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Vulnerable House Dems Start to Weigh in on Presidential Primary

While many prefer a moderate nominee, others are drawn to Warren.



Rep. Harley Rouda

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Swing-district Democratic representatives—the ones who know what it takes to win over supporters of President Trump—have been quiet about their party’s presidential primary. But they may finally be close to breaking their silence.

Of the 52 House Democrats who either won in Trump districts or flipped a seat in 2018, only 13 have endorsed a candidate in the race for the White House (although two backed candidates who are no longer running.) In conversations with 10 undecided swing-district Democratic representatives and their top aides, it was clear that House Democrats facing competitive races were reluctant to tie themselves to a single candidate. Most of these representatives don’t intend to endorse any time soon, but many view Vice President Joe Biden, South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg, and Sen. Amy Klobuchar as the kind of moderates they want to see secure the nomination.

Most of those who have already endorsed have gotten behind their home-state senators’ bids for the White House. For instance, every Democrat from New Jersey, including five in competitive districts, has backed Sen. Cory Booker, while three from Minnesota’s swing districts are supporting Klobuchar.

More of these swing-district Democrats may be preparing to weigh in. For many, decision day is approaching—whether it falls at the start of the New Year, during the Iowa caucuses, or on the day of their own state’s primary.

In Orange County, California, Rep. Harley Rouda said he looks to polls when thinking about who he’d like to see win the primary.

“The person I want to win is the person who can win by the largest margin, so that it is the largest repudiation of the previous four years,” he said.

Rouda said that, based on current polling in the swing states, that candidate is Biden, but if things changed, he would be happy if whoever was leading those polls won the primary. “California will vote for a rock over Donald Trump, so it has to be about the swing states,” he said.

Rep. Anthony Brindisi, who represents upstate New York, is looking for the candidates running on the platform that helped him and his freshmen Democratic colleagues win their races.

“They should be focusing on kitchen-table issues that Democrats ran on in 2018, and not moving the party further away from the center,” Brindisi said. He pointed to Biden, Buttigieg, Klobuchar, “and even some of the candidates who are not getting much attention, like Steve Bullock and Michael Bennet.”

He said he had no plans to endorse—he’s still making up his mind—but that there was plenty of time for things to change. “Who knows? Maybe there's other candidates out there that haven't made their intentions known yet,” he added.

Rep. Ben McAdams of Utah seemed even less likely to endorse. He said he was “staying neutral and letting the voters weigh in.”

But even those who say they aren’t planning to put their thumbs on the scale could change their minds. In late September, a spokesperson for Rep. Katie Porter of Orange County said it was early and she was waiting to see how the Iowa caucuses played out. A month later, she backed Sen. Elizabeth Warren, her former professor.

While Biden’s name was often the first to come up among undecided representatives, many also praised Warren. Multiple Democrats who might be expected to prefer moderates expressed excitement about her candidacy and the

possibility of a female president, commending her organization and her platform. But some of those same representatives, as well as their colleagues, doubted that a progressive like her or Sen. Bernie Sanders could win a general election.

"[Porter's] thought is, 'We need to get somebody who's going to do really well against Trump,'" said a spokesperson before the congresswoman endorsed. "And anyone could do that."

Brindisi, however, had a different opinion. "I think there are a couple of candidates that would have a significantly harder time winning in the general: those candidates who are moving further to the left, away from things like fixing the Affordable Care Act," he said.

It makes sense that these representatives have such different views on the presidential race, since even similarly competitive districts can look very different. Hillary Clinton carried Porter's suburban district, for example, by 5 points. Trump carried Brindisi's rural district by more than 15 points.

The presidential candidates are doing their own kind of math in terms of reaching out to these Democratic representatives. Democrats in competitive House districts outside of swing states, like Brindisi and Rouda, said they hadn't heard from the candidates. Meanwhile, others are getting calls from all the top-tier contenders, who ask questions about their districts or discuss funding for local programs.

Candidates may also find they can rely on established relationships, which multiple sources said could play a part in the endorsement game, even in a Congress full of fresh faces. Among the swing-district Democrats who have

already chosen to endorse, several, like Porter, have long-standing ties to their chosen candidates. Pennsylvania's Matt Cartwright, for instance, endorsed Biden, whom he has known for years.

Those who haven't yet endorsed could find their history with the candidates swaying their decisions. Rep. Abby Finkenauer of Iowa worked on Biden's 2008 campaign. This cycle, her fiancé is Warren's policy director in Iowa.

The presidential candidates may also be hoping representatives return the favor following their efforts in the midterms. Biden campaigned for Finkenauer, along with a handful of other vulnerable Democrats, including Southern California's Mike Levin, who is also the only Democrat facing a competitive general election who received an endorsement from Sanders last cycle.

Just as these representatives counted on the support of national Democrats to win their races last year, they might need them again in 2020. The candidate at the top of the ticket is sure to affect turnout and, with their own political fates hanging in the balance, some vulnerable Democrats want a nominee who stresses pragmatism and focuses on education, health care, and infrastructure.

In other words, they want a nominee like them.