

final - Gaggle - CD8 race.mp3

Ron Hansen [00:00:04] Six years ago, Debbie Lesko stepped into the chaotic vacuum created by the abrupt, scandal tinged departure of eight term congressman print ranks. She left behind the Arizona legislature and quickly rose to become a part of then-President Donald Trump's messaging operation during his first impeachment trial. But his former House speaker, Kevin McCarthy, was being pushed out in a Republican led coup. Lesko said she's had enough. Lesko said. Washington is broken and she's coming back home, but not completely walking away from politics and government. Welcome to The Gaggle, a politics podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. I'm your host, Ron Hansen. I covered national politics for the Republic. My co-host, Mary Jo Pitzl is out this week. Today I'm talking to Laura Gersony, who covers the congressional races for the Republic. She'll bring us all up to speed on one of the more compelling primary races in Arizona this year. Laura, welcome to the gaggle. This is a maiden voyage for you.

Speaker 2 [00:01:10] Thanks for having me on, Ron.

Ron Hansen [00:01:14] Okay. Debbie Lesko has represented the Northwest Valley since 2018, when she replaced Trent Franks after he resigned amid allegations of sexual misconduct involving his female staffers. We'll talk about her in a bit, but I want to start by giving our listeners a sense of who's vying to replace her. So is there a frontrunner?

Laura Gersony [00:01:35] Ron, you know, it's still relatively early on in this contest, and a lot can change between now and the primary in August. But I would say at the moment the frontrunner appears to be Abe Hamadeh. Hamadeh has secured a coveted endorsement from former President Donald Trump. And also he's been endorsed by the Senate candidate, Kari Lake. So those endorsements and some preliminary polling suggests he's in the lead, but the race is still seen as highly competitive. Hamadeh ran for Arizona attorney general in 2022, and he lost, but it was the closest statewide race in Arizona history. Before that, he served for several years in the U.S. Army Reserves, and he worked for the Maricopa County Attorney's Office. Hamadeh really became known for his fierce insistence on discredited election theories. More than a year after his narrow election loss in 2022. He's still contesting the result of that election in court.

Ron Hansen [00:02:30] Okay, so he is the front runner and has the blessings of Trump and Lake. But there are other options for Republican voters. Talk about some of those folks.

Laura Gersony [00:02:42] Yes, indeed. So there are four other candidates who are seen as quite competitive in this race. Two of them represent a more MAGA styled brand. The first is Blake Masters. He's a venture capitalist who unsuccessfully ran for Senate in 2022 against Mark Kelly. He's described himself as extremely conservative and right wing. He was endorsed by Trump when he ran for Senate. And during that Senate run, he received national attention for flirting with the great replacement theory. Which is a hallmark of white nationalist ideology, which holds that there's a purposeful effort to replace the native born electorate with immigrants. The other, I would say, MAGA styled candidate is Arizona State Senator Anthony Kern, who currently represents the West Valley. Kern was really involved in efforts to undermine the 2020 presidential election in Arizona. He served as a fake elector for Trump, an effort that Arizona's attorney general is now probing. And he was at the US Capitol on January 6th, the day that supporters of the former president violently stormed the Capitol complex and disrupted Congress's vote to certify the election.

Ron Hansen [00:03:50] Okay, so those are maybe the two more familiar Republicans that we're talking about in that second tier. Let's talk about some of the less familiar, perhaps, Republicans who are also running in this race. Tell us about them.

Laura Gersony [00:04:04] Right. There are two other candidates who I would say are still highly conservative, but they're less effusively Trumpian. One of them is Trent Franks. He's a former U.S. representative who actually held this seat starting in 2003. He resigned in 2017 after being accused of pressuring female staffers to act as a surrogate for him and his wife. Though Franks has denied that he was attempting to initiate sexual contact with the staffers in this primary, I think he's trying to carve out an image as a statesman staying above the fray. In conversations and interviews, he's prone to quoting Winston Churchill, Thomas Jefferson and other prominent thinkers at some length. But he's more circumspect on issues of election security. He's hesitant when answering whether the election in 2020 was stolen, for example. The second candidate who I would place in that less Trumpian camp is Arizona House Speaker Ben Toma. Like the other candidates, he takes highly conservative positions on immigration, on abortion. But he has not been a leading election denier in the way that some of his competitors have. He's really pitching himself to voters as a pragmatist and touting the fact that he's shepherded legislation through Arizona State House with just a one vote majority. And he's also played a prominent role in passing the state's nationally noticed voucher style program for K through 12 students.

Ron Hansen [00:05:29] Okay, so those are the Republicans. There are Democrats running in this race, right?

Laura Gersony [00:05:34] That's exactly right.

Ron Hansen [00:05:35] Okay. So tell us about them.

Laura Gersony [00:05:37] Yeah. First, I'll say that this district is drawn to lean heavily Republican. So winning this race in the general election would be a long shot for Democrats. For that reason, the candidates are lower profile than in some of the other congressional races. But so far, a handful of Democratic candidates are actively fundraising. One of them is Gregory Whitten. He's a former Department of Defense official. He's raised the most money as of January. And another candidate is Bernadette Green Placentia, who's a truck driver. There's also an independent candidate in the race. That's Jeremy Spritzer, who's a firefighter and EMT.

Ron Hansen [00:06:14] You referenced it a moment ago. Let's talk about it a little more fully here. This is considered pretty safe Republican territory. Can you give us a sense as to why that is?

Laura Gersony [00:06:24] Yeah. You know, this district is about six percentage points more Republican and five percentage points less Democratic than the state as a whole. Republicans have a 15 percentage point registration advantage there, and historically, that's even higher in actual voting.

Ron Hansen [00:06:41] So let's talk about this race for a moment as far as how it's been prosecuted by these candidates, especially on the Republican side. What are they talking about issue wise? Is there anything worth noting? Is this all personal? Is there any issue related matters?

Laura Gersony [00:06:58] There's been some noise about several of the candidates not being from the district. Blake Masters is moving there this year. Abe Hamadeh has lived in Scottsdale, though he lived in the district as a kid. But in terms of policy, I think the top issues for most of the candidates are the same as Republicans talking points nationwide, and those are the economy and immigration. Candidates have been eager to slam President Joe Biden on inflation, and they're arguing he hasn't done enough to curb a recent spike in illegal border crossings. But the issue that I think sets the candidates apart the most is their approach to governance. The question of how they would work as a team with the rest of the party. It's been a turbulent session for the Republican majority in the US House of Representatives. We saw eight Republicans, including two from Arizona, vote to kick out the former House speaker, Kevin McCarthy. Leaving the party scrambling for about a month to find a new leader. Those divisions are on full display in this primary. For example, Anthony Kern said he would take the same hardline approach that party loyalty is secondary to him, whereas Ben Toma directly criticized that strategy and said that party unity and compromise are necessary to get stuff done. And the last issues that at a recent debate, the topic of abortion also came up. Abe Harmony distinguished himself by saying that the issue should be left to the States.

Ron Hansen [00:08:22] Okay, so that's enough about the candidates for a moment. Let's talk about the person who actually holds that office, Congresswoman Debbie Lesko. She's leaving office after about six years. Why she leaving now?

Laura Gersony [00:08:36] Yeah. The reason she gave is that she wants to spend more time with her family. But she also said that turmoil on Capitol Hill was a factor. Lesko announced her resignation during the chaos of McCarthy's ouster. She called that situation, in her words, a total disaster. And in her resignation statement, she said it's impossible to get anything done on Capitol Hill.

Ron Hansen [00:08:57] Congresswoman Lesko is set to leave Congress, but she's not entirely leaving politics and government. Right?

Laura Gersony [00:09:04] Yeah. That's right. She's running for the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors. She's looking to replace Clint Hickman, who recently announced he'll retire at the end of his current term. It's definitely a downshift from her current job, but still an important role. Especially because most elections are administered at the county level. And as we've reported, she does stand to benefit financially from the new job. Though her salary would decrease. But after serving for a single term in that role, her state administered pension would increase about six times over.

Ron Hansen [00:09:37] So, Laura, as she is winding down her time in Congress, is there anything notable about what she's done or her, particular style that she brought to Congress?

Laura Gersony [00:09:48] The word I would use is reliable. She's been a solid vote for GOP leadership. Some of her peers, like Arizona representatives Andy Biggs and Eli Crane, have been more willing to break ranks in service of their own priorities. But for Lesko, I think it's rarely been in question that she'll vote with the majority of the party. Lesko is someone who has straddled support from the establishment with satisfying a more impassioned base. She's supported some highly conservative causes. For example, she voted against certifying the 2020 presidential election results in Arizona and Pennsylvania, and she signed on to and, for example, she voted against certifying the 2020 presidential election results in Arizona and Pennsylvania. And at that time, she also

signed on to an election challenge lawsuit. But I would say she's managed to do that in a less antagonistic way than some of her peers. This also has not been an era of legislative accomplishment from House Republicans. I mean, you've reported that during her time in office, she was the prime sponsor of only two bills that became law, one of which renamed a post office. But of course, that's also reflective of her time, and it's symptomatic of divided government.

Ron Hansen [00:11:06] Yeah. Well, Laura, thank you so much for going over all this with us. If folks want to follow your work on social media, where can they find you?

Laura Gersony [00:11:14] I am on X at my full name, Laura Gersony. That's L-a-u-r-a-g-e-r-s-o-n-y

Ron Hansen [00:11:28] That is it for this week gaggle listeners. Do you have questions about today's episode or topics you'd like us to cover on future episodes? Send us a message at (602) 444-0804, or send a voice memo to the gaggle at Arizona Republic.com. That's one word all spelled out. This episode was edited and produced by Amanda Luberto. Our news direction is led by Kathy Tulamello. Episode oversight is from Kara Edgeron. The gaggle soundtrack comes from Universal Production Music. Never miss an episode of The Gaggle by subscribing to us wherever you listen. If you learned something new today, be sure to share this episode with a friend. You can also leave us a review and rate us five stars. You can follow The gaggle on social media at azcpodcasts. I'm at Ronald J. Hansen. That's h-a-n-s-e-n. The gaggle is an Arizona Republic and azcentral.com production. Thanks again for listening. We'll see you next week.