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Republicans count on candidates of color to expand the House map

Nonwhite candidates are helping the GOP build bridges into minority communities—and deflect Democratic attacks.



Anna Paulina Luna waves before the crowd at a rally featuring former President Trump in October 2020. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)

Mini Racker

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On Wednesday, as Hurricane Ian bore down on the Florida district Anna Paulina Luna is likely to represent next year, she remained down the street from one of the last few open gas stations in the county.

“A lot of my constituents could not leave,” she said. “And so I stayed.”

Luna sees herself as a normal person trying to represent other normal people in Congress. Part of that has to do with her identity as a mixed-race Hispanic American. Growing up, she didn’t consider it unusual that her dad spoke Spanish or that the elote man sold street corn alongside the local ice cream man. But running for office, she began to realize how unique her perspective was. She was raised by a single mother. As a child, she had firsthand experience with the crime that disproportionately affects low-income minority communities; she recalled once seeing a man slumped over his steering wheel at an intersection and later overhearing her dad saying the man had been shot.

“[My Hispanic identity] makes me a lot more passionate in regards to fighting to really correct this stereotype that's been put on to Hispanics—that all Hispanics are quote-unquote 'illegal,’” she said. “I actually get ticked off when I see that, because it's not true. But then I also feel that immigrants are being used. ... If you're gonna come here, come here the correct way, ‘cause you're gonna get hurt in the process.”

In 2020, Republicans depended on candidates of color, women, and veterans to claw back House seats. The party is looking to them to deliver again this cycle.

“Republicans doubling down on recruiting diverse, unique, interesting candidates was the biggest single game-changer in 2020,” said Targeted Victory Vice President Sam Oh, who works with several nonwhite members of Congress. “It shows candidates matter and every seat can be up for grabs. ... Their ability to raise money compared to what you would think is the more prototypical or classic, traditional Republican candidate is a game-changer.”

Now, the list of GOP congressional nominees of color is even longer. It includes at least 32 Latinos, 23 Black Americans, 12 Asian Americans, and three Native Americans.

Nineteen of them are running in districts [*The*](#)

<https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/house-race-ratings>) [*Cook Political Report*](#)

<https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/house-race-ratings>) deems competitive. Half a dozen of those are freshmen seeking reelection. One newcomer, John Gibbs, ousted a more moderate Republican in Michigan’s 3rd District. The other dozen represent GOP pick-up opportunities, positioning House Republicans to increase diversity in their ranks.

“If you look at Juan Ciscomani in Arizona, Allan Fung in Rhode Island, George Logan in Connecticut—I mean, those candidates are putting those seats on the map for Republicans,” Oh said. “If you called me about Rhode Island or Connecticut five months ago, I wouldn't have thought those were serious deals. But we're spending money there. That just shows the field is pretty expansive.”

Party leaders are pouring some of the biggest sums into districts where people of color have become the party’s nominees. A recent [*tally*](#)

<https://twitter.com/rpyers/status/1574146205927415808/photo/1>) found that the Kevin

McCarthy-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund has spent the most in general-election independent expenditures in Indiana’s 1st District, where

Republicans see promise in Air Force veteran Jennifer-Ruth Green. Green, like other nonwhite Republicans, wants to be judged by her accomplishments rather than the color of her skin. But when it comes to deflecting Democratic attacks, her identity as an African American and Asian American woman doesn't hurt.

“Part of this is [that] it's not about what people campaign on, it's what the voters perceive,” said Green's general consultant, Tim Edson. “There's a lot of voters used to ... only white men running for office. And [Green] has a white man running against her in a very diverse district. There's something to be said when voters look around and see he's trying to attack her as against this group or against that group. ... She's a very accomplished minority woman.”

“I just think it makes it a little harder for people like [her Democratic opponent] Frank Mrvan to run that playbook,” Edson continued. “People are like, ‘No, this is actually somebody that I can vote for and it's a vote I can feel good about.’”



📷 Air Force Reservist Jennifer-Ruth Green, who's running for Indiana's 1st District seat. NONE

Democrats have encountered minefields when they've tried to paint other Republicans of color negatively. In the competitive race in California's 45th District, Democrat Jay Chen was [forced on defense](https://www.nationaljournal.com/s/718447/in-battleground-orange-county-parties-start-to-see-asian-american-voters-as-just-voters/?unlock=YSTWoUB6MGWBFHE2) after he suggested Rep. Michelle Steel needs an interpreter. Despite the fact that Chen, like Steel, is Asian American, he received heavy criticism after her campaign labeled the comment as racist.

Luna said that she has faced ignorant comments on the campaign trail, with one journalist suggesting she looked too white to be Hispanic.

"There's certain things that we understand culturally, but I'm not going to go around with a sombrero on my head and say 'Arriba!'" she said, noting that many Americans still have a lot to learn when it comes to talking about mixed-race candidates.

She also mentioned how, on the night of the Republican primary, her Democratic opponent said Luna wants to support "supreme extreme" ideas.

"I thought about that, and was like, 'This is kind of interesting branding that they're using, because when you're talking about fast food, it's kind of a joke. You have the extreme chipotle taco at Taco Bell and all that,'" she said. "And then I looked it up, and [Extreme Supreme] was actually a brand of guacamole. ... And this came shortly after Jill Biden made the comment about Hispanics [being unique as breakfast tacos](https://www.texastribune.org/2022/07/12/jill-biden-latinos-breakfast-tacos/)."

In addition to their ability to defang criticisms from Democrats and the media, Republicans of color can reach voters that other Republicans can't.

“[Green has] been working hard at that outreach, whether it's visiting small businesses, going to churches, just going out ... to community events where often you might not have Republicans,” Edson said. “Where they feel out of place and don't think they can go in and be effective advocates for themselves, she's at ease. This is her community and it's a place where she's comfortable campaigning.”

Other Black Republicans also suggested that they can help stretch the party's tent.

“My journey in the political realm is an example of what our country offers,” said Gibbs, echoing the [American-Dream messaging](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/712005/diverse-new-members-could-help-gop-message-the-american-dream/?unlock=WSW3GO2G4UYC8WNP) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/712005/diverse-new-members-could-help-gop-message-the-american-dream/?unlock=WSW3GO2G4UYC8WNP>), diverse new members rode to Congress in 2020. “My grandparents were sharecroppers in the South, and my parents didn't go to college. But both my sisters and myself all have master's degrees.”

“Voters will come up and ask me, ‘How do we get more Black folks in the Republican Party?’” he added.

“What I can add to our party is basically the eyes of a Black Republican,” said Army veteran Wesley Hunt. “Because that's just inherently different from a white person's perspective; it just is.”

Unlike Green and Gibbs, Hunt doesn't face a competitive race in November. Instead, he faced most of the competition in a crowded GOP primary in Texas's 38th, a deep-red majority-white district near Houston.

“Nine white guys and me running in our Republican primary,” he said.

At one campaign event, a young man approached Hunt and asked if he'd speak to his grandfather on the phone. When Hunt agreed, the older man sounded teary.

“Wesley, I'm 82 years old,” Hunt recalled him saying. “I used to be a very racist person and bigoted person against Black people. And you're the first Black person I've ever voted for, because you share my same values. And I'm sorry, about maybe the way I've treated Black people in the past, but not only have you given the world hope, you have given me hope in myself that I can overcome my racism.”

“That kind of story is what I hear more often than not,” Hunt added.





📷 Wesley Hunt COURTESY PHOTO

Hunt won his 10-way primary with 55 percent of the vote. If all goes as expected, he'll head to Congress next year. He said he does not plan to try to join the Congressional Black Caucus due to the expectation that he would back certain legislation.

“Given where the Democrats are right now, I just don't see that as a possibility,” he said.

Congressional Republicans, on the other hand, have welcomed him.

“When I'm on the Hill, I hear every single time, ‘I'm really glad you're running. We absolutely need more people of color in our party. We both need it and we want it, because we want to look like America.’”

Who tells him that?

“White men,” Hunt said. “I don't want to say any names because I don't want to make them feel uncomfortable. But I'm glad that they felt comfortable with telling me that. That's a good thing.”

In fact, candidates and operatives credit the shift towards diversity largely to two white men: McCarthy and NRCC Chair Tom Emmer. McCarthy and Emmer have made it a priority to recruit candidates that look like their districts. They've relied on House members to help them figure out who would be a good fit, instead of just depending on consultants as some Republicans did in the past.

“They do a good job,” Gibbs said. “They're starting with a small pool, so it's a little bit tricky. There's not a whole lot of Black Republicans out there to begin with.”