantage of the open seat and win the general election, it will take money, which Van Drew has. He has already raised more than \$600,000 in the primary, more than six times what Youngblood has picked up. The other two candidates have raised even less.

Van Drew has also attracted significant outside spending. Campaign finance records show Patriot Majority USA, an independent group that supports Democrats, has spent \$50,000 to support his bid for office with expenditures separate from his campaign accounts.

He also has broad support from South Jersey Democratic Party insiders — most importantly, behind-the-scenes power broker George Norcross.

But Tanzie Youngblood says that kind of logic — that the candidate with the most robust operation is the most “electable” — is the kind of top-down political calculus that has made Democratic voters disillusioned.

And she thinks it is the same kind of disillusionment that caused residents in the 2nd District, who voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, [according to the Daily Kos](#), to switch sides and favor Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

“That’s what the Democratic establishment doesn’t get,” Youngblood said. “That same group of voters, the Trump voters, are gonna be my voters. I call ‘em change voters.”

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