South Florida voters set stage for hard-hitting races for Congress

Frankel, West win easily

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

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South Florida voters set the table Tuesday for a feast of political negativity. Their choices in critical U.S. House primaries ensure the region will see two of the most contentious campaigns in the country, both featuring truckloads of money and super-sized servings of scathing attacks.

In the Broward-Palm Beach County 22nd Congressional District, Democrats picked Lois Frankel of West Palm Beach to face Republican Adam Hasner of Boca Raton in an open seat with no incumbent. Frankel won the primary decisively, crushing Broward County Commissioner Kristin Jacobs. Hasner was unopposed.

In northern Palm Beach County, freshman Republican U.S. Rep. Allen West, the outspoken and controversial darling of the tea party movement, easily won the nomination to seek re-election in the 18th District. Democrats overwhelmingly picked businessman Patrick Murphy to face West in November.

Whether the House of Representatives remains in Republican hands in November or the Democrats recapture it will depend in part on these two matchups.

"They're going to be among the ugliest in the country because these are close races that both parties are targeting," said political scientist Sean Foreman of Barry University. "If one side or the other can pick up both, it would give them a great shot at the majority."

And, Foreman said, the battles to represent the two swaths of South Florida "will be among the most expensive in the nation."

22nd Congressional District

Frankel, a former mayor of West Palm Beach and former minority party leader in the Florida House of Representatives, won overwhelmingly in her Palm Beach County base. The two candidates virtually tied in Broward.

Frankel began running for Congress in March 2011 when West was the incumbent. After the redrawing of congressional district boundaries to reflect population changes reported by the 2010 Census, the 22nd District became more Democratic, so West decamped for the 18th District.
With West gone, Jacobs, a resident of Pompano Beach, jumped in the race in February. Despite a relentless campaign to target the supervoters who decide low-turnout primaries, Jacobs was never able to segue into a commanding position.

"Jacobs got in too late," Foreman said. "She could make a good case that she was ready for Congress, but not a good enough case that she was the best candidate when you already had a well-funded and well-known Frankel in there."

Jacobs said the "unfortunate intersection" of her late entry and the primary's exceedingly low turnout doomed her chances. She said she'd now work to help Frankel beat Hasner in November.

Hasner said via email he was "looking forward to a debate that doesn't include scare tactics or name calling, about how our views significantly differ on what needs to be done to get our fiscal house in order and get America's economy moving again."

Frankel said she expects "a big fight ahead, because the voters are going to have a very clear choice in this election. Adam Hasner and I are going to have very different visions of what we need to do to get this country back on track."

One indication of the importance of the 22nd District in November: Former — and she hopes future — U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited South Florida last week to help Frankel raise money and generate news coverage.

Karin Hoffman, founder of the tea party group DC Works for Us, said the looming Frankel-Hasner matchup "is one of the top 20 battleground districts in the nation."

The independent Rothenberg Political Report rates the Frankel-Hasner race as "leans Democratic." Still, Rothenberg senior analyst Jessica Taylor said Tuesday "it's one that Republicans are certainly intrigued by." Hasner, a former Florida House majority leader, is a "very strong candidate," she said.

18th Congressional District

After redistricting, West moved to the more Republican-friendly 18th District in northern Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties. Murphy, who was originally running in the 22nd District, moved north to follow him.

In Tuesday's party primaries, West easily bested Martin County Sheriff Bob Crowder. And Murphy blew away Jerry Lee Buechler and Jim Horn.

Analysts said the West-Murphy contest, which The Rothenberg Report rates as a tossup that leans Republican, will most likely be won or lost based on how people view West.

"People who like the tea party don't want to see him lose. People who don't like the tea party really want to see him lose," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University.
And, Taylor said, West helps both sides raise campaign cash, thanks to his penchant for incendiary rhetoric.

**Other congressional races**

All the other incumbents representing Broward or Palm Beach counties are likely to win in November, Foreman said. "We're going to be back to our same old, same old safe incumbents."

U.S. Reps. Ted Deutch, D-Boca Raton; Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Miami; Alcee Hastings, D-Miramar; and Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston — none of whom faced primary challengers on Tuesday — are considered such safe bets for re-election that The Rothenberg Political Report doesn't even rate them.

Still, Republicans had a hard-fought primary campaign to nominate a challenger — Karen Harrington of Davie — to challenge Wasserman Schultz in the 23rd District in Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

Harrington, a restaurateur who unsuccessfully ran against Wasserman Schultz in 2010, bested four other candidates.

She faces overwhelming odds: the nationally known incumbent has more than $2 million of campaign cash in the bank, an unbroken string of election victories dating back to 1992, and a district where just 26 percent of the registered voters are Republicans.

Republicans dream of defeating Wasserman Schultz because she has a high profile as President Barack Obama's handpicked chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee. Taylor predicted they're going to be disappointed in November; an upset is "not going to happen in that district," she said.

L.H. Williamson, 77, a retired optometrist, voted on Tuesday for Harrington, but is resigned to the likely outcome: "I expect Debbie Wasserman Schultz will again be elected to her post. I prefer to have a Republican, but I know it's not a perfect world and Republicans can't run everything."

Primary voters also gave U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson, D-Miami, a second term in Congress representing the 24th District, which includes part of Southeast Broward. Tuesday's outcome is sufficient to return her to Washington, D.C., because there is no other candidate in November.

Wilson, who is African-American, faced a challenge from Rudolph "Rudy" Moise, who is Haitian-American, in a district where 56 percent of the residents are black. Obama made a highly unusual move of getting involved in an intra-Democratic contest, endorsing Wilson. Moise got his own presidential endorsement, from Michel Martelly of Haiti.

*Staff writer Linda Trischitta contributed to this report.*