

ELECTIONS

Can Mikie Sherrill keep a seat in Republican stronghold that Trump helped turn blue?

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New Jersey's 11th Congressional District was a Republican stronghold for three decades before Democrat Mikie Sherrill turned it blue in 2018 – with an assist from Donald Trump.

Her 15-point victory marked the largest partisan swing of any congressional district in the country that year. It was a stark about-face for an affluent, suburban district that narrowly voted for Trump in 2016 and counted thousands more registered Republicans than Democrats at the time.

Two years later, Sherrill, 48, is seeking a second term amid a far different political landscape. Democrats in the district, which is centered on Morris County but stretches into Essex, Passaic and Sussex counties as well, now outnumber Republicans by about 8,000, according to state voter registration data.

That shift has not deterred Republican candidate Rosemary Becchi, a Short Hills-based tax attorney and lobbyist, from seeking to unseat Sherrill, a former U.S. Navy helicopter pilot and federal prosecutor who lives in Montclair. The election will be held on Tuesday.

"For the most part, the people of this district are conservative and fiscally conservative and so I think it really still leans Republican at the end of the day," Becchi, 53, said in an interview. "I really feel strongly that we need somebody that's going to work for the people of the district, and I don't think that's what we have."

Sherrill, the first woman to represent the 11th in its 107-year history, calls herself a political moderate and said voters are drawn to her commitment to working across party lines. She has rejected Becchi's claim that she votes with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi "99% of the time," citing an array of bipartisan votes and initiatives.

She points to the Northeast Recovery Task Force, a group she formed with Rep. Peter King, a New York Republican, to help the regional economy rebound from the pandemic. Sherrill also co-sponsored four bills Trump eventually signed into law, including a measure to exempt certain military survivor benefits from taxation and legislation to fund land conservation efforts.

But it's a backlash against Trump that helped Sherrill crack open a formerly safe GOP redoubt. Her predecessor, Republican Rodney Frelinghuysen, had held the seat for 12 terms before retiring in 2018.

Litigating the pandemic

Sherrill said many of her constituents feel increasingly alienated by Trump's presidency, particularly as the second wave of the virus surges across New Jersey. The district's voter registration flipped to favor Democrats in April and climbed at a rapid clip through the summer.

"The administration and the president's handling of the coronavirus has been markedly poor and I think that speaks to people," Sherrill said. "Businesses are closing, a lot of kids aren't in school and I think a lot of this feels as if we're doing this because the administration failed to handle the pandemic."

Sherrill blames Trump for punting response efforts to the states, forcing governors to compete for personal protective equipment and ventilators in the spring while hospitals scrambled to secure supplies at exorbitant markups. She condemned the president for flouting masks and social distancing and accused her opponent's campaign of doing the same.

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Becchi maintains that she adheres to CDC guidelines and goes maskless outdoors when she can social distance. She contends there were "failures at all levels" to manage the pandemic and took specific aim at Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, for overseeing an "arbitrary" reopening process that hurt business owners.

As a former adviser and attorney for the IRS and tax counsel for the U.S. Senate Finance Committee, Becchi has centered much of her campaign platform around lowering taxes,

loosening regulations and restarting the economy. She touts her experience as a lobbyist as an advantage, arguing it gives her expertise in navigating the appropriations process.

"When you work in the U.S. Senate, you learn very quickly how money is distributed and how formulas are made," Becchi said. "I think that's a huge asset for the people of this district to have somebody who understands the process."

Sherrill has criticized Becchi for helping corporate clients like Exxon Mobil and Western Union dodge regulations and lobbying for the 2017 tax bill that capped state and local property tax deductions at \$10,000. The cap is especially punishing for residents of the 11th district, where the average deduction is \$19,000, Sherrill said. Becchi denied working on the cap portion of the bill and like Sherrill, pledged to fight it.

Focus on health care, police

The congresswoman said she has secured three votes to repeal the cap and will continue to work toward that goal if reelected. She outlined a broad agenda for a second term, including securing more coronavirus relief for the district, campaigning for federal funding of the proposed Gateway rail tunnel between New York and New Jersey and, expanding health care coverage.

Policing became another point of contention in the race as the nation erupted in protests this summer over police killings of Black Americans. Sherrill's support of the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which would end the qualified immunity that shields officers sued for misconduct, fueled Republican attack ads attempting to link her to calls from the left to "defund the police."

Becchi argues the legislation would allow criminals to potentially bankrupt officers for doing their jobs. She believes safety and security are top concerns for the 11th district due to its proximity to New York City, declaring in a recent ad that the city is "beset by gun violence and rioting."

"So many of the people in this district ride that train to New York City to go to work and can't right now ... because of COVID and because of the violence," Becchi said.

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Sherrill dismissed the claim as fear-mongering and accused the Republican Party of presenting “a bleak, dark, dystopian future” that is far removed from reality. She does not support defunding police departments, she said, because it would make communities less safe and do nothing to solve systemic issues with policing.

“The fear I have is four more years of this administration driving division, supporting groups like the Proud Boys and QAnon conspiracy theories and private militias in the streets and sending out federal law enforcement to exacerbate tensions across the country,” Sherrill said. “I find it ironic that under this president’s watch, so much of the country has become much more chaotic and unsettled and now there’s some suggestion that four more years of this is going to make things better.”

She called out Becchi for earning an A rating from the National Rifle Association and said her “extreme” views on guns and opposition to the Affordable Care Act are also out of step with the district.

Becchi wants to scrap the Affordable Care Act while keeping provisions that allow children to stay on their parents’ insurance plans until age 26 and protect coverage of pre-existing conditions, noting she has a daughter who was born without her esophagus connected to her stomach. Like other Republicans, Becchi balks at involving the government in health care and proposes increasing private sector competition to lower insurance costs.

About 300,000 residents of the 11th district who have pre-existing conditions could lose coverage if the U.S. Supreme Court strikes down the Affordable Care Act, Sherrill said. The high court is set to hear arguments next month in a case that seeks to overturn the law.

Sherrill described Trump’s push to gut the law during a pandemic, with no plan to replace it, as “one of the most egregious things he’s done.” The number of uninsured Americans decreased by 20 million as the law went into effect between 2010 to 2016, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonpartisan health research group. The uninsured count began ticking up again in 2017 and has since grown by 1.2 million.

Red to blue

The race for the 11th district is rated “solid” or “safe” Democratic by analysts at election forecasting firms the Cook Political Report, Sabato’s Crystal Ball and Inside Elections. Sherrill raised almost six times more money than her opponent and has nearly \$3.7 million cash on hand compared to Becchi’s \$168,708, according to Federal Election Commission filings.

Experts say the blue wave that washed over the district in 2018 can be traced to Trump's election as well as the unpopularity of former Republican governor Chris Christie, whose second term was dominated by the Bridgegate scandal and an ill-fated presidential run.

The president has soured many wealthy, college-educated voters on the Republican Party, eroding longtime bases of support in suburban districts like the 11th, said Matthew Hale, a political science professor at Seton Hall University.

"He's been so damaging to the way that many of the Republicans that carried these districts see themselves," Hale said. "They see themselves as the adults in the room, the ones who are being fiscally responsible, the ones who are conservative and traditional, and he's none of those things." The growing gap between Republicans and Democrats is especially pronounced in the 11th district, where the 24,000-voter lead the Republicans had in 2012 has been wiped out.

"The Democratic campaigns in that district are outworking and out-hustling the other side," said Micah Rasmussen, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University.

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