

Record Searchlight

North State lawmakers, challengers adjust to campaigning in a COVID-19 world

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In her 2018 run for Congress, Audrey Denney spent much of her campaign driving across California's 1st Congressional District — something she said takes seven hours “from farthest point to farthest point.”

For Denney, the drives were worth it because she likes getting in front of people where she can answer questions and understand their positions. But the lingering coronavirus pandemic has forced her to adjust.

“We have to be really creative about how we do that this year so it's been Zoom meetings, and nobody in their right mind wants to get on another Zoom meeting,” said the 36-year-old Democrat from Chico.

Denney, running for U.S. Congress against Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, is one of various candidates trying to secure a legislative seat while social distancing.

At the state Legislature level, candidates are balancing the same interests, as Assemblywoman Megan Dahle, R-Bieber, is trying to hold off Democrat Elizabeth Betancourt of Happy Valley to represent California's 1st Assembly District. Dahle's husband, state Sen. Brian Dahle, R-Bieber, is trying to keep his 1st District seat in the upper chamber against first-time candidate Pamela Swartz, a Democrat from Nevada County.

Incumbents emphasizing the job

Like Denney, incumbent Sen. Brian Dahle said the lack of chances to meet people this cycle has been a disappointment.

Instead, he said he's been spending his time trying to help people who might be worried about having their business close, losing their jobs or not being able to get unemployment insurance. He said he's also been trying to get people help with wildfires, and said voters have been bringing up the high cost of living in California.

“I believe the direction that we are going with more and more taxes, fees and regulations is ruining our state,” Dahle said.

He said his opponent, Swartz, is a nice person but said the two of them “disagree fundamentally on how to solve the issues of the day.”

In the state's other legislative chamber, the Assembly, Megan Dahle, said she's been "focused on doing the work of the people."

Dahle, who won her husband's old seat in a 2019 special election, said COVID has reduced the number of in-person meetings and events. She said over the past seven months she's doing more Zoom meetings, conference calls and said her cellphone number is listed in county voter information guides if people want to call and see where she stands on an issue.

Along with forest management, she highlighted the need for reliable internet across the district "particularly now as many students are learning and parents are working from home."

Dahle also said she's seen more confusion and uncertainty about the voting process this cycle and encouraged people with questions to check with elections officials.

In a candidate forum this week, LaMalfa said the federal response to the coronavirus "can always be better" but said he's voted for three bills approaching \$3 trillion in relief spending.

"We saw an emergency. We took action," he said. "I think we've been able to blunt a lot of it."

LaMalfa said there's been "some level of success" in addressing the pandemic because one forecast predicted about 2 million deaths in the U.S. (There have been about 217,000 thus far.) However, the libertarian Cato Institute has in the past criticized the White House for using the forecast to imply its response might have saved millions of lives, saying the prediction was "simply wrong."

LaMalfa also said some of the business closures and restrictions designed to mitigate the spread have been unfair and unreasonable.

"For people (with) small businesses, they have loans, they have dreams that are on the line that are going to be killed off because of arbitrariness that isn't necessarily tied to something happening in their business, but maybe something happening on the other side of the county," he said.

Aside from the virus affecting campaign plans, Democrats running in the conservative North State are highlighting the response to the pandemic as a campaign issue.

With fewer in-person events, Denney said she's only left Chico a handful of times in the campaign, including once to hand out personal protective equipment in Nevada County.

She said the pandemic has drawn a sharper contrast between her and LaMalfa because he's taken "the wrong votes" on stimulus bills like the HEROES Act, which he lambasted as a "partisan wishlist" for Democrats. Denney said the bill would have gotten more money to small businesses and firefighters.

In the Assembly race, Betancourt said jobs and economic stability are the issues coming up most from voters amid the pandemic. She said she wants to ensure small businesses can stay open safely and advocate for more help from the federal government.

“The opening and closing of our local economies has been incredibly challenging for all of our small businesses, made even more difficult because the big-box stores have been allowed to remain open,” Betancourt said.

Betancourt also highlighted transparency as a campaign issue, saying she’s participated in every public forum offered while her opponent has avoided them.

In the state Senate race, first-time candidate Pamela Swartz said the same about Brian Dahle. Earlier this week, the League of Women Voters of the Redding Area announced that it canceled a forum because the Dahles did not respond to their invitations, and the two were absent from a January forum in the primary.

Swartz said the lack of events has made it harder for voters to compare candidates on the issues and also made fundraising more challenging.

She also criticized her opponent for taking too much money from large corporations and special interests. Meanwhile, she cited her endorsement from the California Labor Federation and said she supports increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. Swartz also said she supports single-payer health care, a type of universal health care, in California.

Speaking about how COVID has changed the race, Swartz and Betancourt each touched on the issue of wearing masks, with Betancourt questioning how wearing a facial covering became a political statement.

While the virus means she can’t spend three to four days a week on the road anymore, Betancourt said she’s been able to respond to peoples’ questions online, saying she’s even helped people correct unemployment issues.

“I’ve been talking with voters of all stripes about how to streamline regulation to make it easier to hire, to cut through California’s dense red tape, and to get away from the one-size-fits-all approach to regulating,” she said.

The last day to vote in the election is Nov. 3.