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# Midsummer Night's Dream? Progressives' final push for 2020 starts with the original Justice Democrat

Cori Bush is one of two House challengers backed by the group who has not yet faced a primary. That changes Tuesday.



AP Photo/Jeff Roberson File

Cori Bush at a protest outside the St. Louis Police Department headquarters on Sept. 17, 2017

## Mini Racker

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Since her name last appeared on the ballot, Cori Bush became a movie star.

The nurse and Ferguson activist was featured in last year's Netflix documentary *Knock Down the House*, which profiles four Democratic women who tried to unseat incumbents in 2018. Her last scene in the film features her wiping away tears and shaking her head, having lost to Rep. William Lacy Clay. With Tuesday's primary, she hopes for a sequel with a more upbeat ending.

Bush is one of only two Justice Democrats-backed primary challengers left this cycle. Three of the group's endorsed candidates won their party's nomination, one cleared a top-two primary, and another three lost. After Tuesday's primary, the last undecided race will be Alex Morse's challenge to Rep. Richard Neal in Massachusetts' 1st District.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 upset made the congresswoman a household name, giving her influence to push progressive priorities on the national stage. Bush hopes to replicate that kind of success. This year, though, she has faced more ordinary challenges. Like more than 4.6 million Americans, she was diagnosed with COVID-19, an illness that had her questioning whether she would survive the spring after she contracted it in March. At times, Bush said she was so weak she couldn't even manage to lift her cell phone; when she did call friends, Turner recalled, they noticed her gasping for air in between phrases. She was sick for two months. But even when she recovered, she barely paused for a breath.

"I started to feel better on a Tuesday, and our first George Floyd or Breonna Taylor protest was on a Friday."

If she is elected, Bush has promised to try to appear on TV and radio to advocate for Medicare-for-all and to hold town halls in the district where she would encourage constituents to do the same. She said there was a difference between supporting something—Clay is in favor of Medicare-for-all—and pushing for it. The other big difference Bush's allies have highlighted is her refusal to take donations from corporate PACs.

Another Bush strategy echoes the one used in 2018 by Ocasio-Cortez, who countered arguments about her opponent's seniority by suggesting he wasn't using his power to help working people. As the House Democratic Caucus chair,

then-Rep. Joseph Crowley earned esteem from constituents, just as Clay has for serving nearly two decades in Congress after succeeding his father. But amid a racial-justice movement that has swelled to a crescendo, the connections he's made in office might not be enough.

“His relationships should have allowed him to make a call and say [to the governor], ‘You won’t bring the National Guard on the people of this district,’” Bush said.

Clay did not respond to *National Journal's* requests for comment.

Bush has been relentless in highlighting the differences between her and the incumbent. In 2018, she couldn't afford to run radio ads until a week and a half before the primary. This time, she's raised \$569,000 as of July 15, enough to pay for billboards while also running more ads sooner.

Democrats think it will be a much closer race than last time, when Clay prevailed, 57 to 37 percent, although Clay remains the favorite. A former Missouri Democratic elected official noted that Clay is not seen as particularly effective. But given the [growing](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/violence-shows-no-sign-of-slowing-after-third-homicide-reported-in-st-louis-this-weekend/article_91317a0a-b7f6-58e4-925a-5cbc1a47a3d3.html) [murder rate](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/violence-shows-no-sign-of-slowing-after-third-homicide-reported-in-st-louis-this-weekend/article_91317a0a-b7f6-58e4-925a-5cbc1a47a3d3.html) [in St. Louis this year](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/two-shot-one-killed-in-st-louis-as-homicide-rate-continues-to-climb/article_1c22517c-8636-5318-80f0-6516415f4454.html), calls to defund the police, which Bush [has echoed](https://twitter.com/CoriBush/status/1268664113145671681) [in St. Louis this year](https://twitter.com/CoriBush/status/1268664113145671681), have also spooked some voters, who want to see more law enforcement. Meanwhile, the former official said, Bush's campaign has not generated the kind of pre-primary buzz among activists that tends to foreshadow an upset. Nor have Clay's allies expressed much worry.

But Bush said a barrage of attacks from Clay indicates otherwise. One mailer suggested she was unqualified because she had been evicted three times, an attack Bush has countered by saying that she shares the experiences of working people in the district. She also pointed to the circumstances that have led to the evictions. Once, she said, neighbors went to her landlord because they were afraid after seeing her protesting on TV. Another time, she took an eviction so she would be allowed to leave for nursing school. The other eviction followed an attack by an abusive partner.

“He thought he choked me to death,” she said. When Bush changed the locks, he tried to find another way in. “He busted out all the windows. I was evicted for destruction to the property.”

The eviction attacks are just a small piece of Clay’s onslaught against Bush. Last month, [he ran an ad](https://www.nationaljournal.com/s/708682/internal-poll-shows-eagle-with-narrow-lead-in-fl-19) that compared her to Trump and slammed her for taking a salary from her campaign.

“To me, that ad his campaign put out really showed their level of desperation,” Turner said. Politics “is a blood sport. It’s a place where people try to destroy you permanently. He wants to destroy her reputation, and that’s harder on a Black woman who’s already prejudged.”

Another [mailer](https://twitter.com/NickTagliaferro/status/1289369922624057344/photo/1) from Clay accused Bush of standing with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, which it calls anti-Semitic. (*Middle East Eye* [reported](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/meet-challengers-taking-pro-israel-democrats-us-congress) in May that her platform included support for BDS, linking to a page on her site dedicated to foreign policy that appears to have since been taken down.) The mailer also features a photo of Bush with Linda Sarsour, who has also faced accusations of anti-Semitism. But that photo opened up Clay to an attack from

Bush, who [alleged](https://twitter.com/CoriBush/status/1289596445390073863) (https://twitter.com/CoriBush/status/1289596445390073863). Saturday that her skin was artificially darkened in the picture. The charge is akin to one that Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina [faced last week](/s/708812/graham-digital-ad-darkens-harrisons-skin-tone) (/s/708812/graham-digital-ad-darkens-harrisons-skin-tone), which centered on his opponent, Jaime Harrison, who is Black.

Much of the progressive movement's success has come through candidates of color. Most of them—Ocasio-Cortez, Rep. Ayanna Pressley, and Jamaal Bowman—defeated white men, eliminating demographic misalignments in diverse districts. The race in Missouri's 1st District is one of the few contests across the country where two Black candidates are squaring off, sparking a heated debate over who is best equipped to represent the district's residence, a plurality of whom are Black.

In a [New York Times interview](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/02/us/politics/cori-bush-william-lacy-clay-missouri.html) (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/02/us/politics/cori-bush-william-lacy-clay-missouri.html) last week, Clay accused leftist groups of supporting primary challengers to Congressional Black Caucus members because they are seen as “easy targets” and called suggestions that he does not do enough for the district “racist.” Bush said it's wrong for the CBC to throw its support behind Clay while he slams her. She said she wanted to see the caucus hold its members accountable, withholding its endorsement from members who don't deliver for constituents.

“We are living substandard, and [the leadership that caused that] gets to stand, simply because people who are not from here, who do not live in this district, want to hold onto their friend,” she said.

Asked whether she would join the CBC if elected, Bush said, “One thing I don't mind doing is being a part of something to see it changed.”

But she didn't commit, either. "I won't just join something because it says 'Black,'" she said. "I have to see what they stand for."

As an activist, Bush knows how much a cultural moment like this one can change a person. Protesting in Ferguson gave Bush an opportunity to connect with groups she was not very familiar with, like LGBTQ, Muslim, and Latinx organizers, a big part of her political awakening. She characterized the time before the 2014 protests as a time when she struggled in a bubble as a Black parent. A half-decade later, her electoral fate may rest on whether voters are willing to abandon their bubbles as well.

"If Cori or Alex wins, we've got basically Squad 2.0," said Justice Democrats cofounder Cenk Uygur, who has since left the group, in an interview with *National Journal* on Friday.

The first candidate ever endorsed by Justice Democrats, Bush embodies the hopes of progressives going into the final primaries of 2020. On Friday, she became just the fourth House challenger to earn the support of the national Democratic Socialists of America this cycle. She sees other progressive candidates like family, especially fellow candidates backed by Brand New Congress, a group which seeks to elect working people. That includes Bowman, who ousted Rep. Eliot Engel in June and endorsed her campaign in July. She calls Bernie Sanders's campaign cochair Nina Turner "Big Sis"; both have endorsed her.

But she's missing an endorsement from Ocasio-Cortez. Although she has sought the representative's backing, Bush told *National Journal* that she would not feel like the congresswoman was going against her if she didn't get it.

"She and I were friends before she was 'AOC,'" Bush said.

"She's on the same committee with Congressman Clay," she added.