

# [***Republicans' defense of the 'Biden 16' House districts starts with Pennsylvania's primary election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BV9-HND1-JC5B-G159-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

NEW HOPE, Pa. — Mark Houck makes a potent appeal to conservative Republicans in this corner of eastern Pennsylvania when he describes his arrest and subsequent acquittal on federal charges that he pushed a Planned Parenthood volunteer outside a Philadelphia abortion clinic.

The account has become a staple of Houck's first-time bid for the U.S. House in suburban Philadelphia, a central battleground of the 2024 election, from the presidency on down.

“I’m telling you this because this is how I became a target of the federal government — the weaponization of the government,” he said at a meeting last week of the New Hope Solebury Republican Club.

Houck's campaign to unseat fourth-term Republican Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick in [*Tuesday's primary*](https://apnews.com/article/pennsylvania-presidential-primary-biden-trump-congress-037846de0c0fe4a8554642d7b5054b39) could offer hints about swing-district Republican sentiment in one of the most volatile White House races in years.

With few truly competitive House seats in play, the 1st Congressional District that Fitzpatrick represents is one of 16 districts nationwide that Democrat Joe Biden carried in the 2020 presidential election where voters also sent Republicans to Washington. By comparison, five seats won that year by Donald Trump, then the incumbent and now his party's presumptive 2024 nominee, are now held occupied by a Democrat.

The Republicans' House majority is so slim that Democrats need to flip just four seats in November to retake control. That makes the “Biden 16” a significant group of competitive seats and they could go a long way in determining whether the next president has a friendly or hostile House next year.

Fifteen of those seats are in states that Biden won in 2020. The exception is Nebraska's 2nd District, represented by GOP Rep. Don Bacon. There are five seats in California, four in New York, two in Arizona and one apiece in New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Several of the “Biden 16” are like Fitzgerald, winning year after year by tightrope-walking between challengers in primaries and general elections. Nine of them won a first term in in 2022, when Republicans took control of the House for the first time in four years.

In the fall, many will face the same Democrat they beat last time, sometimes narrowly.

The Fitzpatrick-Houck winner will face Democrat Ashley Ehasz, a former Army helicopter pilot who is uncontested in her primary. Fitzpatrick, a former FBI supervisory agent who beat Ehasz by 10 percentage points in 2022, is outraising Houck and Ehasz by millions of dollars, combined.

Before November, several others among the “Biden 16” must beat back primary challenges from the conservative wing of the GOP.

In Nebraska, Bacon is facing perhaps his strongest primary test yet. If he wins, he will take on the same Democratic opponent, state Sen. Tony Vargas, whom he defeated two years ago by fewer than 3 percentage points.

Bacon has been a vocal supporter of sending more military aid to Ukraine, something opposed by his primary opponent, second-time congressional candidate Dan Frei.

Frei, who contends the GOP base is fed up with Bacon, accuses the incumbent of flouting campaign promises by voting to increase spending and for bills that do nothing to stem the flow of immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally.

Nearly all of the 16 races are considered toss-ups.

Republicans intend to hammer home a message about lax border security and high inflation under Biden. Democrats are warning that Republicans will pursue a national abortion ban as Democrats invoke an issue that has consistently worked in their favor at the ballot box since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion in 2022.

North Carolina Rep. Richard Hudson, chair of the House Republicans’ campaign arm, said the “Biden 16” have formed strong identities in their districts and are emphasizing local issues.

Hudson said Biden’s unpopularity and presidential turnout models are increasingly giving an edge to Republicans, with the GOP attracting more working-class voters who more likely to vote in presidential elections and help flip these districts to Trump.

“The presidential turnout dynamics actually favor Republicans,” Hudson said in an interview. “And then if you look, state by state, where our battlegrounds are, the presidential turnout is going to help us.”

Washington Rep. Suzan DelBene, who leads the House Democrats’ campaign arm, said Democrats will highlight what they say is the chaos at the highest levels of government when Republicans are charge of the House and Trump is in the White House. They will say Trump is a threat to democracy and Republicans are extremists and hypocrites who voted against major spending bills under Biden and then tried to take credit for the projects that landed in their districts.

Voters "want folks who are there to govern,” DelBene said in an interview. "They’re not looking for extremism. And so all we have to do is make sure that voters are aware of what they’re doing. ... Holding them accountable for their actual votes, even though their rhetoric sometimes tries to be more moderate.”

In Pennsylvania, Houck’s bid to unseat Fitzpatrick, who is backed by some labor unions and business groups, has a visceral feel that some Republicans say resonates with them.

At the Solebury Republicans' meeting on the grounds of a luxury hotel and wedding venue, Houck unwound the story of his arrest, describing federal agents with guns drawn as they descended on his Bucks County home in 2022.

They arrested him, in connection with the incident outside a Planned Parenthood clinic in Philadelphia. Houck defended his actions, saying he acted to protect his 12-year-old son from abusive comments made by the clinic volunteer. The trial ended in an acquittal in 2023, and Houck, who runs a Catholic ministry group, said he began fielding requests to run for office.

Houck’s story struck a chord with Rose Cipriano, who came to hear him speak. Her husband picked up a Houck yard sign and Cipriano, who had previously supported Fitzpatrick, said Houck has changed her mind in the approaching primary.

“I’m looking for fresh ideas, and I’m willing to take a chance and vote for him on Tuesday,” Cipriano said “I’ve known his story since it happened, and I support him.”

Houck’s campaign echoes Trump’s own defense against the criminal cases against him. It centers on the slogan “Faith Family Freedom" while Houck talks about defunding the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the federal departments of Agriculture, Education and Justice, calling them all unconstitutional.

Houck has raised more campaign cash than any previous Fitzpatrick primary challenger. But he is well behind Fitzpatrick’s fundraising and name recognition in a county where his brother previously held the congressional seat.

Fitzpatrick has the support of the county party and the backing of police and fire unions, whose large campaign signs endorsing him crop up every two years.

Bob Brooks, president of the Pennsylvania Professional Firefighters Association, said Fitzpatrick represents blue-collar workers like his union members.

“And, if there was more blue-collar legislators, I think they would find more support from firefighters,” Brooks said in an interview. “We support those who support us, and Brian has supported us on many levels.”

Republicans at the Solebury meeting encouraged Houck to stay involved in party ***politics***.

Houck said he will back Fitzpatrick in the general election if Fitzpatrick wins the primary but won’t campaign for him, put off by what he said was Fitzpatrick failure to check on Houck’s family after his arrest. Fitzpatrick didn’t respond to interview requests.

Cipriano said she is disappointed in Fitzpatrick but said the stakes are too high for the party to be divided in November. She pledged to support Fitzpatrick should he win the primary.

“I am behind the Republican Party 100%,” she said. “So whoever’s running, from the top down, gets my support.”

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