

Inside Elections

with
Nathan L. Gonzales
Nonpartisan Analysis

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Maine 2: Turning LePage on Golden?

By Jacob Rubashkin

Each party has their own white whales in Congress, the representatives who avoid defeat cycle after cycle despite running in difficult districts and facing fierce opposition. This cycle, Republicans' biggest white whale is Maine Democrat Jared Golden.

Since coming from behind to win America's first ranked-choice voting congressional election in 2018—a victory that still makes GOP strategists wince—the tattooed Marine has bedeviled Republicans, winning three re-elections as his district votes red in almost every other race up and down the ballot.

This cycle, Maine Republicans are making a big bet on one of the most prominent and polarizing members of their party: former Gov. Paul LePage, a larger-than-life figure who ran the state in the 2010s, shares a hometown with Golden, and has never lost the 2nd District.

And now the GOP is hopeful that a primary challenge will sap Golden's resources and attention ahead of what will be a grueling general election.

Democrats need a net gain of just 3 seats to flip back the House of Representatives, but if they lose any incumbents, that path becomes much more difficult. Golden represents a more Republican seat than any of his Democratic colleagues, making him a top target for Republicans—and Maine's 2nd District a key race to watch next year.

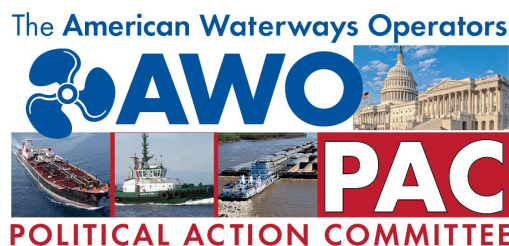
The Lay of the Land

Vast, sparsely populated, and extending from Maine's rocky shores north to the Canadian border, the 2nd District is something of an anomaly among seats held by a Democrat.

The citizen voting-age population of the district is 95 percent white, making it the second-whitest electorate of any district in America. With a median age of 45.3, it is the 12th-oldest district in the country (and the third-oldest outside of Florida), and the third-oldest represented by a Democrat. Just 28 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree, significantly lower than the national rate of 38 percent, and the median household income of \$67,291 was lower than the national median, \$83,730.

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This issue brought to you by



2026 House Ratings

Toss-Up (4D, 9R)

AZ 1 (Open; Schweikert, R)#	CO 8 (Evans, R)	NC 1 (Davis, D)	PA 7 (Mackenzie, R)
AZ 6 (Ciscomani, R)	IA 1 (Miller-Meeks, R)	NE 2 (Open; Bacon, R)	TX 34 (Gonzalez, D)
CA 13 (Gray, D)	MI 7 (Barrett, R)	NY 17 (Lawler, R)	VA 2 (Kiggans, R)
CA 45 (Tran, D)			

Tilt Democratic (7D)

CA 47 (Min, D)
ME 2 (Golden, D)
MI 8 (McDonald Rivet, D)
NM 2 (Vasquez, D)
NY 4 (Gillen, D)
TX 28 (Cuellar, D)
WA 3 (Perez, D)

Tilt Republican (5R)

MI 10 (Open; James, R)
NJ 7 (Kean Jr., R)
PA 8 (Bresnahan, R)
PA 10 (Perry, R)
WI 3 (Van Orden, R)

Lean Democratic (15D)

CA 21 (Costa, D) NV 3 (Lee, D)
CA 27 (Whitesides, D) NV 4 (Horsford, D)
CA 49 (Levin, D) NY 19 (Riley, D)
CA 9 (Harder, D) NY 3 (Suoizzi, D)
FL 23 (Moskowitz, D) VA 7 (Vindman, D)
IN 1 (Mrvan, D)
MN 2 (Open; Craig, DFL)
NH 1 (Open; Pappas, D)
NJ 9 (Pou, D)
NV 1 (Titus, D)

Lean Republican (4R)

CA 22 (Valadao, R)
CA 40 (Kim, R)
CA 41 (Calvert, R)
IA 3 (Nunn, R)

Likely Democratic (8D)

CA 25 (Ruiz, D) PA 17 (Deluzio, D)
IL 17 (Sorensen, D)
MI 3 (Scholten, D)
NH 2 (Goodlander, D)
NY 18 (Ryan, D)
NY 22 (Mannion, D)
OR 5 (Bynum, D)

Likely Republican (1D, 11R)

AK AL (Begich, R) PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)
AZ 2 (Crane, R) TX 15 (De La Cruz, R)
CA 3 (Kiley, R) TX 35 (Open; Casar, D)
CO 5 (Crank, R) VA 1 (Wittman, R)
FL 13 (Luna, R) WI 1 (Steil, R)
IA 2 (Open; Hinson, R)
MI 4 (Huizenga, R)

Pending New Map (3D)

OH 1 (Landsman, D)
OH 9 (Kaptur, D)
OH 13 (Sykes, D)

	GOP	DEM
Solid	184	172
Likely/Lean/Tilt	21	30
Total	204	203
Toss-up	13	
Ohio map TBD	15	
Needed for majority	218	

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

CALENDAR

Nov. 4	Texas' 18th District Special Primary Election
Nov. 4	New Jersey & Virginia Gubernatorial Elections
Dec. 2	Tennessee's 7th District Special General Election
Dec. 8	Texas Candidate Filing Deadline

Report Shorts

Kentucky Senate. Former Marine fighter pilot Amy McGrath joined the Democratic race for the open seat left by retiring GOP Sen. Mitch McConnell. After losing a close House race to Republican Andy Barr in 2018, McGrath gained national attention for her run against McConnell in 2020. She raised and spent nearly \$90 million and still lost by 20 points, so Democrats are wary of her running again. She'll have to get by state House Minority Leader Pamela Stevenson, attorney Logan Forsythe and others in the primary this time. The GOP primary features Barr, former state Attorney General Daniel Cameron and businessman Nate Morris. Solid Republican.

Tennessee's 7th District. The matchup is set for the Dec. 2 special general election to replace GOP Rep. Mark Green in this Middle and West Tennessee district. Former state Department of General Services commissioner Matt Van Epps easily won the Republican primary after being endorsed by President Trump, while Democratic state Rep. Aftyn Behn won narrowly with 28 percent as all four candidates finished with more than 23 percent of the vote. Trump won the 7th District by 22 points in 2024, so Republicans should hold the seat. However, Democrats have been overperforming the presidential margin in special elections by an average of 15 points, according to *The Downballot*, so it could get interesting, especially if Democratic turnout is strong in the piece of Nashville Republicans added to the district in 2022. Solid Republican.

Tennessee's 9th District. African American state Rep. Justin Pearson, 30, is challenging Rep. Steve Cohen, 76, in the Democratic primary in a majority Black district anchored by Memphis. Cohen has previously defeated challengers who were also Black, but this could be his toughest race in years. Solid Democratic.

Texas Senate. Houston-area Rep. Wesley Hunt jumped into the Republican race, which already featured Sen. John Cornyn and state Attorney General Ken Paxton. Hunt's entry angered the GOP establishment who is supporting Cornyn and likely increases the chances there will be a runoff in the race. Cornyn no longer trails badly in polling, but that's because Paxton's support has waned, not because the senator's support has grown. Democrats also have a primary featuring former Rep. Colin Allred, state Rep. James Talarico and astronaut Terry Virts. Likely Republican.

2026 Senate Ratings

Toss-up (3)	
MI Open (Peters, D)	Ossoff (D-Ga.)
NC Open (Tillis, R)	
Tilt Democratic (0)	Tilt Republican (1)
	Collins (R-Maine)
Lean Democratic (1)	Lean Republican (1)
NH Open (Shaheen, D)	Husted (R-Ohio)
Likely Democratic (1)	Likely Republican (2)
MN Open (Smith, DFL)	IA Open (Ernst, R)
	Cornyn (R-Texas)
Solid Democratic (9)	Solid Republican (17)
IL Open (Durbin, D)	AL Open (Tuberville, R)
Booker (D-N.J.)	KY Open (McConnell, R)
Coons (D-Del.)	Capito (R-W.V.)
Hickenlooper (D-Colo.)	Cassidy (R-Lou.)
Lujan (D-N.M.)	Cotton (R-Ark.)
Markey (D-Mass.)	Daines (R-Mont.)
Merkley (D-Ore.)	Graham (R-S.C.)
Reed (D-R.I.)	Hagerty (R-Tenn.)
Warner (D-Va.)	Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.)
	Lummis (R-Wyo.)
	Marshall (R-Kan.)
	Moody (R-Fl.)
	Mullin (R-Okla.)
	Ricketts (R-Neb.)
	Risch (R-Idaho)
	Rounds (R-S.D.)
	Sullivan (R-Ak.)

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

Utah Redistricting. The Utah legislature passed a map that would make two districts more Democratic. The 3rd District, currently represented by Republican Mike Kennedy, would shift from a Baseline of R+30.6 to R+10.7 while the 2nd District, currently represented by Republican Celeste Maloy, would go from R+24.4 to R+14.8. Both seats would still be reaches for Democrats, but could get interesting, particularly if former Democratic Rep. Ben McAdams runs. A judge still needs to sign off on the new map. We'll make any necessary ratings changes after a new map is official.



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A Detailed Analysis of Missouri's New Congressional Map

By Nathaniel Rakich

The unprecedented redistricting arms race of 2025 continues apace. After Texas Republicans redrew their state's congressional map with the goal of flipping from three to five House seats, California Democrats voted to place their own new congressional map before voters this November that would do the same thing. Now, Missouri Republicans are getting in on the act: This past weekend, Republican Gov. Mike Kehoe signed into law a new map for the Show Me State that turns Missouri's 5th Congressional District from a deep-blue seat to a dark-red one. As a result, *Inside Elections* is changing our rating for the seat from Solid Democratic to Solid Republican.

At least for now. There is some reason to believe it won't be in effect by the time of the 2026 midterms. Multiple lawsuits have already been filed against the map, and voters may have the chance to veto it in a referendum next year. For now, though, here is a detailed analysis of the new plan.

Overview

Missouri's congressional map was already pretty good for Republicans — and bad if you like competitive elections. According to Inside Elections' Baseline, our measure of the baseline partisanship of states and congressional districts, the old map had six seats that were R+10 or redder and two seats that were D+10 or bluer — and no seats in the competitive zone in between. This resulted in a congressional delegation that has consisted of six Republicans and two Democrats since 2013.

The new map, however, features seven districts with a Baseline of R+10 or redder and leaves just one seat that is D+10 or bluer. There are still no seats between D+10 and R+10.

The efficiency gap statistic helps quantify how much better the new map is for Republicans than the old one. Efficiency gap is a measure of how many of one party's votes are "wasted" versus the other's. (For these purposes, any vote cast for the losing party or cast for the winning party after it already won a majority is considered wasted.) An ideal efficiency gap is 0, meaning that each party has the same number of wasted votes. Missouri's old congressional map had an efficiency gap of R+10, meaning Republicans wasted 10 percentage points fewer votes than Democrats did. The new map has an efficiency gap of R+21.

District By District

The specific way that the new map squeezes an extra Republican seat out of Missouri is by breaking up the Kansas City area. Previously, most of this heavily Democratic region was covered by one very compact seat, Rep. Emanuel Cleaver's 5th District. Under the new map, however, it is split among three districts — the 4th, 5th, and 6th — that also stretch well into rural central Missouri.

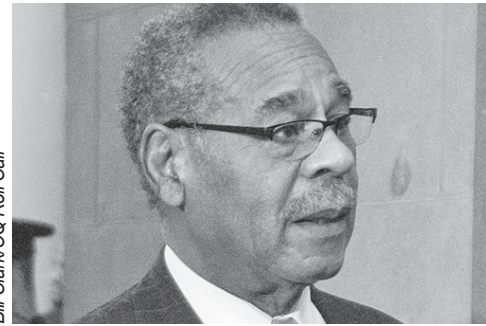
That means the 5th District now includes solidly Republican counties such as Lafayette, Johnson, and Pettis (currently represented by Republican Rep. Mark Alford). That's enough to take its Baseline all the way from D+23 to R+17, all but dooming Cleaver's re-election bid. (He says he will run again no matter what happens with the maps.)

To balance things out, Alford's 4th District now includes a thin sliver of Kansas City between the Kansas-Missouri border and Troost Avenue — historically the dividing line between the city's white and

Black neighborhoods. (As a result, the map has come under fire for being racially insensitive as well as politically unfair.) As a result, its Baseline goes from R+41 to R+20 — less red, but still safely Republican.

Meanwhile, GOP Rep. Sam Graves' 6th District, previously an R+38 district spanning northern Missouri, now takes in more of Kansas City's northern suburbs, including North Kansas City and Gladstone. It, too, is still safely Republican at R+26.

Those aren't the only changes the new map makes, though. Republican Rep. Ann Wagner's 2nd District, based in the St. Louis



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

Emanuel Cleaver

suburbs, now extends further into conservative southern Missouri. That nudges its Baseline from R+11 to R+14 — a small shift, but one that could insulate Wagner if a blue wave develops in 2026 (or a future election).

As a domino effect

from the above changes, GOP Rep. Bob Onder's 3rd District also looks fairly different under the new map; it's now a more compact collection of counties between St. Charles, Columbia, and Hannibal. However, its partisanship is little changed; at R+20, it remains a solidly Republican seat. Finally, the 1st District changes little under the new plan, and the southern-Missouri-based 7th and 8th districts are exactly the same.

What's Next

As mentioned, however, this map faces multiple hurdles that could prevent it from actually being used in next year's elections. The most straightforward is that it could be blocked in court; two separate lawsuits have already been filed arguing that the Missouri Constitution does not allow mid-decade redistricting, and a third alleges that the special session at which the map was passed was called illegally. St. Louis Magazine also reported on a potential error in the map, where a block in Kansas City may have been assigned to two districts at the same time. One of the lawsuits mentions this as a reason to strike down the map.

However, a likelier path to blocking the map — and certainly the one that opponents have the most control over — might be to put it before voters in a veto referendum election. Missouri is one of 23 states that allows ordinary citizens to attempt to repeal a law passed by the legislature by collecting enough signatures to put it on the ballot in a future election; if a majority of voters don't vote for it at that point, it is stricken from the books. This process has a long and successful history in Missouri; such a referendum has qualified for the ballot 27 times, and voters vetoed the law in question 25 of those times. (Most recently, voters in 2018 rejected a law passed by the legislature to make Missouri a "right-to-work" state, 67 percent to 33 percent.)

Here in 2025, a coalition of liberal groups calling itself People NOT Politicians has already started collecting signatures to force a public vote on the new congressional map. They have until December 11

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(90 days after the end of the legislative session that passed the law) to collect a number of signatures greater than or equal to 5 percent of the 2024 gubernatorial vote in six of the state's eight congressional districts, which amounts to at least 106,384 signatures. If they are successful, a referendum over the map would appear on the November 2026 ballot — and, crucially, the map would be put on pause until the referendum takes place. Effectively, that means Democrats can block the map from getting used in the 2026 elections just by collecting enough signatures.

If that happens, the legislature would be allowed to move up the date of the referendum so that the map's fate would be decided sooner — in other words, so that it could be used in 2026 if voters give it their OK. That

could set up two high-stakes referenda — Missouri's and California's — over redistricting right on each other's heels in late 2025 or early 2026.

It's too early to say how Missourians might vote on such a referendum. A Change Research survey sponsored by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee recently found that registered voters in Missouri opposed efforts to redraw Missouri's congressional map 44 percent to 37 percent, with 19 percent undecided. Of course, this was an internal Democratic poll and did not specifically ask about a potential ballot measure on the topic, so it should be taken with a big grain of salt. One thing that is for certain, however, is that such a referendum would be fiercely fought over, as it would essentially determine, months in advance, control of Missouri's 5th District in 2026. **IE**

Arizona 6: Send The Marine

By Jacob Rubashkin

Republican Rep. Juan Ciscomani has been in the spotlight since he stepped on the national political stage four years ago. The young, telegenic candidate was an instant hit with GOP donors and power players, and his story — immigrating from Mexico and climbing from working class beginnings to become the governor's closest advisor — helped him win over swing voters, flip a battleground Tucson district, and play a crucial role in Republicans' 2022 House takeover.

Now in his third term, Ciscomani faces a different kind of test, and a different kind of opponent. This is



Juan Ciscomani

Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

his first re-election campaign running with a Republican in the White House, and while Donald Trump narrowly won the 6th District last year, under the hood the district also saw movement toward Democrats among the voters more likely to turn out in a midterm.

Republicans currently hold a five-seat majority in the House, 220-215, so Democrats need a net gain of three seats to win back control. With mid-decade redistricting giving Republicans a cushion of anywhere from five to fourteen seats, Democrats must look to Trump-won seats such as the 6th.

If Ciscomani can hold on, it complicates Democrats' path to the majority — and sets up the rising star for a future statewide run for Senate in two years.

The Lay of the Land

Bordering Mexico to the south and New Mexico to the east, Arizona's 6th District is a mix of the east side of Tucson and rural areas east of the city. A mostly suburban district, 72 percent of residents live in the greater Tucson metro area, including many in the wealthier suburbs east of the city. But the district also includes the million-acre Coronado National Forest and vast expanses of sparsely populated land.

Nearly 70 percent of citizen voting-age residents are white, and 22 percent are non-white Hispanic. Roughly 39 percent of residents have

a college degree, which is slightly higher than the national average of 36 percent, though the median household income of \$73,000 is slightly below the national median.

Politically, the district has become one of the most evenly divided in the nation as the region has trended away from its more Republican roots. Trump finished ahead of Vice President Kamala Harris by 0.7 points in 2024, but Joe Biden won it by 0.07 points in 2020. In 2016, Trump would have carried the district under its current lines by 5 points, 49-44 percent, and in 2012 and 2008 Barack Obama would have lost it by double-digits.

Roughly three quarters of the district's votes come from Pima County, where Democrats typically win by high single or low double-digits. The balance comes from Cochise, Pinal, Graham and Greenlee counties, more rural areas which Republicans win by a wider margin.

While Tucson itself has become moderately more Democratic over the past two decades, the shift has been most pronounced in the wealthier and more educated suburbs: Oro Valley, Catalina Foothills, Tanque Verde, and Casas Adobes, which voted for John McCain by a collective 8 points in 2008 but for Harris by 12 points in 2024.

Notably, even as Harris performed 6 points worse than Biden in Arizona overall, she only underperformed by 0.8 points in the 6th District. While Harris's margin in Tucson was slightly worse than Biden's, she actually performed better than him in some of the largest Tucson suburbs.

Democrats have had more success in the 6th in other statewide contests. In 2024's Senate race, Democrat Ruben Gallego won it by 6 points, 51-46 percent, over Kari Lake. In 2022, Katie Hobbs carried it by 4 points en route to a narrow statewide gubernatorial victory over Lake, and Sen. Mark Kelly (whose wife Gabby Giffords represented a previous version of the seat) blasted past Republican Blake Masters, 54-44 percent. The only statewide GOP candidate to carry the district since 2018 is Kimberly Yee, the state treasurer.

The Republican Incumbent

Now in his second term, Ciscomani, 41, is one of just two immigrants serving as a Republican member of Congress. Born in Sonora, the Mexican state bordering Arizona, Ciscomani immigrated to Tucson when he was 11; his father drove a bus to support their family.

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A 2003 graduate of Pima Community College and 2005 graduate of University of Arizona, Ciscomani became a citizen in 2006 and worked as a development specialist for his alma mater before joining the staff of Gov. Doug Ducey in 2015. He also ran for a multi-member Tucson-area state House seat in 2008, finishing in last place with 15 percent.

He had more success in his first run for Congress, in 2022, when he was a top GOP recruit in the open 6th District, held by retiring Democrat Ann Kirkpatrick. Ciscomani won 47 percent in a five-way primary before facing law professor Kirsten Engel in the general election. Republicans spent heavily on Ciscomani in that race with \$5.4 million in outside support, but national Democrats did not spend to support Engel, who lost by 1.4 points, 50.7-49.3 percent, in one of the cycle's closest races.

In 2024, Ciscomani faced an unexpectedly stiff primary challenge from 2022 candidate Kathleen Winn, and though he outspent her by more than 10-to-1, he prevailed with just 59 percent of the vote to her 41 percent. In the general election, Democrats invested heavily in Engel after ignoring her two years prior, but Ciscomani won a slightly larger victory, 50-47.5 percent, with a Green Party candidate taking 2.5 percent.

In Congress, Ciscomani sits on the Appropriations and Veterans Affairs committees.

His campaign team includes general consultant Daniel Scarpinato (Ducey's former chief of staff), media consultant Larry McCarthy of McCarthy Hennings Whalen, and New Mexico-based pollster Nicole McCluskey of Public Opinion Strategies.

The Democratic Challenger

In a rarity among offensive targets this cycle, Democrats have largely coalesced around a single candidate against Ciscomani: Marine veteran

JoAnna "Jo" Mendoza, whose compelling life story and second career as a political operative and veterans' advocate helped her clear the field nearly a year before the primary.

Immigration attorney Mo Goldman had been Mendoza's best-funded primary challenger but dropped out in August and threw his support to her. So did Raytheon engineer Chris Donat. Still in the race but unlikely to have the resources or political operation to make an impact are former FBI agent Johnathan Buma, who was arrested earlier this year on suspicion of disclosing classified information (he says the charges are in retaliation for being a whistleblower against Trump) and Samantha Severson, who briefly ran for the special election in the neighboring 7th District but failed to get on the ballot.

Mendoza, 48, grew up poor in rural Pinal County and worked in the cotton fields as a child before enlisting in the US Navy at age 17. After three years in the Navy, Mendoza joined the Marine Corps, where she spent another 17 years. Mendoza served as a drill instructor and deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and she left active duty with the rank of gunnery sergeant. She also served as a sexual assault prevention officer and since returning to civilian life she [has written about surviving sexual assault by her superior officer](#).

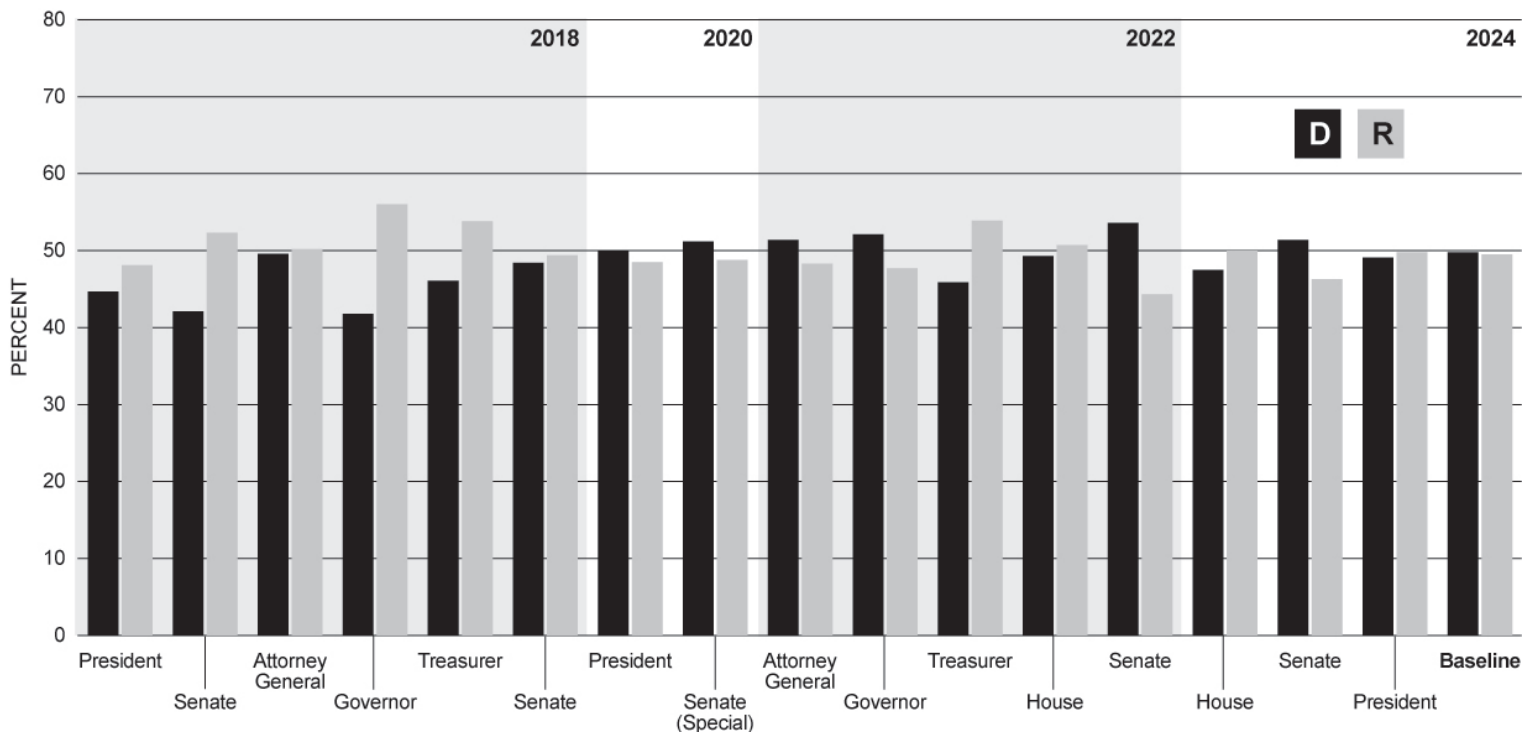
She earned an associate's degree from Palomar College in San Marcos, California in 2009, a bachelor's degree from the for-profit American Military University in 2013, and master's degrees in leadership and political psychology from Grand Canyon University and Arizona State, in 2019 and 2023, respectively.

After active duty, Mendoza worked for a foster care organization and as a veteran advisor at Pima Community College, before entering political work in 2018 as veterans services representative for Rep. Tom O'Halleran, who represented Northeastern Arizona at the time.

In 2019, Mendoza left O'Halleran's office for another position at Pima

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Statewide Election Results for Arizona's 6th District



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Community College, and launched a bid for a Tucson-area state Senate seat. She lost to incumbent Republican Vince Leach 54-46 percent as Trump carried the district by a similar 53-45 percent margin in the 2020 election.

Following her loss, Mendoza returned to O'Halleran's office as deputy district director and managed his unsuccessful 2022 bid for re-election in a significantly redrawn seat.

After that race, Mendoza founded her own consulting firm focused on helping women and LGBTQ+ clients with brand strategy and campaign management. She also did stints as the executive director of the Arizona Center for Economic Progress, which promotes a more progressive tax code, and VetsForward, a veteran-led pro-democracy group.

Her campaign team includes media consultants Martha McKenna and Liz Richards of McKenna Media, pollster Michelle Mayorga of GBAO, and direct mail consultants Rodd McLeod (a former Giffords campaign manager) of Clean Message Delivery as well as Jon Sutton and Matt Smart of Sutton & Smart.



JoAnna Mendoza

Courtesy Mendoza Campaign

The General Election

Democrats are still smarting from the 2022 race for this district and the decision not to support Engel financially, leading to her narrow loss. Determined not to make the same mistake again, Democrats spent heavily in 2024, and both parties are likely to invest in the district in 2026. Democratic outside groups have already spent \$2.7 million on ads attacking Ciscomani this year.

But the second-term Republican has withstood attacks on different elements of his record before. In 2022, Engel ran against Ciscomani on abortion in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision and the implementation of Arizona's 15-week abortion ban, and in 2024 Engel and her allies returned to the abortion argument while also litigating Ciscomani's role in a Christian leadership program called the Patriot Academy, which focuses on "restoring our constitutional republic and Biblical principles that cause a nation to thrive." So Democrats may need new messages — in addition to a new candidate — after falling flat trying to paint Ciscomani as too extreme for the moderate district.

"He looks like your clean cut Republican congressman," said one Democratic strategist, "he doesn't present as extreme or MAGA."

Rather than try to make Ciscomani out as an extremist or tie him to Lake and Masters as in previous years, national and local strategists say healthcare, the economy and cost of living will be front and center for Democrats this cycle. "We're going to beat him because Trump is unpopular and prices are terrible, and everything else after that is just seasoning on the meal," said one Democratic source, echoing the same messaging that Republicans used effectively during the Biden years.

Mendoza in particular has singled out rising energy and childcare costs, drawing on her experience as a single mom to press the issue. And she and her Democratic allies are eager to discuss Ciscomani's about-

face on the Medicaid cuts in Republicans' One Big Beautiful Bill; prior to voting for it, he signed several letters warning against the legislation's effects on Medicaid, saying it "threatens access to coverage or jeopardizes the stability of our hospitals and providers."

"He doesn't stick to his word," said one national Democratic strategist, "and that will be largely the message against him, rather than Patriot Academy."

Ciscomani's allies point to the I-10 widening project as a crowning achievement, one that shows his ability to deliver tangible results to the district and also work across the aisle. He helped secure \$95 million in grants for improvements along the major Phoenix-Tucson artery from the Biden administration in 2024 — money from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law passed in 2021, before he was elected. Ciscomani will also highlight the popular parts of the GOP reconciliation bill, such as the tax deductions for tips and social security, and emphasize his ranking as the most bipartisan member of the Arizona delegation as assessed by the Center for Effective Lawmaking and the Lugar Center.

Republicans also believe that while immigration has faded as an issue nationally since Trump took office, voters in the border district will reward Ciscomani for securing the southern frontier. But the decreased salience of border security could take away one of the strongest hits Ciscomani used in his previous runs against Engel, whose 2022 comment that Arizona didn't have an "immigration crisis" featured heavily in GOP advertising.

With her military service, hardscrabble upbringing, and Latin heritage, Mendoza cuts a different profile than Engel, who was a prodigious fundraiser but also an easy target for Republicans who caricatured her as a liberal professor soft on crime and the border.

That won't stop Republicans from trying, as GOP strategists signal they'll mine Mendoza's positions from her 2020 state Senate run and her consulting work for LGBTQ+ clients for opposition research.

And while some Republicans acknowledged that her military background will make her a tougher target, their playbook will also be to focus on her post-military work as a political operative and government affairs professional to paint her as an out-of-touch lobbyist.

Ciscomani's allies are also excited about the opportunity to flex a financial advantage after being outspent by Engel last year.

Ciscomani reported \$2 million in cash-on-hand on June 30, compared to \$585,000 for Mendoza. At a similar point in 2023, Ciscomani had slightly less campaign cash (\$1.6 million) and had raised nearly \$1 million less overall.

If there's one flashing yellow light for Mendoza, it is her finances. Though she got off to a hot start, raising \$816,000 from mid-February to March, from April through June she spent more (\$577,000) than she raised (\$436,000), in large part on fundraising expenses.

"They've been very spendy on acquisition," said one Mendoza ally. "They have invested, some may say overinvested" in fundraising lists, the Democrat said, "but it's a solvable problem, and at the end of the day this race is going to be won or lost in 'Does she have enough to do the paid media she needs to do?'"

Other Democrats are less concerned, and take confidence from the wide constellation of identity-focused outside groups supporting her, including organizations that back candidates who are Hispanic, veterans, women, and LGBTQ+ (Mendoza is bisexual). Those groups, which include Victory Fund, Bold PAC, VoteVets and EMILY's List, could all advertise on Mendoza's behalf.

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How It Plays Out

The Democratic path to victory in the 6th is no secret, with statewide candidates regularly winning the district. Mendoza's allies hope her profile will give her an edge in the more rural areas where she needs to regain ground, such as her hometown of Eloy, a majority-Hispanic city that swung 15 points toward Trump between 2020 and 2024.

If she can claw back even a bit of that territory and build on continued Democratic momentum in suburbs such as Oro Valley and Catalina Foothills, that should be enough for a win in an evenly divided district.

But Ciscomani and his allies have different plans. While Republicans acknowledge that Ciscomani's 3-point win in 2024 was tantamount to a blowout in this district, the Republican has proven resilient; he was the only Republican congressman to outperform Trump in his district in 2024, and survived running with Lake and Masters, two of the weakest Republican candidates in recent Arizona history. And he did so by running ahead of Trump in the same suburban areas where Democrats have seen the most significant gains, indicating that his profile remains appealing to voters who are otherwise souring on Republicans.

And Republican strategists continue to see upside for Ciscomani as Trump expands the GOP coalition to include more Hispanic and Latino voters. While Ciscomani did better than Trump in Pima County in 2024 (his margin was more than 2 points larger than Trump's), he actually lagged behind the president in the rest of the district, so he may have room to grow elsewhere.

Ultimately, the shape of the race may come down to the national and state political environment. If voters remain unhappy with the economy and the direction of the country, Ciscomani could face considerable headwinds as a member of the majority party. With Trump unpopular but not on the ballot, voters may look to other Republicans to take out their frustrations with the president.

This will also be the first time in more than a decade that Arizona

doesn't have a Senate race on the ballot. Since 2018, the state has seen more than \$800 million in Senate spending, including \$180 million in 2024 and \$258 million in 2022, a constant barrage that has made advertising exorbitantly expensive and made it challenging for down-ballot candidates to get their message out.

While there will be a competitive governor's race taking place next year, the spending will be a fraction of what could be expected in a Senate race. In 2022, total ad spending in the gubernatorial general election totaled just \$51 million. And in Arizona, the gubernatorial race will actually appear below the House race on the ballot.

The Bottom Line

Across three different iterations over three decades, this district has established itself as a perennial swing seat, and 2026 should be no different.

Democrats are high on Mendoza given her military background and early fundraising success, and believe that she cuts a clear and compelling contrast to Ciscomani, negating his strengths and highlighting his vulnerabilities.

Mendoza's ability to consolidate support from national and local Democratic leaders and effectively end the primary before it began also gives her a leg up relative to many of the party's other recruits in top-tier races, including in Arizona's 1st District, where a messy and lengthy primary could complicate Democrats' chances to flip the Grand Canyon State's other swing seat.

But Ciscomani is a hard out, with a proven ability to outrun unpopular Republicans at the top of the ticket and hold on in areas where Democrats continue to improve. As a rising star in a GOP more focused than ever on winning Hispanic voters, Ciscomani remains a top priority for national Republicans.

Democrats need a net gain of three seats to win the House majority, but with unfavorable redistricting elsewhere, their true target is likely closer to 10 flips. That almost certainly means that winning Arizona's 6th District next November is a critical step in the path back to control of Congress. **IE**

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Like many other white, working class districts, the 2nd drifted away from Democrats during the 2010s. Barack Obama won the 2nd handily in 2008 (by 11 points) and 2012 (by 8 points), but it then cast its electoral vote for Trump in three straight elections, by margins of 9 points, 6 points, and 9 points in 2016, 2020, and 2024, respectively.

In other statewide races, the 2nd leans Republican but often less severely. It voted for independent Sen. Angus King in 2018, 51-40 percent (King caucuses with the Democrats) but for GOP gubernatorial nominee Shawn Moody the same year, 48-46 percent. In 2020, it voted for native daughter Sen. Susan Collins by a whopping 58-36 percent, but two years later backed LePage in his comeback gubernatorial bid by just 2.6 points.

Through it all, the 2nd has sent Golden to Congress, continuing a streak of ticket-splitting and heterodox results that goes back at least three decades to 1992, when a previous iteration of the district cast a larger share of its vote for independent presidential candidate Ross Perot than any other district in the country.

The Democrats

Golden faces a primary challenge from state Auditor Matt Dunlap, a longtime fixture in state politics who is forging ahead with a longshot primary bid despite pressure from national Democrats to steer clear of the race.

Golden, 43, is in his fourth term representing the 2nd District. The Marine veteran and 2011 Bates College graduate is no longer one of the youngest members of Congress but continues to make headlines for



Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

Jared Golden

bucking his party at high-profile moments. He recently was the only Democrat who voted to keep the government open ahead of the ongoing shutdown.

A former staffer to GOP Sen. Collins, Golden's political career began in 2014

with a successful run for state House as a Democrat. After re-election in 2016 and a stint in leadership, he ran for the Democratic nomination to take on 2nd District Rep. Bruce Poliquin. Golden defeated a more progressive opponent in the primary, 54-46 percent, before narrowly ousting Poliquin in a race that was decided by Maine's new ranked-choice voting system. While Golden narrowly trailed Poliquin in the

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initial round of balloting, 46.3-45.6 percent, he overtook the incumbent by 0.8 points when votes from two third-party candidates were reallocated.

Golden won a more comfortable victory in 2020, 53-47 percent, over state Rep. Dale Crafts, outrunning Joe Biden at the top of the ticket by 12 points. In 2022, Republicans nominated Poliquin again and national groups spent heavily against Golden, but he prevailed 53-47 percent after the ranked-choice tabulation (he led the initial round, 48-45 percent).

In 2024, GOP state Rep. Austin Theriault gave Golden his strongest challenge. The former NASCAR driver was a top recruit for Republicans and the race attracted nearly \$25 million in outside spending. Golden ultimately won, 50.3-49.7 percent, as Trump won the district by close to 10 points.

In Congress, Golden is a member of the Blue Dog Coalition and is seen as one of his caucus' most moderate members; he was the only House Democrat to vote to keep the government open in March of this year as well.

He is a member of the Armed Services and Small Business committees.

Golden's campaign team, which includes Ian Russell of Beacon Media for media, pollster Mark Mellman of Mellman Group, and Alan Moore of Moore Campaigns for direct mail, has remained unchanged since his 2018 campaign.

Dunlap, 60, currently serves as state auditor, but has spent much of the past two decades as the Maine secretary of state, both positions elected by the state legislature. A Bar Harbor native and 1987 graduate of the University of Maine (where he also earned a master's in English in 1994), Dunlap worked odd jobs after graduating college, including as a fur trapper and textile worker.

But it was while working as a bartender that a friend in the state legislature convinced him to run for state House from Penobscot County in 1996. He won a three-way race with 48 percent of the vote against a

Republican and independent who split the balance evenly; re-elections in 1998, 2000, and 2002 came more easily.

In 2004, Dunlap was elected by his colleagues to be secretary of state, a post he held until Republicans flipped the legislature following the 2010 elections.

In 2012, Dunlap sought the Democratic nomination for the Senate seat held by Republican Olympia Snowe, who opted not to seek re-election. He raised just \$111,000 and lost to state Sen. Cynthia Dill, 44-36 percent. Dill went on to lose to independent Angus King, while Dunlap was reinstated as secretary of state after Democrats retook control of the state legislature that year.

In 2017, Dunlap made national news as one of two Democratic election officials to serve on Trump's election integrity commission. Dunlap said he had hoped the commission would investigate Russian attempts to influence American elections. When chairman Kris Kobach, the Kansas secretary of state, instead sought sensitive election data from states and cut Dunlap out of the commission's process, Dunlap sued and won an initial victory. Trump shuttered the commission shortly afterward.

In 2020, facing term limits as secretary of state, Dunlap was elected state auditor by the legislature. But the position requires an accounting certification, and Dunlap failed his exam in 2021, forcing him to resign. He later retook the test and passed, after which the legislature reappointed him.

The Democratic Primary

State and national Democrats are in wait-and-see mode as to whether Dunlap's primary challenge will catch steam. Several Democratic sources expressed skepticism that he has a viable path to victory and characterized his run as "an annoyance and a distraction," spurred on by Golden's detractors in the state legislature.

Dunlap has been successful in getting significant national coverage of his launch that frames the race as both a moderate vs. progressive fight and a referendum on Trump.

But it's not obvious if he'll be able to raise the money to push that message out to voters in the district, especially after raising relatively little in his only other federal race, the 2012 Senate contest.

That could change if Dunlap receives support from national progressive figures such as Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, who has already endorsed candidates in Maine's Senate and gubernatorial races. But one national progressive operative threw cold water on that prospect. "I don't know him at all," said the Democrat. "Personally, I think Jared is a good working class candidate who is a better choice for the district."

Dunlap is also angling to dip into more mainstream anti-Trump money by portraying Golden as too close to the president — and too close to LePage, whose face is merged with Golden in Dunlap's campaign launch video.

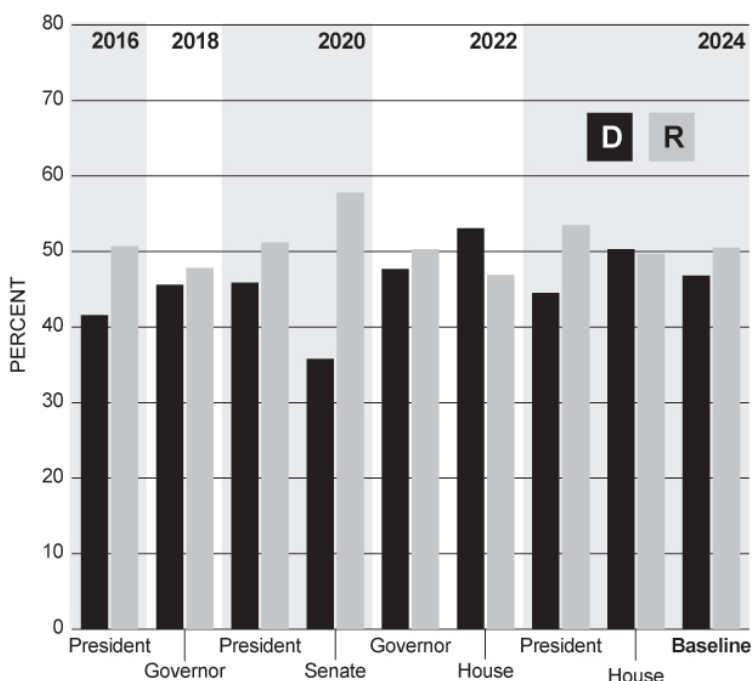
But that case will be hard to make if Democratic primary voters believe that Golden's tendency to break with his own party is in service of winning general elections in unfavorable territory. And the incumbent has plenty of proof points to push back against the argument that he and LePage are the same.

Golden and his allies are already pursuing a two-pronged strategy to head off the challenge, focusing on electability and key policy differences.

Primarily, Golden is arguing that is the only Democrat who can hold the seat, and that Dunlap will lose to LePage. His campaign released a poll in July showing Dunlap trailing LePage by 10 points, 47-37 percent

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Statewide Election Results in Maine's 2nd District



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(the same poll had Golden ahead by 1 point, 43-42 percent).

On policy, Golden will highlight a vote Dunlap took while in the state legislature to mandate a 24-hour waiting period before abortions, which earned him a 100 percent rating from the Maine Right to Life Committee in 2003 (Dunlap says that he is pro-choice and received 0 percent scores from Right to Life during his other terms).

And Golden may also lean into his shift on guns following a mass shooting in Lewiston, when he came out in support of an assault weapons ban, to appeal to Democrats. That's a contrast to Dunlap, who was the executive director of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, a gun rights group. Dunlap appears eager to make that distinction as well, and took the opportunity to speak out against this fall's referendum on a red flag law that was proposed in the wake of the Lewiston shooting.

The Republican

LePage, who turned 77 on this issue's publication date, is a singular figure in Maine politics, with an only-in-America life story and a roller-coaster career that has captivated the Pine Tree State for more than a decade.

The eldest of 18 children born into a poor French-speaking household in Lewiston, LePage fled his abusive father at 11 and lived on the streets for two years before being taken in by two other families. After he was rejected by Husson College in Bangor, then-state Rep. Peter Snowe intervened on his behalf and asked the college to administer an admissions test in French, rather than English; LePage was subsequently accepted and graduated in 1971. He then earned an MBA from the University of Maine in 1975.

LePage worked in lumber, paper products, and later as a business consultant and manager of discount store Marden's before turning to politics in 1997, when he won a town council race in Waterville, an hour north of Lewiston.

His early elections set the tone for the rest of his political career. He abruptly dropped his 1999 re-election campaign two weeks before Election Day, only to finish in an exact tie with his opponent and beat her in a make-over election. In 2003, he ran for mayor of Waterville and won with 48 percent against a Democrat and Democrat-turned-independent who had lost the Democratic primary.

After winning a nailbiter re-election, 51-49 percent, in 2008, LePage sought the GOP nomination for governor to succeed Democrat John Baldacci in 2010. He won a crowded primary with 37 percent of the vote (future 2nd District Rep. Poliquin placed sixth), and faced Democrat Libby Mitchell and Democrat-turned-independent Elliot Cutler in the general election.

While LePage enjoyed a comfortable polling lead for much of the election, Cutler surged in the final weeks of the race. LePage held him off by just 2 points, 38-36 percent, with Mitchell far behind at 19 percent.

LePage's tenure as governor received high marks from conservative groups and was characterized by his intense battles with Democrats in the state legislature over his opposition to the state income tax, his proposed reforms to Medicaid and opposition to Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act, and drug enforcement policy. He made liberal use of his veto pen, sending back more bills than the previous 100 years of governors combined and at one point vetoing every bill sponsored by a Democrat.

In 2014, LePage faced 2nd District Rep. Mike Michaud for re-election; Cutler ran as well. A slight polling lead for Michaud failed to materialize on Election Day as LePage won comfortably, 48-43 percent, with Cutler

winning 8 percent. Post-election analysis of "one of the most surprising results of the evening" cited LePage's social conservatism, record of tax cuts, and appeal to voters in the more rural 2nd District, as well as a ballot measure loosening restrictions on bear traps that boosted turnout in the region. LePage carried last decade's similar version of the 2nd District by 12 points, 52-40 percent, against its incumbent representative.

LePage continued to court national attention and controversy in his second term. At a 2016 town hall he railed against drug dealers named "D-Money, Smoothie, [or] Shifty" who travel to Maine to sell heroin and "impregnate a young, white girl." He left a profanity-laced voicemail for a Democratic state legislator and then said in an interview he wished he could duel him and shoot him in the head.

After leaving office, LePage decamped to Florida. But his hiatus was

short-lived; he moved back to Maine in 2021 to run against Gov. Janet Mills for his old job, and while Republicans were high on his chances he lost handily, 55-42 percent.

LePage once again retreated to Florida but moved back to



Paul LePage

Augusta, Maine earlier this year to launch his bid for the 2nd District. His campaign team includes general consultant Brent Littlefield, and pollster Chris Lane of Cygnal.

The General Election

A Golden-LePage matchup, the likeliest outcome next year, would pit two outsized personalities against each other in a competitive, expensive, and highly combustible battle, with the fate of the House majority hanging in the balance. Both begin with universal name ID and strong bases of support. Both have won the 2nd District every time they've been on the ballot.

The two have a long history going back to their time in Augusta, and that relationship holds clues to what their 2026 race will look like.

Golden's first campaign ad of the 2018 cycle began with the Democrat standing in a park and saying, "This is where Paul LePage said lawmakers like me should be shot" — a reference to comments LePage had made years earlier calling for Lewiston's lawmakers to be "rounded up and executed in the public square." Golden's ad went on to highlight the Democrat's efforts to expand Medicaid despite LePage's resistance.

LePage responded by calling Golden "a fine Marine" but said he "has not gotten the job done."

Much has changed since 2018, but that back-and-forth could conceivably have taken place this year with little adjustment.

Democrats are still eager to litigate LePage's stance on Medicaid expansion in the wake of Republican cuts to the program this year. The governor vetoed expansion five times before voters approved it in a ballot initiative. "I wouldn't be surprised if 99 percent of ads are about Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid," said one national strategist. "That is a fight we would all love to have," said another Democratic operative.

Golden's allies say it's less likely LePage's other controversial statements get the spotlight treatment. "It'll be a disciplined campaign

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focused on pocketbook issues,” said one Democratic source. “There’s so much rage bait you can fall for, but don’t be distracted by the racism and homophobia.”

National and Maine Republicans believe that Theriault lost to Golden because he was insufficiently close to Trump, and that created space for Golden to appeal to Trump voters and peel off enough votes to win.

“The idea that Golden can try to pretend he was a soft Republican, you can’t do that with Paul LePage,” said one GOP source. “You have no ability to claim you’re better on the 2nd Amendment, or job creation, or border security,



Matt Dunlap

nobody is going to do that.” Given the district’s pronounced GOP lean, if LePage consolidates support from Trump voters he can shut off Golden’s path to victory.

During the 2024 campaign, Golden wrote publicly that “Donald Trump is going to win. And I’m OK with that,” and he later declined to endorse Harris when she became the nominee.

“Golden’s little trick has been to run as a GOP-lite,” said one Maine Republican, who argued that Theriault had given Golden that opportunity. Theriault had run on “restoring balance” to Washington, and said in ads he would “stand up to any politician, even in my own party.”

Ultimately, Theriault’s own ads were just a small fraction of total GOP ad spending, much of which tied Golden to the unpopular Biden administration and liberal policies. And while Republicans now talk about Theriault as a disappointment, he was one of the party’s most highly touted recruits ahead of the 2024 election: personally wooed into the race by then-Speaker Kevin McCarthy, and boosted by millions in outside spending.

LePage co-chaired Trump’s campaign in Maine and has called himself “Trump before Trump” because of their shared brash style, penchant for sparring with the media, and devoted following among base GOP voters.

Republicans are hopeful that Dunlap’s primary challenge will push Golden to the left and make him take more unpopular stances on hot-button issues that will haunt him in a general election.

LePage’s allies are also unafraid of engaging with Democrats on Medicaid. LePage often cites his 2013 payment of a long-delayed \$500 million debt to Maine’s hospitals as a proof point of his approach to fiscal responsibility, and he believes that he has been vindicated in his longstanding opposition to Medicaid expansion because of rising healthcare costs and pressure on rural hospitals.

Both parties also believe they have an edge on the age dynamic. Golden, while no longer one of the youngest members in Congress, retains his youthful looks and highlights his young family and tattooed forearms in his campaign ads. LePage would be the third-oldest House freshman in American history. But his allies say that he’s more energetic than ever, and that his age and proclivity for social media make him fit right in with Maine’s older population (the former governor is an avid

Facebook user and maintains an active LinkedIn presence, even giving former colleagues public recommendations).

How It Plays Out

Early polling suggests a race with limited wiggle room for either candidate. A Ragnar Research poll conducted in April for the GOP super PAC Congressional Leadership Fund found LePage ahead of Golden by 5 points, 48-43 percent, though that was before Golden announced he would run for re-election.

A Mellman Group poll for the Golden campaign conducted in mid-June found Golden ahead of LePage by 1 point, 43-42 percent. And a University of New Hampshire survey from late June found LePage ahead by 3 points, 50-47 percent.

Golden begins the race with a moderate financial edge; his campaign says he raised \$1.5 million from July through September and has stockpiled \$1.65 million. LePage, whose latest report is due on October 15, reported raising \$500,000 through the end of June. The Maine airwaves will likely be supersaturated next fall as Democrats gear up to take on Collins, whose 2020 race saw \$200 million in spending.

For now, both parties are waiting to see the impact of Dunlap’s campaign and whether a brewing fight between progressive Graham Platner and Mills in the Democratic Senate primary makes life uncomfortable for other Maine Democrats such as Golden over the next few months.

Between a massive Senate race, an open gubernatorial race, and two well-known House candidates, party strategists expect turnout next year to be high, even for a state that typically boasts strong voter participation. LePage in particular is seen as a turnout booster, on both sides of the aisle. Republicans see him as the solution to concerns about turning out lower-propensity Trump voters who might skip the midterms. Democrats see him as a great unifier for their own party, with the prospect of Congressman LePage uniting progressives and moderates behind Golden no matter how divisive a primary gets.

The Bottom Line

Golden finds himself in a familiar position: in the most Republican district held by a Democrat, with a massive target on his back, and staring down a year of tough votes as Republicans look to ding his moderate image.

With Republicans likely to gain a half-dozen or more seats thanks to redistricting, Democrats cannot afford to lose any more of their incumbents as they cobble together a path to the majority. That means winning in Trump territory, such as Maine’s 2nd District.

But LePage is unlike any opponent Golden has faced before, and commands a following among the area’s Republican voters that even former Rep. Poliquin could not muster when he held the seat. While holding this seat isn’t sufficient to give Democrats a majority, losing it would be a serious blow to their chances of controlling the House next year.

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