

# Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

SEPTEMBER 29, 2023

VOLUME 7, NO. 19

## Michigan 7: The Last Man Standing in Lansing

By Erin Covey

Rep. Elissa Slotkin’s U.S. Senate campaign is a boon to Democrats attempting to maintain their tenuous grip on the Senate majority — and a loss for the party’s fight to reclaim the House majority in 2024.

The moderate congresswoman, one of her party’s most prodigious fundraisers, represents one of the most evenly divided congressional districts in the country. In 2020, Joe Biden won Michigan’s 7th District by less than one point, and in 2022, Slotkin won re-election by 5 points as a ballot measure codifying abortion rights spurred Democratic turnout.

Anticipating a competitive and expensive general election fight in 2024, both parties made an early effort to consolidate around one candidate. Tom Barrett, a former state senator and Army veteran, is poised to be the Republican nominee for the second cycle in a row. And Curtis Hertel Jr., a former state senator who most recently worked as Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s legislative affairs director, has the Democratic primary to himself despite the deep bench of Democratic politicians in the district.

The Wolverine State is guaranteed to be in the national spotlight next year, with competitive presidential and Senate races on the ballot. In the meantime, the United Automobile Workers strike is drawing further attention to Michigan, where 14 of the 38 plants currently on strike are located. Both likely presidential nominees have traveled to the purple state over the past week — Biden joined workers on the picket line Tuesday, and former President Donald Trump visited Drake Enterprises (a non-unionized factory) Wednesday evening, skipping the second Republican presidential debate.

Though it’s not clear how much of an impact the strike itself will have on the race next November, the underlying economic issues will be front and center in the battle for control of Michigan’s 7th.

### The Lay of the Land

The 7th District is anchored in Lansing, the state capital, and encompasses a blend of rural, urban and suburban communities in mid-Michigan.

*Continued on page 5*

## 2024 House Ratings

### Toss-Up (4D, 7R)

|                         |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| CA 13 (Duarte, R)       | NY 4 (D’Esposito, R) |
| CA 27 (Garcia, R)       | NY 17 (Lawler, R)    |
| CO 8 (Caraveo, D)       | NY 22 (Williams, R)  |
| MI 7 (Open; Slotkin, D) | OR 5 (DeRemer, R)    |
| NM 2 (Vasquez, D)       | WA 3 (Perez, D)      |
| NY 3 (Santos, R)        |                      |

### Tilt Democratic (5D)

|                         |
|-------------------------|
| CA 47 (Open; Porter, D) |
| OH 13 (Sykes, D)        |
| PA 7 (Wild, D)          |
| PA 8 (Cartwright, D)    |
| VA 7 (Spanberger, D)    |

### Tilt Republican (9R)

|                      |
|----------------------|
| AZ 1 (Schweikert, R) |
| AZ 6 (Ciscomani, R)  |
| CA 22 (Valadao, R)   |
| CO 3 (Boebert, R)    |
| IA 3 (Nunn, R)       |
| MI 10 (James, R)     |
| NJ 7 (Kean Jr., R)   |
| NY 19 (Molinaro, R)  |
| VA 2 (Kiggans, R)    |

### Lean Democratic (13D)

|                     |
|---------------------|
| AK AL (Peltola, D)  |
| CT 5 (Hayes, D)     |
| IL 17 (Sorensen, D) |
| ME 2 (Golden, D)    |
| MI 3 (Scholten, D)  |
| MN 2 (Craig, DFL)   |
| NV 3 (Lee, D)       |
| NH 1 (Pappas, D)    |
| NY 18 (Ryan, D)     |
| OH 1 (Landsman, D)  |
| OH 9 (Kaptur, D)    |
| OR 6 (Salinas, D)   |
| PA 17 (Deluzio, D)  |

### Lean Republican (7R)

|                        |
|------------------------|
| CA 41 (Calvert, R)     |
| CA 45 (Steel, R)       |
| IA 1 (Miller-Meeks, R) |
| MT 1 (Zinke, R)        |
| NE 2 (Bacon, R)        |
| NY 1 (LaLota, R)       |
| TX 15 (De La Cruz, R)  |

|                     | GOP        | DEM        |
|---------------------|------------|------------|
| Solid               | 182        | 171        |
| Likely/Lean/Tilt    | 26         | 31         |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>208</b> | <b>202</b> |
| Toss-up             | 11         |            |
| North Carolina      | 14         |            |
| Needed for majority | 218        |            |

### Likely Democratic (13D)

|                         |
|-------------------------|
| CA 49 (Levin, D)        |
| FL 9 (Soto, D)          |
| IN 1 (Mrvan, D)         |
| KS 3 (Davids, D)        |
| MD 6 (Open; Trone, D)   |
| MI 8 (Kildee, D)        |
| NV 1 (Titus, D)         |
| NV 4 (Horsford, D)      |
| NH 2 (Kuster, D)        |
| OR 4 (Hoyle, D)         |
| TX 34 (Gonzalez, D)     |
| VA 10 (Open; Wexton, D) |
| WA 8 (Schrier, D)       |

### Likely Republican (10R)

|                       |
|-----------------------|
| CA 3 (Kiley, R)       |
| CA 40 (Kim, R)        |
| FL 13 (Luna, R)       |
| FL 27 (Salazar, R)    |
| IA 2 (Hinson, R)      |
| PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R) |
| PA 10 (Perry, R)      |
| SC 1 (Mace, R)        |
| WI 1 (Steil, R)       |
| WI 3 (Van Orden, R)   |

*Takeovers in Italics. # moved benefiting Democrats, \* moved benefiting Republicans*  
 North Carolina ratings are being withheld pending a new map.

# Report Shorts

**Arizona Senate.** 2022 gubernatorial nominee Kari Lake plans to launch her campaign on Oct. 10. Lake, a Trump acolyte, is the clear frontrunner in the GOP primary, but her path to victory in the general election is more complicated. Rep. Ruben Gallego is the likely Democratic nominee. Independent Sen. Kyrsten Sinema still hasn't announced her 2024 plans. Toss-up.

**California Senate.** Trailblazing Sen. Dianne Feinstein died today at age 90. The Democrat, whose final months were clouded by health concerns, was the longest-serving woman in the Senate. Her seat was already up for grabs, as she was not seeking re-election next year. Gov. Gavin Newsom, who will now appoint a successor, has previously promised to appoint a Black woman to the seat — but also says he wants his appointee to be a temporary occupant of the seat who won't run in next year's election. That rules out Rep. Barbara Lee, who is already running to succeed Feinstein. Solid Democratic.

**Indiana's 4th District.** Another Indiana member might be headed for the exits. *Howey Politics* reported that GOP Rep. Jim Baird is attempting to pave the way for his son, state Rep. Beau Baird, to take his place in this bright red district that includes much of western Indiana. According to the report, Baird might try to retire right before the Feb. 9 filing deadline to keep his son from facing any serious primary opponents. Solid Republican.

**New Jersey's 3rd District.** Democratic Rep. Andy Kim announced he is running for the Senate, potentially against recently indicted incumbent Bob Menendez. A number of Democrats have already expressed interest in succeeding Kim, most notably state Sen. Troy Singleton, state Assembly Majority Whip Carol Murphy, and Mercer County Clerk Paula Sollami Covello, and there's a deep bench beyond that. On the GOP side, 2022 nominee Bob Healey was well-regarded by Republicans though he came up short by double digits. And state Sen. Jean Stanfield would be a compelling candidate — the former Burlington County sheriff is not seeking re-election to her highly competitive legislative district this fall. The district would have voted for Joe Biden by 14 points, 56-42 percent, in 2020. Solid Democratic.

**Pennsylvania Senate.** David McCormick has launched his long-anticipated challenge to Democratic Sen. Bob Casey. The former

# 2024 Senate Ratings

## Toss-Up (3)

Brown (D-Ohio) Tester (D-Mont.)  
Sinema (I-Ariz.)

## Tilt Democratic (2)

Casey (D-Penn.)  
Rosen (D-Nev.)

## Tilt Republican (1)

*Manchin (D-W.V.)*

## Lean Democratic (2)

MI Open (Stabenow, D)  
Baldwin (D-Wis.)

## Lean Republican

## Likely Democratic (1)

Menendez (D-N.J.)\*

## Likely Republican (1)

Cruz (R-Texas)

## Solid Democratic (14)

CA Open (Vacant, D)  
DE Open (Carper, D)  
MD Open (Cardin, D)  
Cantwell (D-Wash.)  
Gillibrand (D-N.Y.)  
Heinrich (D-N.M.)  
Hirono (D-Hawaii)  
Kaine (D-Va.)  
King (I-Maine)  
Klobuchar (D-Minn.)  
Murphy (D-Conn.)  
Sander (I-Vt.)  
Warren (D-Mass.)  
Whitehouse (D-R.I.)

## Solid Republican (10)

IN Open (Braun, R)  
UT Open (Romney, R)  
Barrasso (R-Wyo.)  
Blackburn (R-Tenn.)  
Cramer (R-N.D.)  
Fischer (R-Neb.)  
Hawley (R-Mo.)  
Ricketts (R-Neb.)  
Scott (R-Fla.)  
Wicker (R-Miss.)

*Takeovers in Italics, # moved benefiting Democrats, \* moved benefiting Republicans*

hedge fund CEO is independently wealthy, and isn't expected to face any serious primary challengers now that 2022 gubernatorial nominee Doug Mastriano isn't running. But Casey has won statewide office six times and will be a formidable incumbent. Tilt Democratic.

**Texas' 28th District.** Jose Sanz, former district director to Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar, announced he is challenging his old boss, as a Republican. Sanz started working for Cuellar in 2021 as his district press secretary. Cuellar won re-election last year by double digits, despite facing serious challengers in both the primary and the general election, so he's not seen as particularly vulnerable in 2024. Solid Democratic. **IE**

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# New Jersey Senate: Menendez Indictment Creates Democratic Headache

By Jacob Rubashkin

New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez was indicted on three federal charges last week, nearly a year after news first broke of a possible investigation into the powerful Democratic lawmaker. In a 39-page indictment, the Department of Justice alleges Menendez and his wife accepted bribes and committed fraud and extortion in their dealings with three New Jersey businessmen and a coterie of Egyptian government officials. Menendez has pleaded not guilty.

The indictment injects significant uncertainty into the 2024 New Jersey Senate race, which was not previously expected to be competitive.

The Garden State is not hospitable to the GOP at the federal level; in 2020 Joe Biden defeated President Donald Trump there by 16 points, 57-41 percent, and Republicans have not won a Senate race since 1972. But despite increasing levels of partisanship and a decline in split-ticket voting, corruption scandals can still make otherwise-comfortable incumbents vulnerable — just ask former New York and California Reps. Chris Collins and Duncan Hunter.

Or ask Menendez, who saw the effects of legal trouble in his last race too.

In 2015, federal prosecutors alleged that Menendez had accepted gifts from a friend in exchange for taking actions on his behalf. When the case finally went to trial in 2017, the jury deadlocked and a judge declared a mistrial.

In 2018, a defiant Menendez sought re-election. After winning a closer-than-expected primary against an unknown, underfunded opponent, Menendez defeated GOP businessman Bob Hugin in the general election by just 11 points, 55-44 percent.

There's a lot we still don't know about how the next 14 months will play out. Menendez has never been the type to go quietly — he famously promised retribution against his political enemies as he left the courthouse following his mistrial six years ago. Following this indictment, he released a statement calling the allegations “baseless” and politically motivated, and indicated that he would not resign.

If he decides to tough it out, Menendez will face a serious primary challenge from one of the many ambitious Democrats in the state. Rep. Andy Kim, who represents part of South Jersey and is a strong fundraiser, is already running against Menendez.

Given how poorly he fared in the 2018 primary, winning just 60-40 percent over Lisa McCormick (and that was after he beat the charges), he could be in serious trouble against a credible candidate, such as Kim or New Jersey First Lady Tammy Murphy, while he's actively under indictment.

If he were to make it past a primary, Menendez could also be vulnerable in a general election against the right GOP opponent (a well-funded moderate, perhaps in the vein of 2021 GOP gubernatorial nominee Jack Ciattarelli). A Sept. 26-27 PPP poll commissioned by VoteVets, which supports Kim, found Menendez's image at an abysmal 8 percent favorable/74 percent unfavorable across the state; the senator also trailed a generic Republican in a ballot test by 22 points, 42-20 percent.

Menendez's indictment also complicates national Democrats'

already tenuous path to maintaining their majority. In 2018, Democratic outside groups including the Senate Majority PAC and the DSCC had to spend more than \$10 million boosting Menendez, who faced an onslaught of negative ads from his wealthy opponent. That was money that national Democrats could have spent on more naturally competitive races, including the four Senate incumbents who lost re-election.

This year, Democrats are almost entirely on defense, with three major vulnerabilities in West Virginia, Ohio, and Montana, and vulnerable



Tammy Murphy

incumbents and open seats in a half-dozen other competitive presidential states. If the party has to pour millions into the most expensive media markets in the country, just to bail out a senator running in a state Biden will carry by double digits, that

could have serious ramifications for their ability to defend incumbents elsewhere.

So it's no surprise Menendez is under increasing pressure to resign, with Gov. Phil Murphy, seatmate Sen. Cory Booker, and increasing numbers of Senate Democrats calling on him to resign.

If Menendez resigns, Murphy would have the opportunity to appoint someone directly to the seat, who could then seek a full term next fall. If the incumbent forgoes re-election but stays in the Senate, there could be a heavily contested primary to succeed him.

There is no shortage of Democrats who could easily step in as the party's standard-bearer and hold the seat with little trouble. Kim is one, and Tammy Murphy is another, if she decides to run. Rep. Mikie Sherrill appears more interested in running for governor in two years.

Menendez isn't the first New Jersey senator this century to put Democrats in an electoral bind. Back in 2002, Democrats held a one-seat majority in the Senate, and Democrat Robert Torricelli insisted on running for re-election after being cleared in a federal campaign finance criminal investigation. The issue dogged Torricelli all year, and after polls showed him losing badly to his unknown GOP challenger, he dropped out of the race just weeks before Election Day. Democrats replaced him on the ballot with former Sen. Frank Lautenberg, who won by double digits.

Explaining his decision at a press conference, Torricelli told reporters, “There are times in life when you rise above self. I will not be responsible for a loss of the Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate.”

There are ways for Democrats to keep this race firmly in their column, but the latest news puts the seat at more risk. We're changing our rating of the race from Solid Democratic to Likely Democratic. **IE**

# Tracking Redistricting Battles Ahead of 2024

By Erin Covey

Though the 2024 election cycle is well underway, redistricting battles continue across several states.

With the control of the U.S. House on the line, both parties are keeping a close watch on the map drawing processes in North Carolina, Alabama, New York, and several other states still in the midst of legal battles.

The ongoing litigation makes it difficult to forecast the specific timeline and eventual outcome of these fights, but both Republicans and Democrats have opportunities to win House seats through redistricting. Republicans are expected to secure a more favorable map in North Carolina, while Democrats are poised to pick up a seat in Alabama and are hoping for more favorable maps in Louisiana, Georgia, and New York. Initially, Republicans were expected to draw a more favorable map in Ohio, but another round of redistricting has now been pushed to the 2026 cycle.

Over the next few months, several states should come closer to finalizing the 2024 maps.

## Late September

In Alabama, a federal court has taken over the map-drawing process after Republicans in the state legislature failed to draw a map that added a second district giving Black voters the opportunity to elect a representative of their choosing. Under Alabama's current map, only one out of the state's seven congressional districts is majority-Black despite Black people making up more than a quarter of the state's population. Earlier this year, the Supreme Court ruled that the map likely violated the Voting Rights Act.

The court-appointed special master submitted three map drafts on Monday to federal judges. Under the proposed maps, GOP Reps. Jerry Carl and Barry Moore would both be drawn into the coastal 1st District, and the new 2nd District would have a Black voting age population of 48.5, 48.7, or 50.1 percent. Any of these three maps would set Democrats up to flip the 2nd District, since voting is so racially polarized in the state. (In 2020, Joe Biden would have won all three versions of the new 2nd by between 10 and 13 points, according to *Bloomberg Government*.)

Judges plan to hear objections to the proposed maps on Oct. 3. The U.S. Supreme Court has denied Republicans' request to stay the lower court's decision, clearing the path for one of these three maps to be used in 2024.

Meanwhile, the North Carolina state legislature is preparing to draw a new congressional map that could leave three Democratic members — Reps. Wiley Nickel, Jeff Jackson, and Kathy Manning — in serious trouble.

The legislature started the redistricting process this week with three public hearings. It's not clear how long the legislature will take to draw the new map, but the filing deadline for candidates running for office in 2024 is currently Dec. 15. Republicans control the state legislature and the state Supreme Court, and Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper doesn't have a role in redistricting, so the eventual map will face little resistance.

## Early October

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision that paved the way for Alabama to draw a new congressional map could also result in a new map for Louisiana ahead of 2024.

The Pelican State only has one Black member in its six-person congressional delegation, despite its population being nearly one-third Black, and a federal judge ruled last year that the current map violated the Voting Rights Act. Republicans then appealed the case to the Supreme Court, which had put the case on hold until it ruled on the Alabama case this summer.

The case has now been returned to the lower courts, where it awaits an uncertain future. The federal judge who had thrown out the map in 2022 had scheduled a hearing to draw a new map on Oct. 3, but that was blocked by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Thursday. Louisiana Republicans had previously appealed the judge's ruling to the circuit court, which scheduled oral arguments for that appeal for Oct. 6.

Democrats remain optimistic that Louisiana will need to redraw its map ahead of 2024, allowing the party to net another seat. But Republicans believe the state's current map still holds, and argue that drawing a second majority-Black district is more difficult in Louisiana since it would likely involve connecting geographically distant communities.

In New Mexico, Republicans have sued the state arguing that the congressional map, drawn by the Democratic-controlled state legislature, is gerrymandered in a way that violates the state's constitution.

A lower court has until Oct. 6 to resolve the case, a date set by the state Supreme Court. The trial began Sept. 27. If the court throws out the state's congressional map, Democratic Rep. Gabe Vasquez's competitive 2nd District could become easier for Republicans to flip in 2024.

## Mid-October

South Carolina's redistricting case will also come closer to a resolution within the next month. At the beginning of the year, a lower court ruled that the state's 1st District, which stretches along the coast and is represented by Republican Rep. Nancy Mace, had been racially gerrymandered. Republicans appealed the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court, which has scheduled oral arguments for Oct. 11.

*Continued on page 5*



## Podcast Episode 6

Nathan, Jacob and Erin discuss the fight for the House majority including the key Toss-up races, races with recent rating changes, and the Republican NASCAR driver running in Maine.

The Inside Elections podcast is sponsored by George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management.

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on any of the regular podcast platforms  
or watch on YouTube.



*Redistricting, Continued from page 4*

Unlike cases in Alabama and Louisiana, which argue that the state's congressional maps violate the Voting Rights Act by diluting the power of Black voters, the South Carolina case argues that the state violated the 14th Amendment by using race as the dominant factor in drawing the 1st District.

If the Supreme Court agrees with the lower court's ruling, the 1st could become more competitive, giving Democrats another pick-up opportunity.

## November

In New York, Democrats are attempting to redraw the state's congressional map ahead of 2024, arguing that the 2022 map drawn by a special master — which resulted in Republicans taking control of four seats — was temporary.

Earlier this summer, a mid-level court ruled in favor of Democrats and ordered the state's Independent Redistricting Commission to begin redrawing the map. But in September, New York's highest court, the Court of Appeals, declined to enforce that order, a victory for Republicans who argued that the state should not begin the redrawing process while the case is still unresolved.

The Court of Appeals plans to hear oral arguments for the case on Nov. 15. If New York's map is redrawn, several Republican-held seats in the state could ultimately become more favorable for Democrats, potentially leaving Reps. Mike Lawler, Marc Molinaro, Anthony D'Esposito, George Santos, Brandon Williams, and Nick LaLota in

more vulnerable positions.

In Florida, a state judge ruled at the beginning of September that the congressional map violated the state constitution. The 2022 map had dismantled Democratic Rep. Al Lawson's seat that connected Black communities in North Florida, which plaintiffs argued was a violation of the state's Fair Districts Amendment.

Both sides have asked the state's court of appeals to expedite the process and issue a decision by the end of November, giving the state legislature enough time to draw a new map if the court upholds the judge's decision. Since conservatives control the state Supreme Court, Republicans expect that the 2022 map will stay in place for 2024.

## Other States to Watch

Georgia's redistricting case should come to a close soon. A trial over a lawsuit arguing that the state's 2022 map violated the Voting Rights Act concluded this month, and the district judge is expected to release a ruling sometime in the next several weeks. If the judge throws out the map, Democrats could gain a seat in the Atlanta suburbs.

Congressional maps in several other states — Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, and Utah — face ongoing legal challenges, but those cases are less likely to result in new maps ahead of 2024.

And in Wisconsin, Democrats are challenging the state's legislative maps, hoping that the state Supreme Court's new liberal majority will rule in their favor. But the party has yet to challenge the congressional map.



*Michigan, Continued from page 1*

Most of Lansing, and the neighboring city of East Lansing, is based in Ingham County, the bright blue center of the district. East Lansing is home to Michigan State University, which was crucial to Slotkin's victory last cycle as students turned out in droves. Hertel, an alum of MSU, has represented parts of the county for the past two decades.

Livingston County, in the southeastern corner of the district, is the second-largest county in the 7th and leans Republican. Slotkin performed particularly well there in 2022 — she lost to Barrett by 16 points in Livingston, while Biden lost it by 23 points in 2020.

The district also includes most of Eaton County, Barrett's home base, which lies west of Lansing and includes suburban communities where Democrats have made gains in recent years. Trump won the county by less than 1 point in 2020 after winning it by 5 points in 2016. Barrett lost the portion of the county in the district by 4 points in 2022 (for comparison, Trump lost the same area by 1 point in 2020).

The 7th encompasses all of Clinton and Shiawassee counties, which lean Republican and include a mixture of rural communities and bedroom communities north of Lansing. Clinton is more competitive; Trump won it by 6 points in 2020 and Barrett won it by 3 points in 2022. Both Barrett and Trump won Shiawassee by double digits.

The district also includes a sliver of suburban Oakland County (Slotkin's base), and a tiny portion of Genesee County.

The auto industry is critical to the 7th District's economy; multiple General Motors factories are located in the district, and an electric vehicle battery plant is currently being built in Lansing.

According to *Inside Elections'* Baseline metric, which calculates the partisan lean of a district based on results from the past four cycles, Democrats have a 5-point advantage in Michigan's 7th (51.7 to 46.3 percent). That Democratic advantage is largely due to the blue wave that

swept across Michigan last cycle. At the top of the ticket, Whitmer won the 7th by 10 points.

## The Likely Democratic Nominee

Unlike Slotkin, whose political career began when she ran for Congress in 2018, Hertel has a long history in Michigan Democratic politics. The 45-year-old has held the titles of state senator, register of deeds, and county commissioner over the course of his career, and worked in the administrations of both Whitmer and former Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

Hertel's family has been involved with Michigan politics for half of a century — his father Curtis Hertel Sr. was the speaker of the Michigan state House in the 1990s, his uncle Dennis Hertel represented Michigan's 14th District in the U.S. House in the 80s and 90s, and his uncle John Hertel served in the state Senate in the 70s. Curtis Hertel Jr.'s younger brother Kevin was just elected to the state Senate last November and represents the Detroit suburbs.

Hertel is originally from Detroit but moved to East Lansing to attend MSU. After graduating, he worked as a staffer for the Michigan House Democratic Caucus.

He's lived in the area since then with his wife Elizabeth Hertel, the director of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and their four children.

From 2015 to 2022, Hertel represented the Lansing area in a state Senate seat that Whitmer previously held. He spent his state Senate career in the minority party, and was involved in state budget negotiations as the vice chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. As Whitmer's chief lobbyist in the legislature this past year, he helped craft the state's \$82 billion budget, this time with his party in the majority.

Hertel's path to nomination was cleared before he even entered the

*Continued on page 6*

Continued from page 5

race — a testament to his deep ties to powerful Michigan Democrats including Whitmer and Slotkin, and a sign of how motivated the party was to avoid a contentious primary.

After Slotkin announced her Senate campaign, Hertel was one of a long list of Michigan Democrats eyeing the district. Other potential candidates included Ingham County Clerk Barb Byrum, state Rep. Angela Witwer, and state Sen. Sarah Anthony, but all had reservations about jumping in the race. Lansing Mayor Andy Schor had also launched an exploratory committee at the beginning of March, but suspended it less than three weeks later.

“There were probably better options but none of those people wanted to do it,” one Democratic strategist in Michigan acknowledged to *Inside Elections*. Ultimately, Democrats do see Hertel as a strong candidate, and strategists described him as politically savvy and well-connected — particularly with powerful local unions.

And strategists from both parties expect him to be one of the Democratic Party’s stronger fundraisers, though none expect him to match Slotkin’s numbers. Both Hertel and Barrett announced their campaigns at the beginning of the third quarter and will report initial fundraising numbers by Oct. 15.

Democrats admit that Hertel isn’t “the most inspiring person in the world,” as one operative put it. But they hope that his profile as a white, suburban father of four will make him relatable to voters in the 7th.

“He looks exactly like the people who want to vote for him,” one longtime Democratic strategist in Michigan told *Inside Elections*.

Hertel’s campaign team includes direct mail consultant Terry Walsh of the Strategy Group, pollster Brian Stryker of Impact Research, and media consultant BJ Neidhardt from Prism Communications.

### The Likely Republican Nominee

Barrett, with his military background and experience winning competitive races, was a top recruit for Republicans in 2022. Though he came several points short of defeating Slotkin last November, Republican

strategists believe he’ll be in a better position to flip the seat in 2024, with one federal campaign under his belt and more than likely a better political environment for Republicans in Michigan.

The 42-year-old Iraq War veteran joined the military out of high



Courtesy Barrett Campaign

Tom Barrett

school, and served in the U.S. Army and the Michigan Army National Guard for more than two decades as a helicopter pilot. After returning to Michigan, he worked for the Michigan Department of Treasury.

A native of

Southfield and graduate of Western Michigan University, Barrett currently lives in Charlotte (population 9,000) with his wife and four children. He’s the great-grandson of former Rep. Louis Rabaut, who represented Michigan in Congress 70 years ago and is known for introducing legislation that added the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance.

Barrett’s first foray into electoral politics was in 2014, when he defeated Democratic state Rep. Theresa Abed by just over 300 votes, becoming one of the first two Iraq War veterans elected to the Michigan state legislature. After representing Eaton County in the state House for two terms, he ran for the state Senate and defeated Democrat Kelly Rossman-McKinney in one of the 2018 cycle’s most expensive Michigan Senate races.

Barrett’s challenge to Slotkin was expected to be one of the most competitive races in the country last cycle. But the congresswoman maintained a massive fundraising advantage, raising \$10 million to his \$2.8 million.

Republican strategists frustrated by Barrett’s lackluster fundraising in 2022 feel more optimistic this time around, and hope that the open seat will be more enticing for Republican donors.

Like Hertel, Barrett has a clear path to the Republican nomination in 2024 — especially in a part of the state where the GOP bench is slim.

Barrett’s team includes campaign strategist Jason Roe, who also handles direct mail, pollster Brent Buchanan of Cygal, and media consultant Thomas Midanek of Prime Media Partners.

### How It Plays Out

This race was the most expensive House race in the country last cycle, and is guaranteed to draw national attention this cycle.

Barrett has two advantages that he lacked in 2022: he’s not running against a formidable Democratic incumbent, and he isn’t likely to face the same headwinds that propelled Michigan Democrats to victory.

Republican and Democratic strategists expect that the presidential race will be close in this district, and whoever wins at the top of the ticket will have a major impact on the House race — more than 96 percent of House districts voted for the same party for president and the House in 2020.

Democratic turnout was disproportionately high last cycle, largely due to the Proposition 3 ballot amendment that protected abortion rights in the state, and Whitmer’s double-digit victory at the top of the ticket.

But strategists expect that a rematch between Trump and Biden should lead to more balanced turnout, since the former president has a history of turning out blue collar voters in the state he won in 2016.

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## 2024 Open House Seats

| District | Outgoing Member          | 2022 Result   | 2020 Presidential Result | Rating            |
|----------|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|-------------------|
| AZ-03    | Ruben Gallego (D)        | 77%   | Biden 75%                | Solid Democratic  |
| CA-12    | Barbara Lee (D)          | 91%   | Biden 89%                | Solid Democratic  |
| CA-30    | Adam Schiff (D)          | 71%   | Biden 72%                | Solid Democratic  |
| CA-31    | Grace Napolitano (D)     | 60%   | Biden 65%                | Solid Democratic  |
| CA-47    | Katie Porter (D)         | 52%   | Biden 55%                | Tilt Democratic   |
| DE-AL    | Lisa Blunt Rochester (D) | 56%   | Biden 59%                | Solid Democratic  |
| IN-03    | Jim Banks (R)            | 65%   | Trump 64%                | Solid Republican  |
| IN-05    | Victoria Spartz (R)      | 61%   | Trump 57%                | Solid Republican  |
| MD-06    | David Trone (D)          | 55%   | Biden 54%                | Likely Democratic |
| MI-07    | Elissa Slotkin (D)       | 52%   | Biden 49.4%              | Toss-up           |
| NC-08    | Dan Bishop (R)           | <i>Results and race rating withheld due to upcoming redistricting</i> |                          |                   |
| NJ-03    | Andy Kim (D)             | 56%   | Biden 56%                | Solid Democratic  |
| TX-32    | Colin Allred (D)         | 65%   | Biden 66%                | Solid Democratic  |
| VA-10    | Jennifer Wexton (D)      | 53%   | Biden 58%                | Likely Democratic |
| WV-02    | Alex Mooney (R)          | 66%   | Trump 68%                | Solid Republican  |

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“I don’t know that [a presidential] rematch is a huge advantage for either [congressional] candidate,” a Democratic strategist based in Michigan told *Inside Elections*.

The UAW strike has provided an opportunity for both Biden and Trump to reach out to these blue collar workers — Biden standing staunchly on the side of the labor, becoming the first sitting president to join a picket line, and Trump attempting to toe the line of criticizing union leadership while connecting with the rank-and-file members.

One Michigan Republican strategist called Biden and Trump’s trips evidence that “the blue-collar vote is up for grabs.”

One of the factories currently on strike, Lansing General Motors Redistribution Center, is in the 7th, and Hertel joined the picket line over the weekend. Barrett, meanwhile, has stayed quiet on the issue.

The strike itself might not be a significant issue next November, though depending on how long it lasts, its economic ramifications could ripple into the new year.

And the manufacturing issues undergirding the strike will remain significant throughout the election cycle. Democrats hammered Barrett in 2022 for voting against economic incentives to attract auto manufacturers as a state senator. The incentive package included funds to attract a GM battery cell plant in Eaton County, Barrett’s home base.



Curtis Hertel Jr.

Courtesy Hertel Campaign

Democrats have continued that line of attack in 2024. And Hertel, in contrast, has made his work on this same legislation a key part of his message.

“In Slotkin’s case, she was paying offense on domestic manufacturing by highlighting the CHIPs Act. The corollary for Curtis is being able to talk in the affirmative about the manufacturing plants,” one Michigan Democrat said.

But one of those incentives packages Hertel has been involved with could become a weakness. Republicans have attacked the Democrat for his involvement with legislation that provided incentives for Gotion, a manufacturing company that plans to build an electric vehicle battery plant in the state. Gotion’s parent company is based in China and has ties to the Chinese Communist Party.

Along with these economic issues, abortion is likely to be a significant issue again. Proposition 3 won in the 7th by double digits, evidence of the district’s pro-choice bent. Last cycle, Barrett sent out mailers calling himself “100% pro-life — no exceptions.” And when asked in a debate if he would support a federal ban on abortion, Barrett would not answer the question directly.

Without abortion directly on the ballot, Republicans hope that the issue won’t be as salient as it was in 2022.

“In some ways the Prop 3 stuff kind of bails Barrett out,” one Michigan Republican strategist noted. “He can say the voters decided it here in Michigan.” But the strategist also acknowledged that Barrett would have to answer for his position on a federal abortion ban.

While it won’t have the same impact as the presidential race, the dynamics of the U.S. Senate race could make a difference on the margins.

Slotkin remains the clear frontrunner for the Democratic primary nomination, though she faces a few serious primary opponents, and Democratic strategists expect that Slotkin will carry her seat in the general election.

Michiganders can also expect to see Slotkin and Hertel on the campaign trail together — the congresswoman has made it clear that she’ll be personally invested in the fight to keep her seat in Democratic hands.

It’s less obvious who Republicans’ Senate nominee will be. Former Rep. Mike Rogers looks like the frontrunner right now, but he might face multiple primary opponents, including former Detroit police chief James Craig, former Rep. Peter Meijer, and even businessman Perry Johnson, who is publicly considering ending his longshot presidential campaign and dropping down to the Senate race.

If Rogers is the GOP nominee, he could offset Slotkin’s strength in mid-Michigan. The former congressman represented a large portion of the current 7th District for 14 years (from 2001 until 2015).

And though the governor won’t be on the ballot, Whitmer’s own image will impact Hertel’s fortunes. Unlike Biden, whose approval rating is stuck underwater in Michigan, Whitmer remains popular and is at the top of the list of future Democratic presidential contenders.

## The Bottom Line

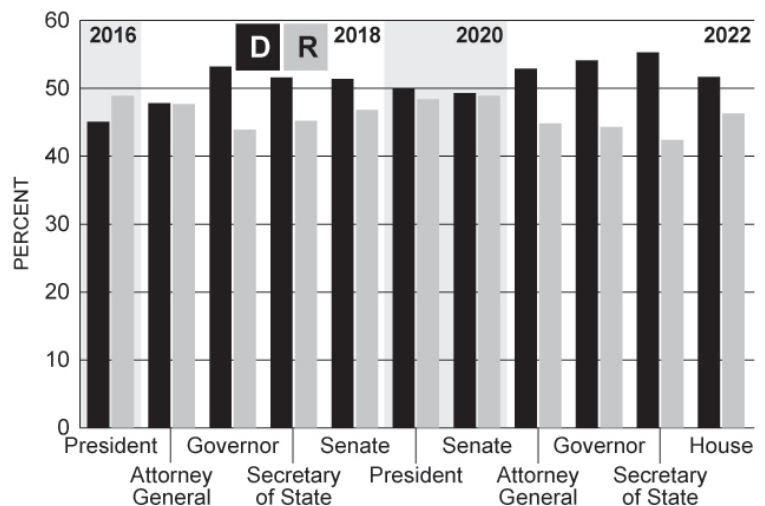
Ultimately, neither candidate has the bipartisan appeal of Slotkin, who was a true political outsider when she first ran for Congress six years ago.

Hertel’s deep history in Michigan Democratic politics is a double-edged sword — he’s in a strong position to rally Democratic support, particularly with his Ingham County base, but he will have a difficult time separating himself from the party if the political environment is rough for Democrats next year.

And though Barrett’s military background gives him an advantage in this swing seat, his solidly conservative record on abortion and economic policies could be a bridge too far for more moderate voters.

But both parties are satisfied with their standard-bearers, who are almost guaranteed to draw national support. Barring a dramatic shift in the political environment, Michigan’s 7th District is likely to feature one of the closest House races in the country. **IE**

## Statewide Election Results for Michigan’s 7th District



# California 13: Central Valley Rematch

By Jacob Rubashkin

The second-closest race of 2022 wasn't supposed to be competitive. But the seat is now at the epicenter of the fight for the House in 2024.

Last cycle, California's 13th District, located in the Central Valley, was made significantly more Democratic by the state's citizen redistricting commission, and Democratic Rep. Josh Harder was sitting on \$5.6 million in the bank after emerging as one of his party's best fundraisers and top political performers on the ballot.

But a surprise retirement from neighboring Democratic Rep. Jerry McNerney led Harder to run in a different seat, and the open 13th District slowly became a real pickup opportunity for Republicans after they nominated a well-funded political newcomer, and statewide Democrats including Gov. Gavin Newsom struggled to run robust campaigns at the top of the ticket.

Ultimately, GOP nursery owner John Duarte emerged victorious over Democratic state Assemblyman Adam Gray by just 564 votes.

Now, Gray is back for a rematch that is crucial for Democrats' path back to the majority.

## The Lay of the Land

The 13th District sits in the mid Central Valley, stretching from the southern tip of San Joaquin County south through Fresno County, but does not include either Stockton or Fresno. The 13th's two largest metro areas are Merced (37 percent of the district, per *Daily Kos*) and Modesto (29 percent).

By population, the district is predominantly Hispanic (65 percent), with the balance 22 percent White, 8 percent Asian, 5 percent Native American, and 4 percent Black. White voters, however, are significantly overrepresented among the electorate, making up 36 percent of the citizen voting age population, while 51 percent of the citizen voting age residents are Hispanic.

Just 13 percent of district residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, making it one of the three least college-educated districts in the country. The median annual household income in the 13th is \$59,219, ranking 325th among all districts.

Politically, the district swings substantially election to election, and often casts among the fewest raw votes of any district in the country.

In 2016, Hillary Clinton carried the 13th by 13 points, 54-41 percent.

In 2018, the district broke hard for Democrats as well, with every statewide Democratic candidate winning by double digits except Newsom, who carried the seat by a narrower 4 points, 52-48 percent.

In 2020, the 13th backed Joe Biden by 11 points, 54-43 percent.

But in 2021, it supported the recall against Newsom, 51-49 percent. And in 2022, it broke hard toward Republicans, backing every single statewide GOP nominee. The largest victory was by Lanhee Chen, the nominee for controller and the most competitive statewide candidate, who carried the seat by 10 points, 55-45 percent; the smallest was by Senate nominee Mark Meuser, who outpaced Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla by 2 points, 51-49 percent.

Democrats have a narrow 50.4-49.2 percent Baseline advantage, making it one of the eight most competitive districts in the country, according to *Inside Elections'* metric. And it's the type of race Democrats probably need to win to regain the majority.

## The Democratic Challenger

Following Gray's loss last year, some Democratic strategists hoped to recruit a Hispanic woman to run. But the two obvious contenders — state Sen. Anna Caballero and state Assemblywoman Esmeralda Soria, both of whom already represent roughly 60 percent of the 13th District's population — passed on bids.

Their lack of interest, plus the narrowness of the 2022 margin, made Gray the presumptive nominee in many Democratic strategists' minds

well before he made his bid official in August.

At 45 years old, Gray has a reputation as a wily political operator in Sacramento, where he represented Merced and Stanislaus counties in the general assembly from 2012



Courtesy Gray Campaign

Adam Gray

to 2022. While a legislator, Gray assembled a relatively moderate record as a "Valleycrat" — a centrist Democrat from the Central Valley — and sometimes clashed with Democratic leadership, including several high-profile spats over water bills that likely cost him seats on coveted committees.

A 2000 graduate of UC Santa Barbara, Gray jumped right into politics with a job as a staffer for state Assemblyman Dennis Cardoza (who would go on to beat Gray's future father-in-law, Rep. Gary Condit, in a 2002 race for Congress). After stints in several state legislative offices, including time with state Sen. Ron Calderon that would later land Gray in front of a federal grand jury investigating Calderon for bribery, Gray ran for office himself in 2012.

Buoyed by President Barack Obama's 14-point win in the 21st Assembly District, Gray won 58-42 percent. Two years later, he faced the same opponent, and the state GOP spent more than \$1 million trying to defeat him in one of the cycle's most expensive races; he ultimately won 53-47 percent, a margin of less than 4,000 votes.

In 2016, 2018, and 2020, he won re-election by more comfortable margins of 39, 42, and 19 points.

In 2022, after McNerney said he would retire rather than run in the newly-drawn 9th District, and Harder said he would run in the 9th rather than in the 13th (as he had previously planned), Gray launched his bid for the now-open 13th. In the primary, he placed second behind Duarte, outpacing fellow Democrat Phil Arballo by 14 points for a spot in the general election.

Public and private polling showed the general election highly competitive with large numbers of undecided voters. The race attracted significant outside spending — \$6.9 million from the GOP's Congressional Leadership Fund, and a combined \$6.5 million from Democrats' House Majority PAC and the DCCC — and Democrats grew progressively more concerned with losing the seat as Election Day approached.

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Ultimately, Duarte defeated Gray, 50.2-49.8 percent, in a race that remained uncalled for more than three weeks. Gray's hometown appeal was evident in his relative strength in Merced County, where he underperformed Biden's margin by just 6 points despite underperforming everywhere else by 13 to 19 points.

Gray's campaign team includes media consultant John Lapp of Ralston Lapp Guinn, who also made Gray's ads last cycle. While Gray is still filling out the rest of his campaign team, he is not bringing back Richie Ross, the longtime Sacramento political consultant and lobbyist who worked with Gray for a decade.

Gray raised \$2.4 million during the 2022 cycle, and doesn't have to file his first fundraising report of this cycle until Oct. 15.

### The Republican Incumbent

Duarte, 57, is a Central Valley native who graduated from San Diego State University in 1989 and later received an MBA from University of the Pacific in 1997. Since graduating college, Duarte has worked at the crop nursery founded by his parents in 1988, and he was the company's president from 2007 until his election to Congress. The Duarte nursery grows pistachios, walnuts, grapes, and almonds.



John Duarte

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Duarte first rose to prominence in 2013, when he became embroiled in a dispute with the Army Corps of Engineers after he plowed a property of his that included federally protected streams and wetlands. Duarte's case became a cause celebre among some farmers; in 2017, after a federal

judge found that he violated the Clean Water Act, Duarte settled with the government and paid a \$1.1 million fine.

The 2022 race was his first bid for political office.

In the 13th's all-party primary, Duarte quickly established himself as the GOP frontrunner, and ultimately placed first with 34 percent, followed by Democrats Gray (31 percent) and Arballo (17 percent), and Republican sports memorabilia salesman David Giglio (15 percent).

In the general election, Duarte defeated Gray, 50.2-49.8 percent.

In Congress, Duarte sits on the Transportation and Infrastructure, Natural Resources, and Agriculture committees. He is a member of the Republican Main Street Caucus.

Duarte's campaign team includes general consultant Duane Dichiaro of Axiom Strategies, which is also handling direct mail. The pollster is Erik Iverson of Moore Information, and Nathan Brennan and Owen Baker of Madison McQueen are doing the TV ads.

Duarte, who raised \$2.2 million and spent \$450,000 of his own money in 2022, reported \$1 million in his campaign account for this race on June 30.

### How it Plays Out

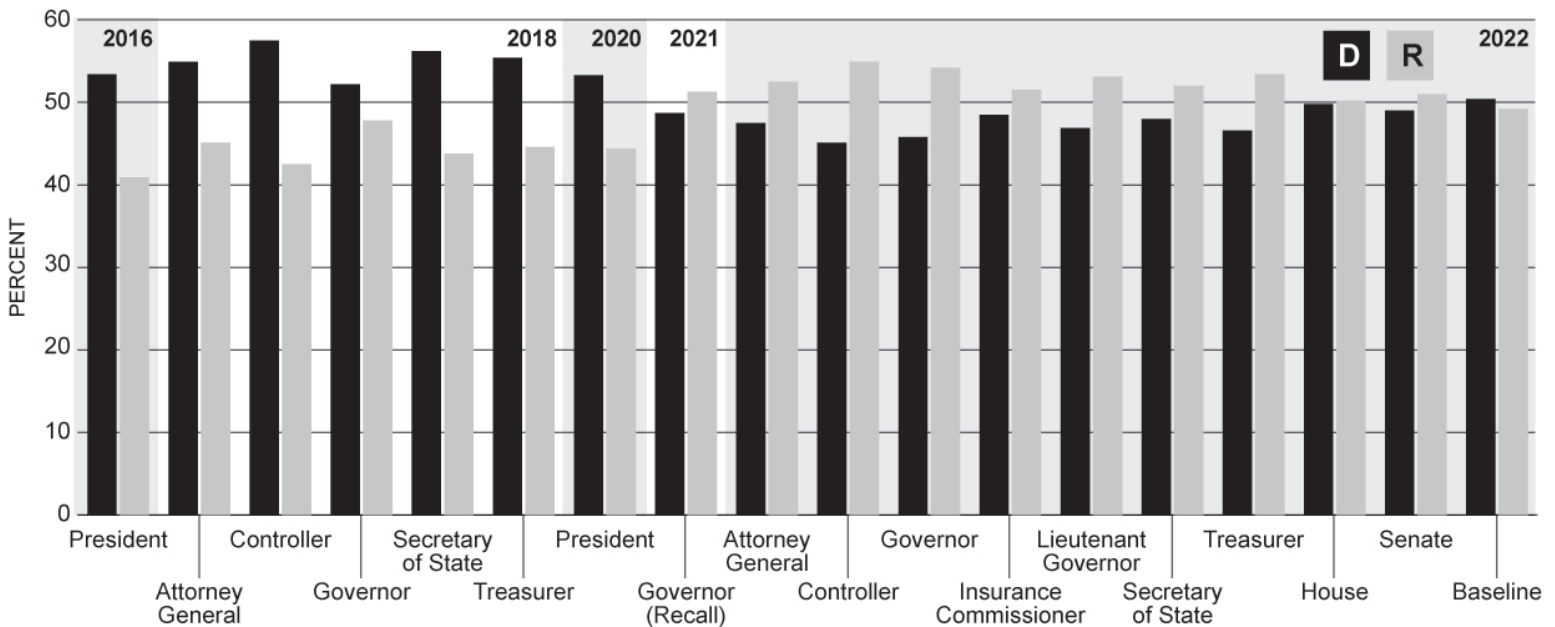
Democratic strategists are more optimistic about this seat than any of their other California pickup opportunities. Though it voted for Biden by a slightly smaller margin than either the 22nd or 27th districts, national Democrats view Duarte as a weaker and less tested incumbent than either David Valadao or Mike Garcia, who have each established themselves within their districts.

And unlike last cycle, when alarm bells began ringing late in the year, both parties are on notice that this will be a highly competitive contest.

Strategists on both sides of the aisle agree that both candidates will have to do a lot of work to re-introduce themselves to the district, given low levels of engagement and two distinct media markets. "It's difficult to drive a message here," said one national GOP strategist. "It's spread out, voters don't necessarily know well who Adam Gray or John Duarte are." A Democratic strategist who's worked in the district concurred,

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## Statewide Election Results for California's 13th District



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saying that “they’re both starting from relatively neutral territory.”

Gray will have a few advantages relative to last year. Turnout in the Central Valley will be significantly higher during a presidential year, and those additional voters will likely lean more Democratic. At the top of the ticket, a rematch between Biden and Trump is likely to produce a result similar to three years ago, when Biden won handily.

Unlike in 2022, then, Gray’s task won’t be to win over voters who are otherwise casting their ballot for Republican candidates, but instead to just hold onto most of the voters Biden is attracting at the top of the ticket.

In 2022, the district saw a significant drop in turnout relative to the presidential election in 2020. Just more than half as many votes were cast (57 percent), compared to a nationwide average of 68 percent. And the drop was worse in one of the most Democratic parts of the seat, Stanislaus County, where turnout ran at 52 percent of 2020’s number.

Democrats are still smarting from what they perceive as a lack of support from Newsom’s campaign on field organizing and get-out-the-vote efforts. “There was not any turnout operation at the top of the ticket post-Newsom recall,” said one national strategist, who was hopeful that with a “very competitive Senate race at the top of the ticket” next year, individual House campaigns such as Gray’s won’t have to carry the entire burden themselves. The best-case scenario for Gray may be a Senate contest between two Democratic candidates, both of whom will be invested in turning out voters across the state.

And Democratic strategists express optimism that, now that he is no longer in the state Assembly, Gray will have more time to devote to campaigning — and raising money.

In that regard, at least, Gray’s first fundraising quarter will be illuminating; his fundraising last cycle was not at the same level as many other non-incumbent candidates running in competitive races, and now he has to keep pace with a sitting member of Congress. “He needs to raise more money,” said one national Democratic strategist. “That’s the one thing he can do better this time around.” (Unlike last year, when Gray had to spend upward of \$400,000 to get past the well-funded Arballo in the primary, he can stockpile cash earlier in the cycle.)

Some Democrats believe that the opposition research the party used against Duarte wasn’t effectively litigated last cycle, with not enough focus on lawsuits and fines Duarte incurred over his employment practices. Strategists believe that could be the foundation for a populist, worker-driven argument against him. Expect to also see the allegations that Duarte sold farmers defective pistachio trees resurface in paid media.

Democratic strategists will also seize on Duarte’s comment that he’s “not that far from a lot of these Freedom Caucus guys” to try to tie him to the conservative caucus’s agenda, as well as the dysfunction in the House of Representatives caused by a few Republican members. And as they will in districts across the country, Democrats will work to paint Duarte as anti-abortion by citing his vote against the Women’s Health Protection Act, which would have codified *Roe v. Wade*.

Duarte’s challenge is the inverse of Gray’s: while he was able to win despite being the worst-performing Republican in his district in 2022, next year he will have to overperform the top of the ticket considerably, winning over Biden voters. That’s why his allies will look to highlight the places where he has broken from the national party, most notably on immigration. Duarte — who calls himself “immigration fluid” in

terms of his policy positions — is one of the few Republicans to support Democratic bills that would provide a path to permanent legal residency for undocumented immigrants.

Duarte is also one of three Republicans on California Rep. Zoe Lofgren’s farm workforce modernization bill, which would help undocumented farm workers gain legal status. Multiple GOP strategists pointed to Valadao as a model for Duarte to hold onto his seat despite the Democratic lean of the district.

Republicans believe they have a polished playbook for beating Gray, who they painted as a “Sacramento insider.” Last cycle, the NRCC and CLF ran ads hammering Gray on high gas prices and the state gas tax, as well as his connections to lobbyists like his ex-father-in-law Condit, and his missed votes in the assembly. GOP strategists believe the automatic gas tax increase slated for next July will keep the issue front-and-center, especially if gas remains over \$6 a gallon in parts of the district.

## The Bottom Line

This district is likely a must-win for Democrats looking to reclaim their majority in Congress. It featured the second-closest House race of 2022, and the district should vote handily for Biden at the top of the ticket.

Democrats believe that last year’s result was a fluke, and that Gray should easily flip this seat given that the political environment will likely be more favorable to his party next year. But Democrats’ persistent struggles with Hispanic men and Biden’s stubborn unpopularity may yet create an opening for Republicans like Duarte to win re-election, provided they can put enough distance between themselves and the national, Trump-led party.

Operatives from both parties see this race as the most competitive in all of California, and one of the most competitive in the nation. Its outcome could prove determinative in the ultimate math for the majority. **IE**

## CALENDAR

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| <b>Oct. 7</b>  | NHL season begins                         |
| <b>Oct. 14</b> | Louisiana Governor Primary                |
| <b>Oct. 24</b> | NBA season begins                         |
| <b>Oct. 27</b> | World Series starts                       |
| <b>Nov. 7</b>  | Kentucky and Mississippi General Election |
| <b>Nov. 18</b> | Louisiana Governor Runoff (if necessary)  |
| <b>Nov. 23</b> | Thanksgiving                              |
| <b>Dec. 25</b> | Christmas Day                             |
| <b>Jan. 8</b>  | College Football National Championship    |
| <b>Jan. 15</b> | Iowa GOP Presidential Caucuses            |
| <b>Jan. 26</b> | West Virginia filing deadline             |
| <b>Feb. 3</b>  | South Carolina Presidential Primaries     |
| <b>Feb. 6</b>  | Nevada Dem Presidential Primary           |
| <b>Feb. 8</b>  | Nevada GOP Presidential Caucus            |
| <b>Feb. 11</b> | Super Bowl LVII                           |
| <b>Feb. 22</b> | MLB Spring Training begins                |
| <b>Feb. 24</b> | South Carolina GOP Presidential Primary   |
| <b>Feb. 25</b> | MLS season begins                         |
| <b>Feb. 27</b> | Michigan Presidential Primaries           |