

POLITICAL SCENE

Assembly's 12 hottest primary races

Key battles in Cranston, Johnston and Woonsocket

Patrick Anderson

Providence Journal USA TODAY NETWORK

Put the quahog rake down and pick up the little rubber-tipped ballot-signing pen: Primary day is near.

The November presidential election might seem like it's all that matters this year in politics, but there are state and local Rhode Island races to pay attention to, and many of them are decided Sept. 10, a week from Tuesday.

It's true that there are fewer competitive General Assembly primaries this year than normal.

And in city halls, only the Cranston mayoral primary has been truly contentious.

But there are exceptions to every trend, and this year Cranston, Johnston and Woonsocket have some of the old-fashioned Assembly primary battles we've come to know and love.

Although the progressive Assembly onslaught has lost a little steam this year, the contingent of overtly conservative Democrats that once ruled the legislature and remain influential continues to be squeezed.

Three of the eight General Assembly retirements this year were conservative Democrats and several more have competitive races.

Here are a dozen Assembly contests, all Democratic primaries, to watch next week.

Woonsocket and Cumberland

House District 51: Robert Phillips vs. Garrett Mancieri Will Woonsocket politics ever get boring? Maybe, but not yet.

The aftershocks from longtime mayor, former state lawmaker and Woonsocket power broker Lisa Baldelli-Hunt's surprise resignation continues to ripple from City Hall.

There are five candidates running for mayor in November to replace her and, for months, it looked like state Rep. Robert Philipps would be one of them.

But he was unable to clear the field and by May announced that, instead of running for mayor, he would run for reelection to his House seat.

By that time, City Council member Garrett Mancieri was already campaigning for the House and decided he was not going to abandon it.

Phillips is a conservative endorsed by Rhode Island Right to Life.

Last session, he led a study commission that drew up a path to putting solar panels on freeway medians, and he wanted to look into regulations around nuclear power.

"My focus has always been about businesses and changing mindset about our business culture. Reducing regulations and red tape, competitive tax structure, and making it easier for constituents to obtain good paying jobs and having transportation to get these individuals to the good paying jobs," Phillips wrote in an email.

Mancieri is a real estate broker. He is endorsed by the liberal and pro-choice Democratic Women's Caucus.

Senate District 20: Denis Collins vs. Marian Juskuv vs. Brian Thompson This district, bisected by the Woonsocket-Cumberland line, opened up this spring when incumbent Roger Picard announced he would not seek reelection after 32 years in the legislature (House and Senate).

Like Picard, Thompson is from Woonsocket, where he sits on the City Council. In the 2022 general election, around 200 more Senate District 20 voters turned out in Woonsocket than in Cumberland.

And, like Picard, Thompson has the support of Senate leadership. Unions, lobbyists and industry players such as Bally's are also backing Thompson, according to his campaign filings.

Collins and Juskuv are from Cumberland. Collins is on the School Committee.

Cranston

Senate District 28: Darrèll Brown vs. Melissa Carden vs. John Croke Jr. vs. Bernice Morris vs. Lammis Vargas In liberal Edgewood, the retirement of Sen. Josh Miller has paved the way for a crowded five-way race among liberals who don't seem to disagree on much. Vargas, the party-endorsed candidate with several years on the City Council, has been the favorite.

But anything can happen with this many candidates.

Carden is the well-known executive director of the Coalition Against Gun Violence.

Brown is vice president of the Conservation Law Foundation of Rhode Island and has impressed in candidate forums.

Croke is a systems analyst at Providence College.

Morris is director of education and employment at Crossroads Rhode Island.

House District 16: Brandon Potter vs. Joseph Graziano Potter hasn't shied away from controversy since being elected under the Rhode Island Political Cooperative banner in 2020 and then being expelled from the group.

His disagreements with House Republicans sparked a House rule against social media feuding between colleagues. And his fellow Cranston delegation member Rep. Charlene Lima took out a newspaper ad last cycle to recruit someone to beat him.

Enter Graziano, who works registering lobbyists in Secretary of State Gregg Amore's office and comes from a family with a long history of politics on Smith Hill.

Potter believes his fiery opposition to legalizing online gambling a year ago angered Senate President Dominick Ruggerio and put a target on his back.

Graziano has denied being recruited to run by Ruggerio and accuses Potter of "headline grabbing" and position-taking rather than a "results-oriented approach."

He criticized Potter's goal of legalizing "magic mushrooms" and, on a more hyper-local level, he questioned Potter's attempts to shut down the police gun range near Cranston West High School via legislation.

"Such an initiative, without proposing a viable alternative, not only disregarded the operational needs of our police but also failed to engage with the broader community to understand their concerns," Graziano wrote. "This kind of policymaking is not just ineffective but counterproductive, it alienates those who are directly affected by such decisions."

Potter responded: "Expanding access to high quality, affordable health care, protecting workers, building new schools and keeping people safe from gun violence isn't about grabbing headlines. It's telling that my opponent's

biggest gripe is my effort to protect kids in classrooms from being distracted and desensitized to AR-15 gunfire when numerous NRA supporters have helped fund his campaign.”

House District 14: Charlene Lima vs. Giona Picheco Speaking of Lima, she has a rematch of a race she won 59% to 41% two years ago. Picheco has been campaigning aggressively and is backed by the Working Families Party.

Lima, first elected to the House in 1992, is part of its conservative contingent. She has been cast out of, and welcomed back into, House leadership several times over the years.

Johnston

Senate District 25: Richard DelFino III vs. Andrew Dimitri vs. Pam Leary Johnston famously voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020 despite a venerable, conservative Democratic machine that has kept control of Town Hall and the State House delegation.

That control could be tested in both the House and Senate this year, where left-leaning candidates are mounting primary challenges this month and the GOP is eyeing seats in November.

Sen. Frank Lombardo, a pro-life, pro-gun Democrat, died this year, which opened up a seat that had been uncontested since 2018.

Abortion politics in this election year could play a role in this race.

DelFino has the party endorsement, plus name recognition from a stint on the Town Council and more than a decade working as a staffer for the last three governors. (He left a job as director of municipal affairs for Gov. Dan McKee last year but said it had nothing to do with the deteriorating relationship between McKee and Johnston Mayor Joseph Polisena Jr.)

He is endorsed by Rhode Island Right to Life.

Andrew Dimitri is a lawyer and son of William Dimitri, who has worked as counsel at the State House for years, including a prominent turn during the 38 Studios investigations.

Leary is an operations manager for the state Department of Children, Youth & Families and is endorsed by the progressive- leaning and pro-choice Democratic Women’s Caucus. She also has picked up the endorsement of the building trades unions.

“I have heard from hundreds of voters who want a state senator they can trust to stand up for their rights,” Leary wrote in an email. “The women and men that I speak to on the doors know that I will stand up for issues like protecting abortion access, mifepristone, and IVF access.”

Both DelFino and Leary said they support universal free school lunch.

Asked if they support House Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi’s housing packages, Leary said “yes.” DelFino said he supports “programs that make housing more accessible to our working families,” but all new development “must fit in with the current neighborhood.”

House District 42: Edward Cardillo vs. Dennis Cardillo vs. Kelsey Coletta The list of vulnerable incumbents this year isn’t too long, but it could include Rep. Edward Cardillo, who faces a rematch of his three-way race from 2020.

Cardillo beat Coletta 41% to 36% – a margin of 82 votes – two years ago, with nephew Dennis Cardillo coming in third with 23% of the vote.

Two years ago, Coletta, a therapist and substance abuse clinician, ran under the banner of the progressive Rhode Island Political Cooperative, which was always going to face an uphill battle in conservative Johnston.

This year Coletta, the daughter of Rep. John “Jay” Edwards, is backed by the more measured progressive Working Families Party and has been aggressively campaigning for much of the year.

It is difficult to predict how the familial dynamics of a race like this will play out.

Providence

House District 11: Grace Diaz vs. Tania Quezada Unlike most longtime incumbents in safe blue seats, Diaz has had to face a contested primary each year since 2012, although mostly against the same opponent, and it wasn't much of a contest.

This year, she has a new opponent, Quezada, who is well-known in the Providence political world. She was on Mayor Brett Smiley's transition team.

The challenge from Quezada, who is not related to Sen. Ana Quezada, has been serious enough that the Service Employees International Union State Council has been canvassing to help Diaz.

State House speculation suggests Diaz is facing primary challenges for her socially conservative bent and picking sides in recent high-stakes campaigns. She endorsed Gonzalo Cuervo for mayor in 2022 and Sabina Matos for Congress in last year's special election.

House District 9: Enrique Sanchez vs. Anastacia Williams vs. Santos Javier Policy was always in danger of taking a back seat to personality – and accusations of impropriety – as two of Rhode Island's most colorful politicians rematch after Sanchez unseated Williams last cycle.

But the three candidates do come from different political places. Sanchez is one of, if not the, most left-wing politicians in Rhode Island, aligned with the Democratic Socialists of America.

Williams, while generally liberal, is from the pragmatist school of politics.

Javier is endorsed by Right to Life and backed by the socially conservative Rep. Ramon Perez.

Pawtucket

House District 58: Cherie Cruz vs. Elizabeth Moreira The relationship between Mayor Donald Grebien and the city's progressive block – of which Cruz is a member – has been an uneasy one in recent years. Among other things, they've sparred on the proposed development of Morley Field and policing.

Moreira, a former city employee, is running on the mayor's slate of preferred candidates and at minimum has raised more than \$22,000 since May, an unusually large total for a first-time House candidate.

But Cruz is seen as a star on the left, is very plugged into her district, and will have plenty of help knocking on doors.

Warwick

Senate District 29: Jennifer Rourke vs. Peter Appollonio Jr.

In 2022, Political Cooperative cofounder Rourke finally won the Democratic primary for the seat formerly held by ex-House Majority Leader Michael McCaffrey – only to be toppled in the general election by Republican Sen. Anthony DeLuca. She didn't get much help from the Democratic Party or Senate leaders.

This year, Rourke takes on Appollonio, a former police officer, for the chance to take on DeLuca.

Westerly

House District 37: Sam Azzinaro vs. Jonathan Daly-Labelle Since winning his House seat in 2008, Azzinaro, part of the contingent of conservative House Democrats, has not had a primary challenge, until this year.

Daly-Labelle, a peace activist and former South Kingstown School Committee member, is challenging Azzinaro from the left.