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### **Democrats challenge Wittman**

***U.S. Rep. Wittman has represented the 1st District for 10 terms. Democrats are trying to flip that seat***

By Ben Swenson, Correspondent

Congressional midterm elections are still 17 months away, but already Democrats are itching for a fight against U.S. Rep. Rob Wittman.

In April, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee identified Virginia's 1st Congressional District as one of 35 Republican-held seats it hopes to flip in the 2026 midterm elections. Wittman, R-Westmoreland, has represented the 1<sup>st</sup> District since 2007. So far, two Democrats have announced they intend to seek their party's nomination and others have not ruled out the possibility.

Wittman, now serving his 10th term in Congress, has maintained a firm grip on his seat representing the 1st District, which includes 13 counties and two cities in Eastern and Central Virginia, along with parts of Henrico, Chesterfield and Hanover counties. The district includes Williamsburg and James and York counties.

Since the 2021 congressional redistricting, which removed localities in Northern Virginia from the district and added jurisdictions in suburban Richmond, Wittman has won two elections — by 13 percentage points in 2022 and 12.8 percentage points in 2024. Wittman's closest race was prior to redistricting in 2018, when he defeated Democratic challenger Lavangelene Williams by 10.5 percentage points.

Nevertheless, many Democrats believe that Wittman's alignment with President Donald Trump and his agenda will be a liability in 2026.

"Career politician Congressman Rob Wittman has spent nearly 20 years in office enriching himself while voting as a rubber stamp for his D.C. party bosses, rather than fighting for his own constituents," DCCC spokesman Eli Cousin said.

"Wittman cast the deciding vote for the largest cuts to Medicaid in history, which will kick working Virginians off their health care and gut rural hospitals ... all to pay for more tax cuts for billionaires," Cousin said.

Political analysts have also said that Wittman's race has the potential to become competitive. The Cook Political Report, Sabato's Crystal Ball at UVA's Center for Politics and Inside Elections with Nathan L. Gonzales all classify the 1st District seat as "likely Republican," which indicates that it is something less than a slam dunk for the GOP.

Wittman's office did not say whether he intends to seek an 11th term but signaled that his focus now is on serving his constituents. "While national Democrats play political theater and chase meaningless headlines, Congressman Wittman is fighting every day to lower costs, secure the border, support our military, and put the commonwealth first," Wittman spokesperson Kathryn Rexrode said. "Democrats can waste their money however they want but Virginians have elected Congressman Wittman by double-digits time and again for a reason."

Being deemed a "District in Play" by the DCCC indicates that conversations are taking place among senior-level Democratic strategists about approaches that would be likely to help flip a Republican-held seat and that they are considering strong candidates who could help accomplish that goal. The designation also confers a level of investment in a race that less competitive contests do not enjoy.

The DCCC also announced that it is targeting one other seat in Virginia — that held by U.S. Rep. Jen Kiggans in the 2nd Congressional District, which encompasses much of southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore.

Amanda Pohl, clerk of the Chesterfield County Circuit Court, was the first Democrat to announce in June that she hopes to challenge Wittman for the 1st District seat. Prior to being elected clerk of court, Pohl worked in voter advocacy, political leadership and social work. She said she feels that the combination of her lived experience as well as her public service and professional expertise make her a better fit for the job than Wittman.

"The bottom line is that we have a congressman who's not representing us," Pohl said.

In her 2023 election as clerk of court, Pohl flipped a seat that had previously been a stronghold for Republicans. She said that the political profile of 1st District communities like hers is moving away from traditionally conservative leanings.

Lisa Vedernikova Khanna of Midlothian announced later in June that she would also seek to challenge Wittman.

Vedernikova Khanna resigned her position as president of the Metro Richmond Area Young Democrats to launch her congressional campaign. She was previously employed in technology, most recently for Instacart.

Vedernikova Khanna was raised by a single mother and immigrant from the Soviet Union. She said that the struggles she and her mother encountered while she was growing up resonate today with many Virginians who are struggling to get by. She has memories as a child of being evicted from their home and her mother filing for bankruptcy.

Still other Democrats haven't ruled out a run. Jim Hendrickson, Northumberland Democratic Committee chair and a retired Air Force colonel, is considering challenging Wittman, although he said that the election of Abigail Spanberger as governor and other statewide races are his priority right now.

Henrico County Commonwealth's Attorney Shannon Taylor, who in June narrowly lost the Democratic primary for Virginia attorney general, will make a decision about running for the office in the coming weeks and months, according to a senior adviser.

If more than one Democrat remains interested in challenging Wittman for the 1st District seat when congressional races begin to take shape, the nomination could be decided by primary in 2026.

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