



Millennial firebrand Calandra Vargas wants to kick Lamborn to the curb

Miss Vargas goes to Washington?

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At the Fifth Congressional District Assembly in April, Calandra Vargas — Christian missionary, legislative aide, equestrienne, organic gardener, animal rights defender and 32-year-old military brat — took the stage after being nominated from the floor.

The newcomer gave a rousing speech and walked away with 58 percent of the delegate vote, coming within fewer than 20 votes of bumping five-term U.S. Congressman Doug Lamborn out of the Republican primary.

Surprise.

"It was like skydiving — the whole world opened up," Vargas remembers. "I was like, 'I have a real race. I could actually be the next congresswoman from this district.'"

She's young, and certainly lively. In one breath, she recalls growing up on a military base in Belgium, being kissed on the cheeks by a farmer named "Mr. Francois" while learning how American soldiers saved his life in World War II. In the next, she's somewhere in Georgia, eating a pickled pig's foot, encircled by dancers singing about the Confederacy. It's fair to say she's seen many sides of America, and she says it's made her more open to others.

If elected, Vargas says she'll serve only four terms, she'll reach out to the public (including *liberals*), and she'll hire a Veterans Affairs specialist to do outreach. Getting elected, she says, may prove the biggest challenge.

"I've been told from Day One, to run I need \$300,000," she says. "It's not going to happen."

Part of the problem is that people are afraid to go on record opposing a congressional incumbent.

"If you are intimidated in any way by your own elected official, it's a problem," Vargas says. "And you're a part of the problem if you don't call it out."

Vargas is a former Heritage Foundation intern, a pro-life, pro-gun, pro-Donald Trump (after she originally backed Ted Cruz) Republican. She's skeptical of transgender bathroom rights on a

mass scale, and a believer in "traditional marriage" and creationism. But, she says, none of those issues are her priorities.

"We can talk about all these controversial issues and the things that really divide us," she says, "but I want everyone to be able to have a great paying job. I want them to be able to pay off their student loans. I don't want them to worry about their future, worry about how to take care of their parents because Social Security's suddenly gone."

We spoke with Vargas about her background and views:

Tell us about your career, which seems like this strange mix of horses and the Heritage Foundation.

I've been told I'm a strange political animal by all my friends. So I'm this hardcore, liberty-minded conservative, but I have some of these liberal elements. My dad's a Democrat, he's Bernie Sanders-supporting. I grew up very hippie ... it wasn't until high school that I began really challenging my world view. So at 17 years old when 9/11 happened, I decided to do a program overseas called Youth With a Mission. It's a Christian missionary organization, but they're really phenomenal ... really out-of-the-box.

"We went to Argentina, and it was during the economic collapse of 2001 and I remember standing on the rooftops banging on pots and pans, I mean the whole city was literally in protest because it was a financial collapse. It was a wonderful experience. It challenged me, it humbled me, it made me see being an American in a different perspective. It made me grateful for my country, but it also made me wake up to harder realities that can even happen here ... those kind of propelled me into school. I went to Oral Roberts University and I was a part of their government program.

From there, Regent University, went into global politics with an emphasis on Mideast studies. I studied the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ... I was in D.C. during the Arab Spring and so when all of these diplomats [were here] from around the world ... I was at Brookings Institute, Heritage Foundation, Cato, American Enterprise, Senate hearings, hearing these stories of people coming and saying, "Is America really serious about supporting democracy?" So when I came back here and my friend was like, "Come down to [work at] the [state] Capitol.' I was like, "Eh, it's not really my heart. I want to get back to D.C."

But, when I saw what was going on in Colorado politics, this clash of worldviews, liberal versus conservative, centralized planning versus free market, it's not always black-and-white, but for me it was a very big difference, in that the things that I value about my country were under attack or were being diminished or that political energy was being spent on things that really didn't matter. For me, I'm like, people need to eat. ... At the Legislature, they were talking about what kind of toilets people need to be using. You're kidding me, right? This is so nonessential.

So you ended up working for which state politicians along the line?

I've worked for Paul Lundeen, Mark Waller, Ray Scott, I've done volunteer work for many. I've worked for Mitt Romney, I've worked for Ken Buck.

And Doug Lamborn, let's not forget him.

[Laughs] Yes, let's not forget him. Which was a free position, by the way. He did not pay me even though I did real work ... I felt like I wasn't an essential staff member; I was just there. He was doing me a favor, right? And his staff did not treat me that way, but Doug Lamborn never even bought me a cup of coffee."

On your platform online I didn't see some key things: abortion, guns, transgender rights, gay rights. Was this on purpose?

"It is a purposeful thing, because you know, for so long, Republicans have shot themselves in the foot in the sense that they limited themselves. And they missed the chance to build relationships with such an amazingly diverse community here ... You've got to put people before politics ... We can wave our liberty flags all day, but if people aren't voting for us, game over. We failed as a party, we failed to communicate these values. And if our whole goal is to get into office, to get a majority, so we can support this platform, if people aren't voting for us, what's the point?"

In the case of Doug Lamborn, where it's supposedly such a safe seat, I disagree. We have almost as many unaffiliated voters, which is growing. I mean Colorado is a blue-leaning state, people are moving here in the tens of thousands in their 20s and 30s, and we're a top destination for outdoor recreation. Denver's just growing. Pretty soon, I think Colorado Springs and Denver are going to just merge. right?

... Are we ready to face those changing demographics? If I'm the next congresswoman, I represent the whole district. I can't just stay in my little conservative district, go to the same Republican meetings."

So, you're a lot different than Irv Halter or Bentley Rayburn — others who have challenged Lamborn.

"I think any candidate that's ever run. I mean, one, I'm a woman, duh. And yes, my age, but my perspective, my lifestyle.

Does this stuff make you better? Some would say you're too young.

"Well, they're grossly misinformed, because the Constitution [says] 25 years old, citizen for only seven years, you have to live in the state. I don't even have to live in this district to run for this district; most people don't know that. So James Madison, Federalist Papers, 52, I was reading about this, Congress is supposed to be the elected officials closest to the people.

... Don't tell me that you support the Constitution and then you support this little hierarchy of culture in your little Republican bubble about how I should be, or I need to show respect, or I should have gray hair and wear khaki pants to run. That's not constitutional."