BUFFALO, N.Y. — Voters in an upstate New York congressional district will choose between a Democrat regarded by many as the natural successor to the longtime congressman who vacated the seat earlier this year and a Republican with crossover appeal in a special election Tuesday.

Democratic Rep. Brian Higgins, who arrived in Congress in 2005, [*resigned in February*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-higgins-democrat-buffalo-fe01be8cd698e2a290534050fdd8a395) to become president of Shea's Performing Arts Center in Buffalo. With Republicans holding a narrow margin in the U.S. House, even a race for a seat widely expected to remain in Democratic hands has drawn its share of scrutiny.

The race in the 26th District features state Sen. Timothy Kennedy, a Democrat who regards Higgins as a mentor, and Gary Dickson, the first Republican elected as a town supervisor in the Buffalo suburb of West Seneca in 50 years.

The district spans Erie and Niagara counties, including the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls. With registered Democrats outnumbering Republicans by more than 2-to-1, it is considered a safe seat for Democrats.

A state lawmaker since 2011, Kennedy, like Higgins, is the product of a strong South Buffalo base. Describing Washington as “chaotic and dysfunctional,” he said he would focus in Congress on reproductive rights, immigration and stronger gun laws like those passed in New York after a 2022 [*mass shooting*](https://apnews.com/hub/buffalo-supermarket-shooting) at a Buffalo supermarket.

“New York has been a bulwark against Donald Trump’s extremist MAGA agenda that has infected our ***politics*** and our nation’s capital,” he said. “The MAGA extremists have made the House of Representatives a laughingstock.”

Kennedy enters the race with a huge financial advantage. The Democrat raised $1.7 million by April 10, compared with Dickson’s $35,430 total, according to [*campaign finance reports*](https://www.fec.gov/data/elections/house/NY/26/2024/). Kennedy has spent just over $1 million in the off-season election, compared with $21,000 for Dickson as the candidates work to remind voters to go to the polls.

Dickson, a retired FBI special agent, acknowledged his uphill climb when he announced his candidacy at the end of February, saying he was running to give voters a choice. He said he supports Trump as the Republican nominee for president, while describing his own ***politics*** as “more towards the center.”

Drawing from five years at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow while with the FBI, Dickson said he would have voted for the [*$95 billion foreign package*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-ukraine-israel-pacific-glance-0af96be97c47496f88506a21ebe1ddab) passed by Congress, which included aid for Ukraine. He called Russian President Vladimir Putin a “vicious, brutal dictator.”

“If he is not stopped now, he will keep on going,” he said during a late-campaign debate.

Earlier this year, the GOP’s slim House majority was narrowed in a closely contested Long Island-area [*special election*](https://apnews.com/article/george-santos-suozzi-pilip-special-election-be0140979ca3050921579e90507bfe1f) that followed New York Republican George Santos’ expulsion from Congress. That race, won by Democrat Tom Suozzi, was viewed as a test of the parties’ general election strategies on immigration and abortion.

In the 26th District, even a closer-than-expected win for Democrats would say something about the mood of the electorate, said Jacob Neiheisel, an associate professor of political science at the University at Buffalo. He said low turnout could be a sign that enthusiasm is lacking.

“If Dickson is able to make it a tighter race than it is expected to be, it seems likely that Republicans would trumpet this as evidence that their party is ascendant," he said.

The election comes as [*Trump is on trial*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-hush-money-opening-stormy-daniels-6beee9b99114898ee0dd60185d43bac5) in New York City in the first criminal trial of a former American president and the [*first of four prosecutions of Trump*](https://apnews.com/projects/trump-investigations-civil-criminal-tracker/) to reach a jury.

The winner of Tuesday’s special election will serve the rest of the year.

Kennedy is on the ballot for the general election in November. On Tuesday, former town supervisor Nate McMurray, who planned to challenge Kennedy in a Democratic primary in June, said in a social media post that election officials had removed him from the ballot because of insufficient signatures. Attorney Anthony Marecki is the only Republican candidate who has filed petitions to run. Dickson did not file to run in the general election.**t**