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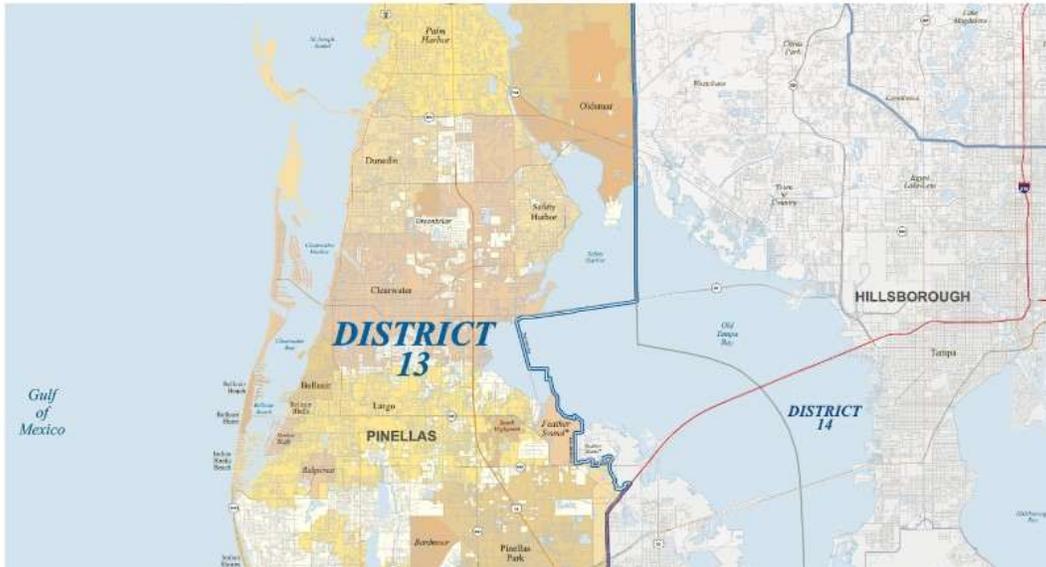
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ABORTION POLICY CLIMATE CHANGE ELECTION 2024

Meet the Democrats who want to oust Anna Paulina Luna from Congress this fall

It won't be easy: 50,000 more Republicans than Dems live in the district

BY: MITCH PERRY - MAY 24, 2024 7:00 AM





U.S. Census map of Florida's Congressional District 13

As a crowd tightly packed the Scottish Cultural Center in Ron DeSantis' hometown of Dunedin last week, four Democrats attempted to make the case for why they are the best option for voters hungry to oust conservative Republican incumbent Anna Paulina Luna from office in November after her first term representing most of Pinellas County in Florida's Thirteenth Congressional District.

Whoever survives the Aug. 20 primary will be a decided underdog to Luna this fall, as the district was drawn to be solidly Republican during the most recent congressional redistricting process in 2022.

That turned the seat from a previously safe Democratic district into an even safer GOP-leaning area, with the heart of its liberal base (eastern and southern parts of St Petersburg) moved into the already strongly Democratic District 14 seat held by Hillsborough County's Kathy Castor.

The Cook Political Report lists the race as "Likely Republican," defined as "not considered competitive at this point but has the potential to become engaged." [The Center for Politics' "Sabato's Crystal Ball"](#) and [Inside Elections](#) also list the race as "Likely Republican."

Yet it's also possibly the only seat that the Florida Democrats have a hope and a prayer of flipping this year in what has become an increasingly red state.

Touting the most endorsements and fundraising totals is **Whitney Fox**, 36. She's received backing not only of Castor but also other Florida Democrats such as Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, and Lois Frankel.

Fox also draws union support from the American Federation of Government Employees and the



Whitney Fox (photo credit: Whitney Fox campaign)

Establishment links

Liz Dahan, 44, was raised in South Florida but has mostly called Washington, D.C., her home for the past two decades. Her CV is cluttered with D.C.

Establishment links, including stints with the World Bank, the Council on Foreign Relations, the office of then Democratic Senate Leader Tom Daschle, the Albright Stonebridge Group (originally chaired by former Secretary of State Madeline Albright and co-chaired by former National Security Adviser Sandy Berger), and for the past eight years she's served as a partner with the Brunswick Group, a D.C. business consultancy.



Liz Dahan in Dunedin on May 16, 2024. (Photo by Mitch Perry/Florida Phoenix)

Although she visited her aunt in Clearwater as a youth, she'd never been a full-time resident of Pinellas County until this year. But that's not much different from Luna, a Southern California native who moved to the district only a short time before her first run for the CD 13 seat in 2020.

Sabrina Bousbar, 27, is a Florida State University undergrad who gained a master's degree in emergency management and natural disasters at Georgetown University on the same day that last week's forum took place.



Sabrina Bousbar outside Black Crow Coffee in St. Petersburg on May 22, 2024 (Photo by Mitch Perry/Florida Phoenix)

She grew up in the county, first in Pinellas Park, and now lives in Largo. She worked as one of the first field organizers for the Joe Biden campaign in Iowa in 2019, and says the campaign utilized her trilingual skills (she says she speaks fluently in English, Spanish, and Arabic) to work as a field organizer in South Florida leading up to the election.

She then was hired to work as deputy director of transportation for the Biden inauguration. She served in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services over the past three years.



Mark Weinkrantz in Dunedin on May 16, 2024 (Photo by Mitch Perry/Florida Phoenix)

Mark Weinkrantz, 67, is an Air Force Veteran and former airline pilot for Northwest. A resident of Palm Harbor in North Pinellas, Weinkrantz is the only candidate with previous experience in local government, as an East Lake fire commissioner. He has the backing of two former Republican County Commissioners, Susan Latvala and Karen Seel.

There is a fifth candidate who qualified for the primary: **John Liccione**. However, he was not permitted to participate in the gathering, and will not receive any institutional support from the Pinellas County Democratic Executive Committee, according to party chair Jennifer Griffith, because he did not pass a vetting process.

Disdain for Luna

During the candidate forum last week, all four Democrats identified similar issues that they consider priorities, such as climate change, abortion rights, and standing up for democracy.

And, of course, their mutual enmity for Luna, whom they claim is simply too conservative for the district.

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Anna Paulina Luna
(Source: Luna's X page)

Last week, she became part of a group of GOP lawmakers who want to [award a Congressional Gold Medal](#) to Trump. Just hours before the forum took place, she became the latest Florida Republican to make the caravan to Manhattan to show solidarity with the former and potentially future president of the United States at his hush-money and campaign-finance violation trial.

"So, I entered the race about six weeks ago, because I couldn't stand by and watch Anna Paulina Luna destroy our democracy any longer," said Dahan.

"My girls are growing up with fewer rights that I did," said Fox. "Doctors are leaving our state. Women will die. Anna Paulina Luna supports this six-week [abortion] ban that is in place here in Florida, and she supports a national ban."

"Right now, we have extremist Anna Paulina Luna," added Bousbar. "She is denying our fundamental rights as women. She's denying and disregarding the climate crisis, and she's cutting Social Security and Medicare for a district that needs it the most."

(That was apparently a reference to the Republican Study Committee, which Luna belongs to, supporting [a proposal](#) to raise the Social Security retirement age for younger workers, as well as transitioning Medicare to a "premium support model" in which the program would compete with private plans and beneficiaries would receive subsidies to shop for preferred policies, according to [Spectrum News](#).)

LUNA RESPONSE

Luna response

Olivia Carson is the campaign manager for Luna. She spoke to the Phoenix on Thursday afternoon to address some of the comments, beginning with where Luna is on abortion.

“Rep. Luna has never said that it’s a federal issue,” Carson said. “It’s a state’s rights decision as was made by the Supreme Court.”

“There also were some comments about the climate and the environment, so while we’re on that topic, Rep. Luna has been the most strong supporter of beach renourishment and fighting for our sea turtles and manatees, so anything about her not caring about the climate or the environment is just false,” Carson continued.

“She has brought home millions back to the district and fixed Social Security problems for many constituents. We have a fantastic caseworker team on our official congressional side that has brought back hundreds of thousands of dollars for people who need returns from Social Security, so her wanting to cut Social Security is completely false.

“As you can tell by these false claims from candidates running against her, they’re not serious. They’re not able to smartly discuss her platform or her voting record, and are unable to address local issues, which is a shame especially if they’re at a candidate forum where candidates are there to learn. We would expect them to be factual.”

Abortion

Regarding the state’s six-week abortion ban, which went into effect on May 1 and has been described by anti-abortion advocates as a “heartbeat bill,” Luna was interviewed in 2023 on a podcast called “EWTN Pro-Life Weekly.” At that time, the ban had been proposed in the Florida Legislature but not yet signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

“It needs to happen,” she said, adding, “I have faith within my governor, within the state of Florida Legislature, to do the right thing and follow the science and actually protect life at heartbeat.”

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“It needs to happen,” she said, adding, “I have faith within my governor, within the state of Florida Legislature, to do the right thing and follow the science and actually protect life at heartbeat.”

But while that position may be out of favor of the majority of voters in the district, the 2022 redistricting map approved by DeSantis makes this a solidly red constituency. Moreover, as in virtually every other place in the state, Republicans continue to run up their numbers compared to Democrats in voter registration. More than 50,000 more registered Republicans than Democrats live in Congressional District 13, according to [the Florida Division of Elections](#).

The four Democrats maintain they can overcome that disadvantage if they win the nomination in August.

“What I learned from working with Tom [Daschle] is, you have to find the common ground,” Dahan said at the forum. “You have to be able to understand what the other side is actually looking for, and then you have to work really damn hard to find that common ground. I learned that from him, I will bring that to my service for the people of Pinellas County.”

Still, “no straight-line Democrat is going to win this district,” said Weinkrantz. “I’ve been committed and invested in this community for over 30 years, I have really broad support from influential Republicans and, between them and the number of nonparty-affiliated [voters], I feel really good about succeeding and beating Luna.”

“We are building the coalition necessary to defeat Anna Paulina Luna,” Bousbar said. “We have Republicans, independents, Democrats, people from all walks of life. It’s for the people. It’s about bringing everyone together because right now our Congress is playing performative politics.”

“We are confident in our path to victory because I am running as a candidate who is not afraid to talk to people in the Republican Party,” said Fox. “I have many relationships with Republicans in this district and Republican elected leaders, and we are having very candid, sincere conversations with them.”

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Fox added that “this is the moderate, pragmatic district with iconic leaders like Charlie Crist, David Jolly, and Bill Young,” referring to the last three officials who held the seat, with Jolly and Young being Republicans (Young serving from 1971 to 2013).

Not so moderate

However, longtime observers of Pinellas County politics conclude that the district isn’t so moderate anymore.

“Both Republican and Democratic parties’ bases have moved more to the right and to the left the last several years,” said Barry Edwards, who has worked with Democratic and Republican candidates in Pinellas County elections for decades. “She [Luna] is reflecting the party’s move to the more conservative side and, like Bill Young, she has an interest in defense policy and foreign affairs.”

Luna has been outspoken in opposing additional funding for Ukraine, but that stance is in sync with the majority of Republican voters. A [CBS News/YouGov survey](#) released last month showed that 61% of Republicans oppose sending weapons and military aid to Ukraine. “She reflects where the majority of the base of her party is, which is why she didn’t get any challengers in her primary,” Edwards said.

Redistricting moved the district from a Democratic +2 points district to a Republican +6 or possibly +7 district, Edwards said.

Daryl Paulson is emeritus professor of government at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg. A former Republican who has listed Ronald Reagan, Barry Goldwater, and William F. Buckley as his political heroes, he [left the party](#) to become an independent in 2017 following the election of Donald Trump.

He says the CD 13 seat isn’t what it used to be, because the Republican Party nationally isn’t the same.

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“What you’re seeing in Pinellas County is sort of a microcosm nationally,” he says. “It’s not the Republican Party, it’s the party of Donald Trump, and Luna is one of the Trumpites.”

Paulson noted that Luna had been a newcomer to Pinellas, which previously might have been a detriment to her electoral chances, but that changed when she was [backed by Trump](#) in September 2021. “She’s somebody who pledged her affiliation early on to Donald Trump and, in many cases across the country, that’s been the difference for winning Republican candidates.”

Whether any Democrat can take down Luna won’t be known until the fall. But these candidates have about two months before the first vote-by-mail ballots go out to make their case that they can flip the seat in November.



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Mitch Perry has covered politics and government in Florida for more than two decades. Most recently he is the former politics reporter for Bay News 9. He has also worked at Florida Politics, Creative Loafing and WMNF Radio in Tampa. He was also part of the original staff when the Florida Phoenix was created in 2018.

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