

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Conor Lamb calls for 'delicate balance' on U.S.-Israel relations in Pa. Senate bid; Nassau Republicans are all in on Anthony D'Esposito; Sydney Kamlager wants to speak 'truth to toxicity' in Washington; MEPPA board member: Peace act signals shift in U.S. policy on Israeli-Palestinian conflict; A White House speechwriter chronicles major speeches never delivered; and Brown win sets off race for Cleveland-area Democratic Party boss.

MAY 9, 2022

Conor Lamb calls for 'delicate balance' on U.S.-Israel relations in Pa. Senate bid

The moderate congressman is walking a fine line between 'maintaining our support' for Israel, yet criticizing Israeli moves he says jeopardize the two-state solution

By Matthew Kassel

Rep. Conor Lamb (D-PA), who gained national prominence when he pulled off a surprise upset in a Trump-leaning House district outside of Pittsburgh four years ago, launched his Senate campaign last summer with an argument that he is uniquely capable of repeating that success across Pennsylvania.

With little time remaining until next Tuesday's high-stakes Senate primary, however, the two-term congressman has struggled to gain momentum, notwithstanding a continued effort to position himself as a centrist foil to the frontrunning Democrat and lieutenant governor, John Fetterman, an outspoken progressive who holds a sizable polling lead.

But Lamb's messaging on at least one major Middle East foreign policy issue has, perhaps unexpectedly, put him somewhat to the left of Fetterman and another progressive rival, state Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta, in the open-seat race to succeed outgoing Sen. Pat Toomey (R-PA). As the primary enters its final stretch, Lamb is calling for a more nuanced if actively critical approach to American engagement

with Israel, particularly amid increased settlement expansion that, he warns, has dimmed hopes for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"That's where I think we have to strike this delicate balance," Lamb, 37, said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, "of maintaining our commitment to it, maintaining our support for Israel, especially right now, as they're being attacked yet again, but not being afraid to say when the settlement activity goes over the line and therefore jeopardizes what it is we're trying to pursue in the two-state solution."

His argument is broadly consistent with that of the Biden administration, which objected to the Israeli government's announcement last week that it will approve the construction of nearly 4,000 new housing units in the West Bank. "Israel's program of expanding settlements deeply damages the prospect for the two-state solution," Jalina Porter, a spokesperson for the State Department, told reporters on Friday.

Still, the urgency with which Lamb has recently drawn attention to the issue has stood out, not least because of his reputation

as a pro-Israel stalwart who is among the most high-profile moderates in the House.

During a Senate candidate forum hosted by the Jewish Democratic Council of America last month, for instance, each of the three participants — including Lamb, Fetterman and Kenyatta — voiced unanimous support for continued and unconditional security assistance to Israel as well as funding for its Iron Dome missile-defense system.

Fetterman, who angered some on the activist left when he came out as staunchly pro-Israel in a recent interview with *JJ*, reiterated his views at the end of the forum, noting that, "at every juncture," he would "come down on the side of Israel."

Lamb, on the other hand, devoted a portion of his remarks — on a question regarding the two-state solution — to criticizing Israeli settlements. "Unfortunately, if the settlement activity just sort of continues with no limit to it, it becomes less and less plausible that you could have a possible two-state solution, just as a question of geography," he argued. "That's the biggest thing we have to pay attention to and try to use our political

influence to balance.”

In conversation with JI late last week, Lamb, a Marine veteran and former federal prosecutor, offered further insight into the motivations for his concern, cautioning that both Democrats and Republicans have shied away from endorsing the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, which, until recently, had been a longstanding bipartisan pillar of American foreign policy in the Middle East.

“My personal perspective is to say that it’s time for us to double down on the importance of the two-state solution,” he emphasized, “because there are people in Washington, actually on both sides, who are openly questioning the viability of it, in part because of all the settlement activity that is taking place.”

Such comments are echoed on the issues page of Lamb’s campaign site, where he is alone among his Democratic opponents in including a section devoted exclusively to policy toward Israel. “Israel has the absolute right to defend itself and protect the Israeli people,” he writes, before adding: “That does not mean that the Israeli government should be immune from criticism.”

But in interviews with JI last week, some of Lamb’s longtime Jewish backers expressed surprise over the direction of his critique, even as, despite some quibbles, they affirmed their continued support for the congressman’s Senate campaign.

“Let me just say, it’s more to the left than my stance,” said Lou Weiss, a pro-Israel advocate in Pittsburgh. “We don’t need to put pressure on Israel. They put pressure on themselves.”

Jeffrey Letwin, a Jewish community activist in Pittsburgh, said he had watched some of the JDCA forum last month but missed Lamb’s more critical remarks. “Conor has always shown himself to be the type of candidate and the type of legislator who’s been willing to reach across the aisle,” he told JI. “Maybe that was just a reflection of his willingness to listen to all sides.”

“But I honestly believe, when it comes to someone we can count on, he’s our guy,” Letwin said.

Weiss, who described Lamb as a “great ally” and a “proven supporter,” agreed. “Conor’s head and his heart are in the right direction and everyone wants peace,” he

reasoned. “What are the terms of that peace and how it’s arrived at, that’s where people have different strategies. When push comes to shove, we can absolutely count on him.”

During his first congressional bid, in 2018, Lamb drew some scrutiny from the Jewish community when a conservative website unearthed a letter from his college days in which he had accused Israel of “terrorism” and deliberately targeting civilians in the Gaza Strip.

Lamb said at the time that he had “no memory” of submitting the letter to the University of Pennsylvania’s student paper in 2002, while also stressing that he would “always support Israel.”

He prevailed over his Republican opponent with endorsements from a number of Jewish groups, including the political arms of J Street and the JDCA.

This cycle, pro-Israel organizations have largely stayed out of the Senate race. J Street and the JDCA are not making official endorsements, while Democratic Majority for Israel’s political action committee isn’t weighing in because it has concluded that Lamb and Fetterman are both suitable choices.

Lamb, who took office shortly after the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, has built close relationships with Jewish voters across the state during his time in Congress, where he has pushed back against boycott campaigns targeting Israel as well as “other antisemitic movements in our culture,” he told JI.

“Unlike his primary opponents, Congressman Lamb was at the intersection of Shady and Wilkins the morning of the Tree of Life massacre,” said Ari Mittleman, a Jewish activist and an expert on Pennsylvania politics who is neutral in the primary. “I imagine those emotions and memories never leave you.”

Over the past four years, Lamb said he has frequently consulted with Jewish voters on U.S.-Israel issues and other Middle East foreign policy concerns. “I think I’ve just learned more — more detail, more history, more perspective,” he told JI. “I don’t think my basic position on the importance of this relationship has changed, but I think I’ve gained a lot of knowledge thanks to many people in the community who are willing to kind of sit me down and talk me

through everything they understand about it. It’s been really one of the things that I’ve enjoyed learning about the most.”

He said he has gained a deeper appreciation for, among other things, “the specific way that our military aid operates on the ground in Israel,” including how the Iron Dome system “has been a force for nonviolence,” as well as what he characterized as an “evolving challenge” with Iran. “It’s become a lot more urgent now,” he said, referring to the Biden administration’s renewed efforts to negotiate a nuclear deal.

“I started as a skeptic because of the changes that have taken place in Iran since the last deal was in place,” Lamb told JI, noting that he opposed leaving the deal in 2018. “But Iran itself seems to have radicalized and gained a lot of nuclear material since then, and so it’s always been hard for me to understand how you were going to unring that bell.” Lamb remains “open-minded” on a possible agreement as he awaits further information. “I’m not reflexively in support of it,” he said. “I’m also not starting off against it. I really need to think the devil is in the details on this one.”

Lamb was relatively optimistic in his assessment of Israel’s coalition government, led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. “I’ll say just that while Bennett obviously is pretty conservative himself, he’s maintaining a coalition with an Arab party in it as well,” Lamb said, “so I would think that could only help on the road to something approaching the negotiations for a two-state solution.”

“Time will tell, but I think a fresh start is always healthy,” he added. “Now that there seems to be this larger alliance taking shape in the Middle East between Israel and some of these Arab countries, that might actually increase the likelihood that we make some progress on peace, and that’s a factor that we didn’t have before.”

The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab countries, “can only help get the two sides to the table and achieve something like an understanding with each other,” Lamb suggested. Still, he said a number of “important steps” must “take place before that can happen,” not least on the Palestinian side. “It certainly appears like Hamas is still calling a lot of the shots over there,” Lamb told JI. “There’s a lot that

needs to happen.”

Lamb argues that his involvement with such issues gives him an “advantage” over his opponents, who, as state-level officials, are newer to the foreign policy realm.

“I would say my record is a lot deeper and more specific both because of the type of job that I’ve had — you know, I’ve had to take thousands of votes in the last four years — but it’s also just who I am,” Lamb said. “When someone asks me a question, I’m going to answer it, and I’m going to answer it to the point. That’s not always true with someone like John.”

In recent weeks, Lamb has become more confrontational as he has attacked Fetterman on issues that critics believe will be problematic in the general election. Most notably, he has repeatedly accused the lieutenant governor of avoiding scrutiny over a 2013 incident in which Fetterman confronted an unarmed Black jogger with a shotgun while serving as mayor of Braddock, a post-industrial steel town just outside Pittsburgh. Fetterman has long defended his actions.

“I don’t really believe in being cagey or ambiguous about where you stand,” Lamb argued, “especially with something as important as our relationship with Israel.”

Fetterman, meanwhile, has claimed his support for Israel is rock solid, despite being untested at the federal level. “Whenever I’m in a situation to be called on to take up the cause of strengthening and enhancing the security of Israel or deepening our relationship between the United States and Israel,” he told JI last month, “I’m going to lean in.”

“I’ve come by my beliefs honestly,” Lamb countered. “I’ve earned them in some pretty tough territory politically, and I just I feel like I’ve developed an understanding of how swing voters think and what they care about. They’re not very liberal, but they’re willing to support someone like me who has served the country and served in law enforcement because that gives you some credibility, and then you build on that credibility by showing up and reaching out to them in person — and those are all things that I just haven’t seen John do.”

Despite such criticism, Lamb has continued to play catch-up with the lieutenant governor, who has sought

inroads with working-class voters in rural Pennsylvania who gravitated to Trump.

Lamb says he has no particular model in mind as he pushes for an approach to America’s relationship with Israel that carries some apparent similarities with legislators such as Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT), who has long advocated for a “progressive foreign policy” in the Middle East. In 2020, Murphy, along with Sens. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) and Tim Kaine (D-VA), circulated a letter — later revised — cautioning that annexation of the West Bank would mean “Israel no longer values the bipartisan support that Congress has provided it for decades.”

“On this stuff, honestly, I really have tried to focus a little bit more on paying attention to people in the Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania Jewish communities and what they think, so I probably would have to figure out once I got there who sort of saw things the same way that I do,” Lamb told JI. “But in general, I’m supportive of the way the Biden administration is conducting itself.”

He acknowledged that pursuing what he calls a “delicate balance” that holds Israel accountable for settlement expansion while also affirming support for the Jewish state would be a difficult line to navigate if he is elected to the Senate. “But that’s why it’s the Middle East, right?” Lamb said. “It’s one of the hardest places in the world to do business.”

Brett Goldman, a Democratic activist in Philadelphia, said he had been “expecting” that Lamb would carve out a somewhat more distinctive path on such issues. “We can be pro-Israel and still have a nuanced, critical view,” he argued, adding that Lamb has always been clear in expressing positions that are “generally in line with the mainstream of the Democratic Party.”

For many in the Jewish community, Goldman told JI, “that steady hand is very important, and we need a steady voice and a steady vote that’s going to back our interests.”

Even as Lamb has failed to break through in the polls, he has earned some significant endorsements from Philadelphia’s Democratic establishment as well as the city’s leading daily newspaper, the *Inquirer*, which praised, among other things, “his thoughtfulness on tough policy questions”

in an editorial published on Sunday.

A super PAC led by James Carville, the veteran Democratic strategist, among others, has also aggressively promoted Lamb’s campaign.

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee has so far stayed out of the primary.

“Barring a surprise outcome on May 17, the party has clearly gone against the conventional wisdom of rallying around the ‘electable’ candidate as the primary criterion in a tight general election race, as this one will be,” said Lewis Irwin, a professor of political science at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. “I am not sure if it’s Fetterman’s name recognition that is driving this choice, or his perceived ideological tilt, but it’s the opposite of what happened with Joe Biden.”

Biden prevailed over Trump by a narrow margin of just over 1% in the 2020 presidential election — an outcome that Lamb has suggested he is capable of reproducing in a general election matchup that is expected to be among the most competitive races of the cycle.

In the crowded Republican primary, Dr. Mehmet Oz and David McCormick are currently locked in fierce competition for the nomination. Oz notched a coveted Trump endorsement last month and appeared alongside the former president at a rally outside Pittsburgh over the weekend.

Lamb said it was difficult to judge whom he would prefer to go up against in the general election. “It’s not that I don’t want to answer that, I just don’t have an answer, to tell you the truth,” he told JI. “It’s at a level of craziness on their side that it’s very hard for me to draw a distinction, so we’ll let it run its course.”

In the final week of the primary, it remains to be seen if such questions will ultimately stay hypothetical.

Asked how he himself is feeling about the race, Lamb gave a blunt reply: “Not too great.”

“I mean, I’ve run this campaign the same way I’ve run all four of mine — this is my fourth campaign in four years — which is to go everywhere you possibly can, answer every question of any person anytime and really just show people that you’re willing to be accountable,” he said, adding: “People are still coming out because there are so many

undecided voters left.”

This week, he says he is traveling east from Pittsburgh and then turning back to his district in western Pennsylvania as he

traverses the length of the state just “two more times” before the election.

“People have a lot of skepticism toward all politicians at this time, and I think when

they can get up close and personal with you and see that you’re willing to be transparent with them, it goes a really long way,” Lamb said. “I’m going to keep doing that.” ♦

MAY 10, 2022

Nassau Republicans are all in on Anthony D’Esposito

The GOP has coalesced around the former NYPD cop as the party’s candidate to flip Kathleen Rice’s congressional seat

By Marc Rod

Nassau County Republicans have quickly coalesced around Hempstead Town Councilman Anthony D’Esposito, a former police detective and fire chief, as their best hope to flip the Long Island congressional seat currently held by retiring Rep. Kathleen Rice (D-NY).

D’Esposito told *Jewish Insider* last week that he’s running for Congress “because the country clearly needs a change” and people in the community feel “that our country and our state are on the wrong track... We really need some common sense in Washington.”

The town councilman said that he would seek to “treat government like a business and make sure that you protect the taxpayer at all costs,” which he said would be a continuation of his work on issues like cutting taxes in Hempstead. He characterized public safety as “a huge issue” — both locally and at the U.S. southern border — and decried rising gas and food prices.

“We need to stop and break the majority because Nancy Pelosi and the Democrats in Congress — they’ve been a rubber stamp for all these [Biden administration] programs and all of these policies that have failed the American people,” he said.

Bill Staniford, another GOP challenger who had been in the 4th Congressional District race for months and raised \$255,000, dropped out soon after D’Esposito announced his bid and secured the party’s backing in April.

D’Esposito enters the race in a strong financial position: He told JI that he had

around \$230,000 in the bank, which he will be able to dedicate to the general election. Democratic former Hempstead Supervisor Laura Gillen, who leads the Democratic pack, had \$217,000 on hand as of the end of the first quarter, some of which she’ll have to use to stave off other Democrats trailing her ahead of the primary, which was pushed to August amid a court battle over the state’s newly drawn congressional map.

A new map is expected to be finalized by the May 20 deadline given by the courts, but Nassau County Republicans had high hopes for flipping the district as originally drawn, with the heavily Orthodox Jewish Five Towns community — much of which D’Esposito currently represents as a town councilman — expected to form a key base of support.

An early March poll of 300 likely voters in the district conducted by McLaughlin & Associates for D’Esposito’s campaign found that he led Gillen on the head-to-head ballot, 48% to 36% with 16% undecided. The poll also found that a generic Republican leading a generic Democrat 55% to 33%, and showed President Joe Biden with a 53% disapproval rating in the district.

When Rice announced her retirement from Congress in February, Democratic strategist Jake Dilemani told JI that the district was “by no means a lock” for Democrats. Veteran New York Democratic strategist Hank Sheinkopf likewise speculated at the time that Rice may have retired because she was concerned about her electoral prospects in a year in which Republicans are expected to pick up seats.

Democrats also fell short in a recent local special election in a usually reliable part of the district. “If I were a Democrat running for Congress in the 4th Congressional [District], I would be very worried,” Democratic strategist Ross Wallenstein told JI at the time.

Despite his attacks on the administration and congressional Democrats, D’Esposito decried partisanship in Washington, saying his time on the Hempstead town board and in the New York Police Department gave him experience with working with people of varied backgrounds and political stripes.

“I sat in cars with guys and girls that I may have probably never met if it wasn’t for joining the police department... my life depended on them and their life depended on me,” he said of his colleagues in law enforcement. “And I learned better than most [people] get the opportunity to, how to compromise and work with those that were not the same as us to deliver real results. And that’s the exact same mentality I want to bring to Washington.”

D’Esposito demurred when asked whether he thought President Joe Biden was the rightful winner of the 2020 election, but acknowledged, “President Biden was sworn in, and he took an oath that he is the president of the United States... I may disagree with his policies but I think whenever a president is sworn in, whether we love them or dislike them, it’s a chance for us to root for them because we want success for America.”

D’Esposito boasted of strong relationships with the local Jewish

community and a strong record on Israel, including opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement in local government.

"We were, if not the first, one of the first municipalities to draft anti-BDS laws," he said.

When ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's announced last year it was pulling out of what it referred to as "Occupied Palestinian Territory," D'Esposito said the town board was "out front and center" and had "immediately" directed officials to stop doing business with parent company Unilever.

"We've certainly done our part for a township on Long Island to really fly the flag and let everyone know that we not only stand with Israel, but we're willing to put the pen to paper and let everyone across the nation know it," he said.

From a federal perspective, "the U.S. needs to make sure that there is always funding and that we provide anything and everything that we can to the State of Israel," D'Esposito continued.

Foreign aid to the Palestinians "is important to maintain relationships," he added, but should be reassessed annually "based on behavior and relationships and mutual respect." He said he was not familiar enough with the specifics of the issue to say whether he supports a two-state solution.

Like most Republicans, the Hempstead councilman opposes returning to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, but said he would "absolutely" support a stronger agreement, although he had not thought through what he'd like to see in such an accord.

"I understand that the sanctions perhaps have not worked to the best that they [could] have, but I think strong sanctions and really crippling their economy is a smart way to encourage a stronger agreement," he said.

D'Esposito said Hempstead's government has worked "very hard" with the Five Towns to "help in any way we can" to secure places of worship and local yeshivas and also touted antisemitism education programs in the town.

He said he also works closely with the local police departments to ensure necessary security for Jewish institutions, as well as with a civilian public safety team that augments the police presence around

Jewish institutions during the High Holy Days.

"In all facets of my district right now, I think really because of my background and being a New York City detective and a former chief of the fire department, when people think of safety or public safety or there's a concern in a Town of Hempstead community, I am usually their first call," he said.

Rabbi Zalman Wolowik of the Chabad of the Five Towns told JI D'Esposito's law enforcement background has been helpful in providing honest assessments of the community's security needs and vulnerabilities, and said he has worked with police and federal officials "trying everything in his power to make sure that our community is as secure as possible."

"Anthony is a dear friend to everyone in the community," Wolowik said. "I don't know of anybody who does not like him. He's a dedicated servant. He takes his job serious[ly]. He takes his responsibilities serious[ly]."

According to Rabbi Anchelle Perl, D'Esposito was, during his time as a New York City cop, responsible at one point for guarding the global Chabad headquarters in Brooklyn and recently helped coordinate an event commemorating the 120th anniversary of Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson's birth.

To curb the spate of antisemitic incidents in the United States, D'Esposito said that the federal government needs to provide further funding for antisemitism education — delivered through law enforcement agencies and municipalities, in addition to schools; "do a better job" through the Department of Homeland Security to secure all places of worship; and consider prosecuting more antisemitic crimes at the federal level.

"When you send a message that we are taking a step forward to really protect these places of worship, it raises that awareness that people think, 'Maybe this isn't a crime that I want to commit,'" he said.

He compared his idea for federal prosecution to the "Trigger-Lock Program" in place in New York during his time as a detective, which transferred all weapons possession crimes from the state to the federal judicial system, where penalties are often stiffer.

"If we realize that people aren't being charged on a state level and there's an opportunity that someone who commits a heinous antisemitic attack is now being charged federally... I think that begins to send a real message that the United States and the federal government is standing against all acts of hate," he said, adding that he'd support such a program for hate crimes of all types.

D'Esposito said the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, which provides DHS grants to nonprofits and houses of worship to improve their security, needs both additional funding and improved outreach to local leaders.

"If you walked into the Five Towns right now and just started going synagogue to synagogue and said, 'Rabbi, do you know about this program?' over half of them would say, 'I have no idea what you're talking about,'" he said.

The town councilman said he's been working to spread that awareness, hosting one of the first events in Hempstead to spread awareness about the NSGP, and several since then. He said the town had also brought in town staff to explain the application process.

D'Esposito said he does not see antisemitism as originating from any particular political perspective, but exists "in all walks of life" and is not "geared to any one group."

"I think it's just people that unfortunately have some serious hate in their heart," he said. "The fact that those numbers are so high is scary and there's a real opportunity in every level of government to do our part to make sure that number drops dramatically over the next year."

D'Esposito told JI he's worked closely with the Jewish community on a range of issues, including starting a local program to distribute and train citizens to use Narcan — an emergency treatment to counter opioid overdoses — in response to a concern raised by Perl, a local Rabbi. The program has now trained almost 11,000 people, working in particular through local religious institutions.

Perl said that the councilman had taken a "personal interest" in the issue and

“constantly is someone I can turn to.”

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky, dean of the Yeshiva of the South Shore, said D’Esposito had been helpful with a range of

projects like securing permits for building projects and putting up safety signs in local communities.

“He’s been a guy who’s been

tremendously responsive to any requests that members of our Jewish community place,” Kamenetzky said. “He is a proven friend of the community.” ♦

MAY 11, 2022

Sydney Kamlager wants to speak ‘truth to toxicity’ in Washington

The California state senator and congressional candidate has pulled together a diverse cadre of Democratic supporters in her bid to replace Rep. Karen Bass

By Gabby Deutch

LOS ANGELES: It was earthquakes that tested Sydney Kamlager’s patience as an Angeleno. Born and raised in Chicago, the California state senator has lived in Los Angeles for more than three decades except for a brief period in Pittsburgh, where she attended graduate school. The devastating 1994 earthquake in the San Fernando Valley made her reconsider, briefly, her Golden State dream.

On the mild May evening she sat for an interview with Jewish Insider at a coffee shop near the South LA neighborhood of Crenshaw, it was hard to imagine why anyone would choose to live anywhere besides Southern California. And since she returned from Pittsburgh in 1996, Kamlager has remained loyal to her adopted hometown.

“I had fallen in love with the city and all of its flaws, but all of its opportunities,” Kamlager, who is 49, said over green tea and a chocolate-tahini pastry. After a career rooted in local arts activism, Kamlager, a Democrat, is now running for Congress as what some have described as the heir apparent to Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA). “I was also really intimidated by the shoes that Congresswoman Karen Bass will leave, to have to fill — but then really empowered by my record,” said Kamlager. Bass, who was chair of the Congressional Black Caucus from 2019 to 2021, is running for mayor of LA after 12 years representing the city in Washington.

In her bid to represent California’s 37th Congressional District, Kamlager has been

endorsed by a who’s who of California Democrats: Gov. Gavin Newsom, Sen. Alex Padilla (D-CA) and Reps. Bass, Adam Schiff and Brad Sherman, among others. Kamlager raised \$257,000 in the first quarter of 2022, while former LA City Councilmember Jan Perry brought in \$238,000.

Kamlager has pulled together an ideologically diverse cadre of national Democratic supporters, ranging from the Congressional Progressive Caucus PAC to Democratic Majority for Israel. The 37th District is one of the most Democratic congressional districts in the country, as well as a diverse one: The newly redrawn district, which includes many communities west and southwest of Los Angeles, such as Culver City and Inglewood, is 36% Black, 39% Latino and 7% Asian.

“The goal of an activist is to get their own outcome, their win,” Kamlager said of the earlier part of her career. “And my goal is, how do I make sure that the people in the 37th are safe, and are able to live with dignity and have shelter and feel like they’re able to live a life that is free and full of possibility?”

The daughter of an actress and activist parents, Kamlager has a flair for the dramatic. She danced in her seat to the café’s music while talking about her work bringing funding to underserved communities in LA. Her email signature includes her preferred gender pronouns: “she/her/hers/fire.”

“I do find ways to still sort of be an activist. I think I say things that are much more honest and authentic, but I think they’re also what people are thinking,” Kamlager said.

This inclination toward saying what’s on her mind was inspired by her parents, an interracial couple who created a family in a deeply segregated Chicago.

“They both raised me to be unapologetically Black,” said Kamlager. “They both raised me to be vocal, but to also be really empathic and to be unafraid to talk about race, because they had to be unafraid to love each other.”

Like many in her generation, Kamlager’s eyes were opened to racial politics in LA during the 1992 riots. The unrest came after jurors acquitted three Los Angeles Police Department officers who were on trial for using excessive force in the arrest and beating of Rodney King. During the riots that followed the beating, which was caught on video, National Guard troops were housed at USC, where Kamlager was an undergraduate.

“They would eat in the commissary, and you could go up to the top of the dorms and you could see these plumes of smoke where fires were popping up,” said Kamlager.

Her father, a social worker, lived in Los Angeles, and before the riots she would see him frequently. But he was white, and during the riots, they needed to talk about their racial differences. “He and I had conversations about making sure that he was safe, making sure that I was safe, if it would be safe for us to be together,” she recalled.

In the aftermath of the riots, Kamlager volunteered with the L.A. Festival, an international arts festival — the beginning of many years of civic engagement through

art. (Kamlager admits she is not particularly talented in fine arts: In a drawing class in college, her professor prepared to question her about what Kamlager described as a “hot mess” of a drawing. When she told him she was a political science major, “he said, ‘OK, never mind, don’t worry.’”)

The festival’s budget had been slashed, leading to more of a local focus than its typical global reach. “It was about sort of building bridges post-riots,” said Kamlager. “We would have, for example, African drummers play a concert at a Greek Orthodox Church, or we would invite a Jewish choir to come to a Chinese temple and perform. So it was using culture and place and art to build bridges.”

She stuck to that creed. In the 1990s, she worked at a nonprofit that creates public murals around the city, and then at an archive that documents American social movements. This passion for building new, representative public art and archives was inspired by seeing her mother act in plays, which are “all about telling stories about people that you wouldn’t really know about, and using that to either heal or to educate, but ultimately, hopefully, to inform,” Kamlager explained.

Acting was never for her, but growing up in a dynamic home with a mother who was an actress and a teacher — and a father who was a social worker and a sometimes-music producer — gave Kamlager “opportunities to engage in new things or uncomfortable things, because I think the arts can bring that out of you,” she said.

But her political career was launched, inadvertently, with a position she took managing public affairs for Crystal Stairs, a local nonprofit that helps families access childcare. When the organization’s CEO, Holly Mitchell, ran for the California Assembly, Kamlager helped run her campaign, and later joined her office as district director. She followed Mitchell through the ranks of California government: Kamlager ran for Mitchell’s old Assembly seat in 2018, and then ran for her state Senate seat last year when Mitchell stepped down to serve on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

In her time in state office, Kamlager has forged close ties with the Los Angeles Jewish community. “I actually have a bubbe,”

she added, referring to an elderly Jewish friend who she thinks of as a grandmother figure. “I say that because it affords me an opportunity to have Shabbat with her and then talk about what’s going on in the community and to hear her side of things.”

Assemblymember Jesse Gabriel, who chairs the California Legislative Jewish Caucus, has worked with Kamlager since both were elected to the Assembly in the same special election in 2018.

“She’s not one of these people that suddenly wants to develop a relationship with the Jewish community because she’s running for office,” Gabriel told JI. “She has a decade-long relationship with our community, and has been an ally and friend to our community going back for a pretty long time.”

Kamlager recently emceed a Jewish Free Loan Association gala that Gabriel attended: “I wouldn’t be the most natural emcee for that, because I’m not that funny or entertaining, but she’s perfect,” he said. “She’s not your cookie-cutter, boring politician. She’s going to say funny, entertaining stuff.”

Amid a wave of antisemitism last year that came in the wake of the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas, multiple institutions in the heavily Jewish Pico-Robertson neighborhood were targeted with vandalism. Kamlager attended a dinner recently at Pat’s Restaurant, where last year a window was broken when someone threw a cinder block through it.

“My husband’s grandmother was Jewish. I’m not Jewish. But I’m an ally, and I think as an ally, it is important to stand up to those kinds of hate crimes when you hear about them,” she recalled. “We had rabbis at that dinner who talked about being assaulted, being afraid to walk to the store to buy groceries, needing to take off their yarmulke — here, in Los Angeles”

The Simon Wiesenthal Center recently honored Kamlager alongside members of the state legislature’s Jewish caucus for helping to secure state funds for the center’s Museum of Tolerance, said Michele Alkin, SWC’s director of global communications.

If elected, Kamlager would represent an even more racially diverse district than she does as a state senator — with immigrants from Ethiopia, Myanmar, Korea, Iran and the

Philippines, and religious communities of all faiths. Getting to know those immigrant communities has informed her thinking on foreign policy.

The climate crisis is a key issue for her, at home and abroad, but she also hopes to play a role in global diplomacy. “That’s part of the human condition... to coexist, but also to, you know, get into it. I’m very interested in that, because it’s volatile everywhere,” Kamlager explained. “I want to have a deeper understanding and play some role in the stabilization of this world and the healing of the planet.”

The U.S. is “fortunate,” Kamlager explained, to be allies with “really important countries, and Israel is one of those. And it is important, I think, for our allies to have the right to exist and be able to exist. And sometimes they also need aid to support them in those endeavors. I think that’s incredibly true and has been true for a long time with Israel. And so I also believe that it’s important that we maintain that kind of military aid to Israel.” Kamlager added that she would vote in favor of funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system.

“Their right to exist is routinely threatened, and they’re in a region that is incredibly volatile,” noted Kamlager. “The invasion into Ukraine has only amplified that, I think, in ways that many of us might not have understood.”

When talking about the turbulence in the Middle East, Kamlager pointed out Iran’s role: “Tehran has a plan that is really about the destabilization of the region and also us,” she said. Kamlager voiced support for reentering the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, but expressed concern about the progress Iran has made toward building a nuclear weapon, especially following the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the deal in 2018, a move she called “disastrous.”

“I think he withdrew us from the JCPOA without a plan, and I think there wasn’t any buy-in from our European allies, and I think that complicated our abilities on so many other fronts with regards to diplomacy and leadership and credibility. And so now, here we are,” she explained.

The U.S. has “an obligation to reenter into the agreement. I think that the perfect should not be the enemy of the good,” said

Kamlager. “I think it’s also important for us to be walking into this room, I guess we’ve already walked into it, but to be negotiating eyes wide open with who all the actors are.” The ultimate goal, she said, is “something that will prevent Iran from having access to nuclear weapons and securing the existence of Israel.”

She hopes to see a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the U.S. as an “actively engaged ally” in those conversations. But, she added, “at the end of the day, the agreement must be between Israel and the Palestinians. I think self-determination is incredibly important.” It’s her support for a two-state solution, she said, that colors her opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. “I don’t think it does anything

to move the needle forward towards a two-state solution, and I don’t think it does anything to advance the continued security of Israel,” said Kamlager.

Gabriel said he is “very optimistic” that Kamlager will be a member of Congress who will “prove that you can be a really strong progressive and an outspoken champion on progressive issues and also be someone who is close to the Jewish community, works with us on our issues and supports Israel.”

Running for Congress has offered an illuminating education in global affairs to Kamlager, and she hopes to join the House Foreign Affairs Committee if elected. But the issues that matter most to her — and her would-be constituents — are at home in LA.

“People will talk about their own thing as it relates to a foreign policy issue. But

ultimately, they go back to the issues that everyone else is also talking about: crime, affordability, climate, transportation, funding,” said Kamlager.

She spoke to JI the day after *Politico* published a leaked draft Supreme Court opinion overturning landmark abortion rights legislation. She serves on the board of the local Planned Parenthood, and the issue motivates her. (“California kind of operates in a bubble,” she said, and “we might have to be with *Roe v. Wade* right now.”)

“It’s time for a new wave of leadership,” Kamlager said, “who can really speak truth to toxicity and who can work to remind folks that government should be about solving problems, not creating them, and working to kind of upend this compromise of rights and freedoms that we’re seeing happening.” ♦

MAY 9, 2022

MEPPA board member: Peace act signals shift in U.S. policy on Israeli-Palestinian conflict

On visit to Israel, Heather Johnston touted the ‘grassroots’ economic projects between Israelis and Palestinians spurred by the congressional legislation

By Ruth Marks Eglash

The Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA), with its strong bipartisan support in Congress and focus on people-to-people relations, signifies a clear shift in U.S. policy in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one of the newly appointed members of the board that advises the fund told Jewish Insider in an interview last week.

Heather Johnston, who was visiting Israel in her role as founder and executive director of the U.S. Israel Education Association, an organization that fosters communication between American and Israeli leaders, said the strength of the \$250 million aid package is that it circumvents the Palestinian Authority and goes directly to the nonprofit organizations that are facilitating on-the-ground grassroots programs.

“It doesn’t take a two-state solution off

the table,” Johnston, who led a congressional delegation to Israel last week, told JI. “What it does is to prioritize grassroots and economic developments.”

MEPPA, which was signed into law in December 2020, aims to advance peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as joint economic ventures that aim to enable a sustainable two-state solution. Broadly supported in Congress, with some 43 Democratic and 20 Republican co-sponsors, the act was passed after the U.S. cut more than \$200 million in aid to the Palestinians during the Trump administration, partially due to a deteriorating relationship with the Palestinian Authority leadership.

Two funds were established under the act, with allocations to be made over a five-year period. The first round of funding was announced in March, with grants to “support Palestinian and Israeli private sectors to build partnerships, increase

economic growth, and lay the foundation for peace through people-to-people programs,” according to a March 8 announcement by USAID, which implements the program together with U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC).

“It’s an incredible opportunity – it is one of the largest aid packages for people-to-people programs,” said Johnston, who was appointed by Sen. Richard Shelby (R-AL) to MEPPA’s board, which met last month for the first time and is charged with offering guidance and suggestions on potential projects but does not get to vote on which projects are ultimately approved.

“There is a real desire in everybody’s hearts to see MEPPA succeed and to be able to, at the end of the day, report back to Congress on how these funds were applied toward people-to-people projects,” she continued.

Johnston, who founded the U.S. Israel Education Association more than a decade

ago, said she was in Israel primarily in her capacity as the organization's president, but that her work bringing members of Congress on educational tours to Israel has been helpful in "informing me as to how to think about MEPPA."

"We have been bringing senior leaders of Congress to Israel for the last 10 years, traveling through Judea and Samaria, where the resounding and recurring discovery is the importance of a grassroots movement to build a robust economy," she said, adding that it was important not to provide separate aid only to the Palestinians, but to make sure that funding went toward shared Palestinian and Israeli projects and businesses.

"Right now, a political solution [to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict] is off the table, so the question is what can we do?" explained

Johnston. "The answer, we believe, as do many in the U.S. Congress now, is economic."

Johnston pointed to the handful of joint industrial zones that dot the West Bank, which her group visited during its weeklong trip, and emphasized how they enabled Israelis and Palestinians to work alongside one another and develop businesses together. She said they were a good model that must be developed further.

"Congress is looking at it that way now and so is the Israeli government," she continued. "So now everybody's sort of now looking at it the same exact way."

The five members of Congress who took part in the U.S.-Israel Education Association trip were Reps. Brian Babin (R-TX), Lou Correa (D-CA), Neal Dunn (R-FL), Mike Bost (R-IL) and Andy Harris (R-MD).

Harris recently signed onto a letter led by Reps. Joaquin Castro (D-TX) and Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), which stated that Israeli perpetrators of attacks on Christians and Christian sites in Jerusalem are "able to act with impunity."

Johnston, who last year published, *Uncommon Favor: The Intentional Life of a Disciple*, a memoir about her spiritual journey and love of Israel, said the delegation also met with top Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Defense Minister Benny Gantz, as well as with mayors and key business leaders in both Israeli settlements and Palestinian towns in the West Bank. The trip, she concluded, allowed them "to understand the demographic realities of Judea and Samaria and to discover the region for themselves." ♦

MAY 10, 2022

A White House speechwriter chronicles major speeches never delivered

Biden speechwriter Jeff Nussbaum spent two decades searching for speeches that leaders ultimately scrapped — speeches that could have changed history

By Gabby Deutch

On election night in November 2000, as the outcome of the neck-and-neck vote remained elusive, speechwriter Jeff Nussbaum had drafted three possible speeches for his boss, Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore. One was for a Gore victory, another was for a Gore defeat and a third was for a scenario in which Gore won the electoral vote but lost the popular vote.

Gore didn't deliver any of them. Instead, he won the popular vote but lost the electoral count to George W. Bush — a shocking result that was affirmed in a controversial Supreme Court decision weeks later. Nussbaum's speeches, which would have ushered in an alternate ending, were lost to history.

But that night marked the first stop on a scavenger hunt whose clues Nussbaum has been following for two decades. The result is his new book *Undelivered: The Never-Held Speeches That Would Have Rewritten*

History, which comes out today just weeks after Nussbaum stepped down from serving as a speechwriter to President Joe Biden.

"It started me thinking, there must be other instances in history — and not just elections, which are obvious — where an ultimate outcome wasn't just envisioned, [but] the words that would accompany that outcome were drafted," Nussbaum told *Jewish Insider*. "I started to follow breadcrumbs for undelivered speeches wherever I heard them."

The treasures he found along the way range from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's would-be presidential victory speech in 2016 to the remarks then-Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower was set to deliver on D-Day if the Allied invasion of Normandy had not gone well. The book is also threaded with Nussbaum's observations from two and a half decades spent as a speechwriter for presidents, politicians and business leaders. He has ghost-written two other

books, but this is the first published in his own name — a new experience for a person used to writing under anyone else's name but his own.

"It is different," said Nussbaum. "I tried to find, 'where is the drama in the story?'"

The result is a collection of historical essays that tries to put readers in the rooms where leaders were deciding which decision to make — and which speech to deliver. Historians call this idea that every outcome is contingent upon some other event "contingency": Nothing is inevitable. It's the real-life version of "Sliding Doors," the 1998 movie that shows two radically different trajectories for Gwyneth Paltrow's character's life based on whether or not she catches the subway one day.

Some of the moments chronicled by Nussbaum are not particularly memorable precisely because the outcome for which the undelivered speech was prepared did not happen. That New York City did not go

bankrupt may not be notable on its own; most cities, after all, do not go bankrupt, and their residents never think twice about the possibility. But in the 1970s, “New York City was so close to going bankrupt that the mayor had prepared a speech announcing it,” Nussbaum recounted, referring to Abraham Beame. (A version of this chapter was published in *The New Yorker* in 2015.)

“I tracked down the bankruptcy attorney at the time, who was a young lawyer and is now an established law partner. He had the bankruptcy filing, but not the speech,” said Nussbaum. “But then his assistant tapped me on the shoulder and was like, ‘I think I might have what you’re looking for.’” She reached into her file cabinet and gave Nussbaum a copy of the speech, which is now published for the first time in his book.

Each chapter also gives readers insight into the complicated political calculus that goes into a leader’s speech. Former Rep. John Lewis (D-GA), a young civil rights activist during the 1960s, intended to give a heated address criticizing the Democratic establishment at the 1963 March on Washington. Lewis wrote a fiery speech that chastised President John F. Kennedy and criticized the civil rights legislation Kennedy proposed for offering too little, too late. But when other organizers saw Lewis’s planned remarks, panic ensued — and Martin Luther King Jr. stepped in to get Lewis to tone down his rhetoric.

“One of the really pivotal moments was the fear that John Lewis’ speech was so hot that the Catholic leadership would pull out of the event, and the Kennedys desperately wanted the Catholic Church’s seal of approval on this march,” Nussbaum explained. “That sort of fraught relationship between progressive religious groups and civil rights, I think, is tremendously fascinating.”

Convincing people to hand over their undelivered speeches for publication was, Nussbaum found, a surprisingly easy task. “I was seeking permission to elevate these speeches into the context of history, and in that way, people were very agreeable about it,” he said. If, for instance, Clinton herself published her undelivered 2016 victory speech — or if President Richard Nixon had in the 1970s published a draft of a speech in which he did not resign the presidency — it

would have appeared politically motivated. But in a book written by someone else, “all of a sudden, it’s in the context of history and out of the context of politics,” explained Nussbaum.

But he could not always get to the speeches he wanted. One speech that only appears in the book as an acknowledgment of defeat — Nussbaum simply could not find it — was the speech that President Jimmy Carter planned to deliver if the 1978 Camp David negotiations between Israel and Egypt fell apart.

The negotiations were at a standstill, and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat packed his bags to leave. But then, on the verge of collapse, the parties “moved so quickly to an agreement that they basically sprinted out of Camp David to the White House,” said Nussbaum. “Everything that was on President Carter’s desk, including the failure speech — basically, imagine someone taking an arm and sweeping it across the desk into a box, and into the box it went.” The Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta confirmed to Nussbaum that the box existed, but no copy of the speech was found in it.

Then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice intended to speak about President George W. Bush’s foreign policy on the afternoon of Sept. 11, 2001. She never gave the speech, and Nussbaum was not able to access the draft because the national security apparatus would not declassify it. Through Freedom of Information Act requests, Nussbaum received the materials Rice relied upon to draft it and a couple sentences of the speech. That chapter became a primer on the speechwriting process, which Nussbaum hopes can inform people who are interested in the work but may be intimidated by it. He cited a Jerry Seinfeld bit on public speaking, referring to polling that showed it is people’s greatest fear.

“I found that amazing. Number two was death,” Seinfeld said at a stand-up show. “This means to the average person, if you have to be at a funeral you would rather be in the casket than doing the eulogy.”

So Nussbaum’s hope with the book is that readers “have a sense of why some speeches work and why some speeches don’t, and when they work, what strings in your mind are being pulled. And how

you can write your own speech — because again,” he explained, “it is something that people fear a lot. And it need not be an unapproachable art.”

It’s not uncommon for talented young speechwriters to find themselves writing for politicians whose careers may have started before the writer was born. In Barack Obama’s administration, his speechwriting staff was known for its fraternity-like brotherhood of young men like Jon Favreau, who was not yet 30 when he became director of speechwriting for Obama.

Nussbaum got pulled into Biden’s orbit in 2008, when the Obama campaign tapped him to lead speechwriting at the Democratic National Convention for whomever Obama picked as vice president. Nussbaum did not expect Biden’s reaction when they were introduced: “He literally crossed himself, looked to the sky and said, ‘I’ve been in the Senate longer than you’ve been alive. What are you going to teach me?’”

What Nussbaum has since articulated is that a talented speechwriter may not know as much as their boss about policy, or campaigning, or how to win a race. “There may not be a lot that you can teach your boss, but there are a lot of ways you can help your boss,” said Nussbaum.

“I was going to be able to help him understand the places and the audiences he was going to go to, what they were talking about, what they cared about. I was going to be able to help him translate, in some cases, policy, into what that means in the lives of the average person,” he explained.

What got Biden on his side, Nussbaum recalled, is the speech he wrote for Biden’s late son Beau, who introduced his father at the 2008 convention. “My dad has always been there for me,” the speech went. But the younger Biden wouldn’t be able to “be there” for his father because he was about to deploy to Iraq. “So I have something to ask of you: Be there for my dad, like he was for me. Be there for Barack Obama, because our country needs him. Be there for both of them.”

The crowd erupted in cheers, and Beau embraced his father when he walked onto the stage.

“That was the moment at which Joe, I think, gave me permission to work for him,” said Nussbaum.

In the White House, Nussbaum has written scores of speeches for the president and other administration officials on everything from the Child Tax Credit to criminal justice reform. He submitted jokes for Biden's speech at the White House

Correspondents Association Dinner last month, but by then, he had already left the White House for his first quiet summer in years.

But what about Nussbaum's own undelivered speeches? There are "dozens

and dozens" of them, he said. His favorites? "I have presidential announcement speeches for people who didn't end up running for president."

Unfortunately for political gossip hounds, those didn't make it into the book. ♦

MAY 11, 2022

Brown win sets off race for Cleveland-area Democratic Party boss

As Rep. Shontel Brown steps down from key post, Rob Zimmerman eyes the job as a way to stem the red tide in Ohio

By Matthew Kassel

Following her decisive victory in a high-profile primary rematch last week, Rep. Shontel Brown (D-OH) is poised to step down as the chairwoman of Cuyahoga County's Democratic Party. Her impending departure next month sets up another consequential Cleveland-area race, whose outcome — while unlikely to attract national attention — could carry broader implications in the midterms.

"If Cuyahoga County actually does its job in November, then Tim Ryan has a chance against J.D. Vance," said Rob Zimmerman, a former longtime city councilman in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, referring, respectively, to the Democratic and Republican nominees in Ohio's upcoming Senate election. "Hence, one of the main reasons I'm running."

Zimmerman is among at least three candidates who are jockeying for the influential county role, which covers Cleveland and its surrounding suburbs. His opponents include state Rep. Kent Smith and Andrew Mizesak, a senior leader of the Bedford/Walton Hills Democratic Party.

The field could grow even more before central committee members of the county party cast their votes for Brown's replacement at the beginning of June.

Despite his enthusiasm for the race, Zimmerman said he had no intention of seeking the chairmanship when Brown announced in January that she would vacate the post at the end of her current term. He

had recently retired from a 16-year run as a local city councilman and was otherwise keeping busy as a partner at the Cleveland law firm Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff, where he specializes in civil trial and appellate law.

"It didn't even occur to me to be her successor," Zimmerman, 56, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

But after a friend with Ohio's Democratic Party reached out to suggest he consider running, Zimmerman said, he began mulling a possible bid. "I looked into this and I finally decided that the party needed help," he reasoned. "Ohio is getting redder and redder."

Zimmerman — who shares a birth name but no relation with Bob Dylan, otherwise known as Robert Zimmerman — argues that he is uniquely suited for the position, not least because, in contrast with his opponents, he is no longer an elected official.

Brown, for her part, drew criticism for holding onto the seat after launching her campaign to replace former Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH) in a hotly contested special House election last summer, when she pulled off a surprise upset over Nina Turner, a former state senator and progressive stalwart.

The editorial board of Cleveland's Plain Dealer, which endorsed Turner, demanded Brown's resignation as county chair, describing her control over local party machinery as an "obvious conflict" in the crowded race. The paper expressed similar

concerns this cycle, where Brown defeated Turner for the second time in nine months, all but assuring her first full term in Ohio's newly drawn 11th Congressional District, situated entirely within Cuyahoga County.

Zimmerman, who supported Brown in both congressional races, said his tenure as party chair would face no such scrutiny. "I don't have those issues," he told *JL*. "If I were elected, I would be solely focused on building the party."

"I've got more comprehensive ambitions for what the party can be and what it will be," Zimmerman said, invoking his campaign motto — "win bigger and win better" — as a call to action in what is expected to be a bruising election season for Democrats.

His campaign site features a detailed list of proposals, including outreach to "disenfranchised and disaffected" voters in Cleveland where Democrats have "underperformed," countering "Republican attacks and extremism" and recruiting "new talent" to build a "more diverse pool of candidates for office," particularly at the local level.

"I view the job as being the architect of what the county party should be, building out its infrastructure," Zimmerman said, pointing to a broader goal of "maximizing" Democratic engagement in Ohio's second-largest county.

Even as he has campaigned aggressively across the state for months, Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH), who handily beat back a Democratic challenger last Tuesday, is facing tough odds

as he prepares to go up against J.D. Vance, the author and venture capitalist, in the open-seat race to replace outgoing Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH).

Ohio's Senate election is shaping up to be among the most closely watched matchups of the midterms, as Democrats fight to maintain their tenuous majority in the upper chamber.

And if Ryan has any hope of prevailing, Zimmerman believes, his success will, in many ways, run through the heavily Democratic Cleveland area. "It's going to require a big vote from Cuyahoga County," he told JI.

Zimmerman, who is Jewish, studied political science at The Ohio State University, where he worked on Democratic campaigns, before graduating from The Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law.

Previously, he served as an assistant Ohio attorney general. He first ran for city council, where he focused largely on infrastructure and public works initiatives, in 2005.

The Cleveland native, who lives in Shaker Heights, has long been involved in organized Jewish life, having served on the boards of the Jewish Federation of Cleveland, the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League, among other places.

Zimmerman described Brown as an "accessible" chair who has been eager to "listen" when asked to address any number of local party concerns, but he said he would bring his own personalized approach to the role.

The chairmanship covers what he characterized as a host of responsibilities, including "raising money to effectuate a

vision" as well as "refereeing primaries" in order to "keep the peace within the party," which seems to have frayed somewhat after two bitter matchups between Turner and Brown.

His legal background, he quipped, will give him an "advantage" as he navigates such tensions.

Before Brown, who has held the position since 2017 — when she became the first Black and female local Cuyahoga County party leader in history — previous chairs have included Stuart Garson and Jimmy Dimora, now serving out a 28-year sentence in federal prison for corruption.

But while Brown went on to pursue higher office, Zimmerman insists he harbors no such aspirations. "This isn't about me," he told JI. "I have no political ambition beyond the party chair." ♦