

Old-School House Democrats Face Primary Challenges From Progressives Across the Country

David Limbaugh is off. The following is a column by Salena Zito.

By David Limbaugh

PITTSBURGH -- Jerry Dickinson is the Democrats' perfect House candidate -- and not just on paper. Yes, he's young, accomplished, academic and a charismatic liberal outsider who supports the ideals of the Green New Deal, the impeachment of the president and can self-raise an impressive amount of cash for his candidacy. He is all of those things and more.

His only handicap is that he's running against a Democratic incumbent. That, however, is far less of an obstacle in this new era, when incumbency may not hold the weight among Democratic primary voters that it used to. Once Rep. Joe Crowley fell to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in 2018, primary season became incumbent-hunting season for eager liberals who had enough ambition and confidence and could run in safe Democratic districts.

Dickinson is that guy. Mike Doyle, the veteran congressman from Pittsburgh, is his target.

"Twenty-plus years is a long time in office," Dickinson says. "Look at the record. Is Doyle liberal enough to lead what is a safe, strongly Democratic district? The answer is no."

Dickinson describes what he thinks Pittsburgh deserves: "Think about the safe blue districts all across the United States, whose representatives take on the liberal mantle, who are loud. They are leaders. They stick their neck out on the issues that really, really do matter to liberals. That should be happening here. This is a post-industrial liberal enclave, which actually makes it in a unique position to actually be the leader on all major issues."

Doyle was first elected to office as a rare Democratic freshman in the Republican wave election year of 1994. He's lived through two redistrictings, but his seat is still based in Pittsburgh.

Doyle has never really faced much of a challenge either in a primary or a general election. The most iconic moment of his congressional career came during his time as head coach of the Democrats' congressional baseball team when he drew the team in from the practice field in prayer when news hit that the congressional Republicans' baseball team members were under attack on another practice field. His only controversy came in 2003 when his residence, at a home filled with Republican and Democratic members, came under scrutiny when it was revealed the landlord was a religious organization.

Doyle, a practicing Roman Catholic, said at the time of the living arrangement: "It's very ecumenical. We all pay for the food. We have common life experiences. We're also people of faith."

Dickinson, who is black, has a compelling life story. Separated as an infant from his biological parents by the Orphans' Court, Jerry was eventually fostered and then adopted into a "boisterous and loving home" parented by a white couple, Robert and Judy Dickinson. They ended up adopting eight children in total.

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Everyone's early childhood experiences shape your life in some way," Dickinson says. "It just so happens in mine was in this multiracial environment -- and sometimes chaotic environment."

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Dickinson smiles as he fondly talks about his family background and calls his father, Robert, one of his best friends. "He's a late-70s white man, you know? And even though I am a black man in America, we've just built this very neat relationship and deep bond."

History is certainly on Doyle's side, though, explains Kyle Kondik, managing editor of Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics. "More than 98% of all House members who have sought renomination by their parties since the end of World War II have, in fact, been renominated."

Still, Doyle should not dismiss Dickinson. "One also would expect a handful to succeed in any given year," Kondik said, pointing to both Crowley and Republican Eric Cantor in 2014.

The Intercept reported last week that the chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Rep. Cheri Bustos, counted as many 111 primaries for her incumbent members, a higher-than-normal number as the Democratic Party struggled with the leftward trajectory of their new coalition, which is less white, more educated and youthful.

Dickinson left suburban Pittsburgh to attend the College of the Holy Cross, where he excelled both in the classroom and on the soccer field. He returned to practice law and later to teach it at the University of Pittsburgh.

"I realized it was time to step up and be the one to actually take on this fight for this region and be the strong voice it needs."

In a different era, a 32-year-old liberal assistant law professor probably would have remained on the sidelines. But in today's climate, Dickinson has jumped into the fray.

Salena Zito is a CNN political analyst, and a staff reporter and columnist for the Washington Examiner. She reaches the Everyman and Everywoman through shoe-leather journalism, traveling from