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OPINION

Six U.S. House races. Six recommendations

The Times Editorial Board weighs in on the local primary races for U.S. House of Representatives.



The U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. [KENT NISHIMURA | Los Angeles Times]

This article represents the opinion of the Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board.

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The U.S. House of Representatives remains nearly evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, with Republicans holding a slight edge. House members face numerous challenges, from addressing inflation and immigration to protecting civil liberties, voting rights and the environment. Members are elected to two-year terms and paid \$174,000 annually. The primary election is Aug. 20.

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District 12 Republican — **Gus Bilirakis**



Gus Bilirakis, 61, was first elected to Congress in 2006. Republicans in District 12 should vote for him again. He's the obvious choice in this two-person primary.

Gus Bilirakis [Times files]

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Bilirakis doesn't often seek the limelight or blast away on cable TV. Instead, he works more behind the scenes, but he gets things done. In fact, the Center for Effective Lawmaking run by the University of Virginia and Vanderbilt University ranked Bilirakis as the most effective U.S. representative from Florida for the 117th Congress, which ran from January 2021 to January 2023. He introduced several substantive bills that became law, despite spending nearly all of that two years with a Democrat in the White House.

This Editorial Board does not always agree with how Bilirakis votes on issues, but he is strong on issues important to seniors and veterans. His office also provides good service to constituents. Earlier this month, the [Congressional Management Foundation](#) gave Bilirakis two of its Democracy Awards, one for constituent service and the other for constituent accountability and accessibility. He mandated 24-hour response times to constituent requests for assistance and held approximately 100 in-person or tele-town hall meetings in 2023, the foundation reported.

Among other leadership roles, Bilirakis co-chairs the Military Veterans Caucus and co-founded the Longevity Science Caucus and the Caucus for the Humane Bond, created to strengthen the bond between people and animals.

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Bilirakis' priorities for the next two years include tackling inflation through reducing spending and passage of a balanced budget amendment and securing the border by enacting U.S. House bill 2, which among other things would impose limits on asylum eligibility and require employers to use an electronic system to verify the employment eligibility of new employees.

Bilirakis is running against Hank Dunlap, 52, an industrial controls programmer and a self-described "regular guy," who doesn't think the constituents in this district are having their voices heard. His top priorities include reducing nearly all discretionary spending to only what is constitutionally obligated and severing federal relationships with all entities

that embrace diversity, equity and inclusion or environmental, social and governance programs or “any form of anti-American communistic philosophies.”

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The winner of this primary takes on Democratic challenger Rock Aboujaoude Jr. in the Nov. 5 general election.

The Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board recommends Gus Bilirakis in the Republican primary for U.S. Representative, District 12.

District 13 Democrat — **Whitney Fox**

This five-person race has several impressive candidates with a variety of skills and life experience. The winner gets the difficult task of trying to oust Republican incumbent Rep. Anna Paulina Luna in a district that leans Republican. For Democrats, we think that person is Whitney Fox.

Whitney Fox, a Democrat, is running for Florida's 13th Congressional District in an attempt to unseat Republican Rep. Anna Paulina Luna [Courtesy of Whitney Fox for Congress]

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Fox, 36, is a first-time political candidate who is a natural on the campaign trail and comfortable in the public eye. She also appears to have the personal fortitude to hold up under what will likely be a withering general election campaign. Fox has a bachelor's degree in advertising and public relations from the University of Central Florida and has a background in strategic communications and public policy including a tenure as the communications director for the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority.

She has a strong command of the issues and is right when she says the nation “absolutely has to secure our border.” She would oppose a national

ban on abortion and “protect and strengthen” Social Security and Medicare. She said she would favor lower prescription drug costs and expanding the \$35 cap for insulin to everyone, not just seniors.

Fox has out-raised her Democratic opponents by a wide margin. She has brought in almost \$743,000 as of the last reporting deadline, which, excluding loans to their campaigns, is more than the other four candidates combined. She also has more cash on hand. Money isn’t the only measure of a candidate, but it says something when you can essentially out-raise all of your primary competition combined.

Plenty of prominent Democrats have backed Fox’s campaign, including many of the Democratic House representatives from Florida, former St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman and former Florida Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink.

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Liz Dahan, 44, is another impressive first-time candidate, also with a good command of the issues and the kind of life experience that would serve her well if elected to Congress.

She was a partner at Brunswick, a global firm that advises clients including Fortune 500 companies on political, regulatory, social and financial issues. She described herself as a “pragmatic optimist” and a bulwark against authoritarianism, which she has had to navigate in some of the countries in which her former clients operated. She has experience with the Homeland Security program at the Council on Foreign Relations and with Latin American and Caribbean programs with the World Bank.

Dahan also worked with former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former U.S. Sen. Tom Daschle of South Dakota. She has a bachelor’s degree from George Washington University and an MBA from The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

Sabrina Bousbar, 27, would be the first Gen Z woman elected to Congress if she were to win the primary and defeat Luna in November. She was a senior adviser in the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services’ Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response. This is her first run for elected office. Bousbar said she would work to rein in rising costs, secure abortion rights, protect our beaches, reduce prescription drug costs and invest in education. Bousbar has a bachelor’s degree from Florida State University and a master’s from Georgetown University.

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Mark Weinkrantz, 67, is an Air Force veteran and retired airline pilot who was elected to a four-year term on the East Lake Special Fire District

Commission in 2010 and unsuccessfully ran for Pinellas County Commission in 2014. To combat inflation, he would crack down on corporate price gouging. He'd also support programs to relieve mortgage costs and provide down payment assistance.

John William Liccione, 64, is an engineer, entrepreneur and intelligence analyst who founded Leaks Media, which the company website bills as a “global media company just getting started that exposes the dark secrets of those who undermine democracy worldwide.”

Democrats looking to beat Luna in November need a candidate who is well-spoken, well-funded, not easily rattled and with an agenda that can resonate not only with Democrats but with the independent voters who will decide the Nov. 5 election. Fox is that person.

The Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board recommends Whitney Fox in the Democratic primary for U.S. Representative, District 13.

District 14 Republican — **Ehsan Joarder**

Republicans have a weak field of challengers hoping to unseat the Democratic incumbent, Kathy Castor, who was first elected in 2006. But Ehsan Joarder would likely be the most competitive in a general election with his focus on jobs, education and other bipartisan priorities.

Ehsan Joarder [Courtesy of
Ehsan Joarder]

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Joarder and his three Republican primary challengers all focus heavily on immigration, echoing calls by GOP candidates nationwide for stronger enforcement of border security. Joarder also wants to close the southern border temporarily and suspend foreign aid.

The 34-year-old entrepreneur talks more about controlling inflation and bringing greater transparency to Congress. He wants to reduce federal spending, support small businesses and create new affordable housing options. Joarder, who grew up in South Florida, said as the father of three young children he has more “skin in the game” compared to older lawmakers; he said he strongly supports increased funding for public schools and new investments in domestic infrastructure. He also promises to “prioritize bipartisan cooperation” and to interact regularly with constituents at town hall meetings.

Robert “Rocky” Rochford, 60, is a retired U.S. Navy captain and self-described “fiscal conservative” who says his leadership skills separate him

from the pack. He wants more domestic energy production and opposes a ban on offshore drilling in Florida. Rochford promises to work across partisan lines but says America is endangered by a “far-left agenda” and that “the enemy is inside the gate.”

John Peters, a 60-year-old business owner and Lakeland resident, stresses border security and energy production. Neelam Taneja Perry, a 64-year-old physician, supports many of the same priorities. In terms of campaign contributions, most of the candidates in the race have raised only in the mid-five figures, and all are self-financing half or more of the costs of their campaigns. That doesn't show much popular traction for any candidate.

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Joarder is bright, a good communicator and financially competitive in this primary. He also has the strongest message if Republicans hope to compete in November for a district that covers western parts of Hillsborough County and eastern parts of Pinellas.

The Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board recommends Ehsan Joarder in the Republican primary for U.S. Representative, District 14.

District 15 Republican — **Laurel Lee**

There's not a single reason for Republicans to replace incumbent Rep. Laurel Lee as the GOP nominee for Florida's 15th congressional district. Lee has been a solidly conservative voice in Washington whose experience, temperament and commitment to service reflect well on her constituents.

Lee, 50, is a former federal prosecutor and Hillsborough County circuit court judge whom Gov. Ron DeSantis appointed secretary of state in 2019. As secretary, she oversaw Florida's 2020 elections, which were widely hailed as trouble-free. Lee was praised by local elections supervisors across the state as a good communicator and problem-solver in the lead-up to the election. That professional approach and attention to detail has marked her public service, and she is the strongest candidate for Republicans as they look to November's general election.

U.S. Rep. Laurel Lee [handout]

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Like most Republicans, Lee said she is focused on controlling inflation and better securing the border. First elected to Congress in 2022, she has avoided becoming a point of drama or a symbol of gridlock in Washington. She has

long ties to the district, which covers parts of Hillsborough, Pasco and Polk counties, and works across the aisle on issues of bipartisan, regional concern.

James Judge, a 40 year-old small-business owner who lost a different congressional race in 2022, also lists federal spending and border security among his top priorities. Judge said he is running to oppose “the Democrat/Republican establishment uni-party,” or what he sees as a bipartisan collusion between members of Congress and monied special interest groups. He wants a temporary moratorium on immigration, and a requirement that new immigrants learn English and American history. A U.S. Coast Guard veteran and self-described Christian, Judge wrote in a Times questionnaire: “We need to return to the values we had when our nation was rooted in the Bible,” adding: “We need representatives who fear the LORD.”

A third candidate, Jennifer Barbosa, a 50-year-old paralegal, doesn’t offer anything new to this race beyond a call for federal tax credits to offset the cost of insurance premiums. She maintained in a response to the Times questionnaire that the 2020 election was “stolen,” that the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol was “a setup” and that the COVID-19 pandemic “was a scam.” These are ridiculous claims that ignore reality and that contribute to America’s division.

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Lee is a serious lawmaker who brings valuable experience and credentials to Washington. The winner of this primary faces Democrat Pat Kemp in November.

The Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board recommends Laurel Lee in the Republican primary for U.S. Representative, District 15.

District 16 Democrat — **Trent Miller**

The choice for Democrats in this race is not one about policy but who should be the party’s standard-bearer going forward in November. Attorney Trent Miller offers a solid agenda and a fresh perspective for the district, which includes all of Manatee County and parts of southern Hillsborough.

Trent Miller [Courtesy of Trent Miller]

Miller, 57, is managing attorney of his Bradenton law firm, specializing in civil matters and workers’ compensation. He supports traditional Democratic priorities, from protecting Social Security and Medicare to safeguarding abortion rights. Miller also addresses bread-and-butter concerns, from high living costs to tax fairness. He supports a

comprehensive immigration bill to improve border security and promises to work with Republicans on policies that help working families.

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Jan Schneider, 77, a Sarasota attorney, has largely the same agenda, and she is a strong communicator for progressive ideals. She understands national issues and working-class concerns and has demonstrated her commitment to improving this region through her civic and political involvement. But Schneider ran losing campaigns for this seat in 2022, 2018 and 2016, and she lost two earlier campaigns for Congress when the district was more heavily centered in southwest Florida. Voters clearly are looking for something different.

Miller has banked more campaign cash than Schneider, which any Democrat will need in this uphill fight. But he is best suited to take the race to the Republican incumbent, Rep. Vern Buchanan.

The Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board recommends Trent Miller in the Democratic primary for U.S. Representative, District 16.

District 16 Republican — **Vern Buchanan**

Incumbent Rep. Vern Buchanan has been a good fit for Republican voters in this Tampa Bay area district. He is the party's best choice for stemming the gridlock in Washington and working on the region's behalf.

U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan [U.S.
Rep. Vern Buchanan]

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Buchanan, 73, was first elected to Congress in 2006, representing a district that has been reconfigured north from the Sarasota-Charlotte county areas to Hillsborough and Manatee counties. He is a pro-business conservative who has long supported free trade, environmental protection and veterans issues — all major concerns for a coastal community with leading ports and airports, a precious ecosystem and a large retiree population.

Buchanan is touting much of the same agenda that Republicans are espousing across the country, from addressing inflation to securing the

border. He vows to protect Medicare and Social Security and work across the aisle to get things done. His style is a welcome break from politicians who seek publicity by trashing the nation's institutions. It makes Buchanan more effective in Washington and a more formidable Republican opponent.

Eddie Speir, the founder of a private Christian school, promises a wholly different approach. Speir, 55, wants to "eliminate the bureaucratic sprawl of three-letter agencies" and "fight the woke weaponization of government." How many struggling Floridians are worried about those things around the kitchen table?

Congress has enough ideologues grinding Washington to a halt and sapping voters' faith in government. In Buchanan, Republicans have a candidate more reflective of the district and better poised to keep the seat in GOP control.

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The Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board recommends Vern Buchanan in the Republican primary for U.S. Representative, District 16.

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The recommendation process

Before making a recommendation, the Times Editorial Board asks candidates to fill out questionnaires and sit for an interview. The process can also include running criminal and civil background checks, interviewing candidates' colleagues and employers, reviewing voting records and financial disclosures and examining their past and current positions on relevant issues.

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