Tough South Florida race could help determine control of Congress

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

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BOCA RATON

It's a critical campaign dominated by big bucks fundraising, talking points platitudes and scathing TV attack ads.

It gives South Florida voters a big voice in deciding if Democrats or Republicans will control Congress for the next two years.

And it features two candidates who've shed their past personas like pythons in the Everglades.

Lois Frankel, the Democrat, has a long history as a sharp-tongued and outspoken liberal, and leans to the left on just about every issue. Now, wearing a constant smile, she's running as a practical problem solver.

Adam Hasner, the Republican, positioned himself as the conservative's conservative when he was seeking his party's nomination for U.S. Senate. He's now running as a consensus builder who promises to reach across the political aisle.

Both candidates are racing toward the political center, hoping to attract the middle of the road swing voters who could determine the outcome in the 22nd Congressional District, where 41 percent of voters are Democrats and 32 percent are Republicans. That's more Democrats and fewer Republicans than most of Florida — and the 27 percent who are independent/no party affiliation voters is much higher than other congressional districts.

That helps explain why the Republican touts his list of "Democrats for Adam" and the Democrat touts her "Veterans for Lois Frankel" group.

In reality, Broward and Palm Beach county voters face a stark choice between two dramatically different candidates.

On almost every issue, they line up predictably. Frankel supports the federal health care overhaul law known to many as Obamacare; Hasner would repeal it. Frankel favors a "balanced approach" to deficit reduction, possibly including higher taxes on the wealthy; Hasner rules out tax increases under any circumstances.
Frankel favors abortion rights; Hasner opposes abortion except in cases of rape, incest or to protect the life of the pregnant woman. Frankel supports marriage rights for gays and lesbians; Hasner is opposed.

They’ve clashed sharply and repeatedly over Medicare. Frankel says Hasner's approach would turn the health plan into a voucher program that would force seniors to bear heavy costs. Hasner said he wouldn't do anything to affect anyone 55 or older but that changes are needed to ensure some kind of coverage is available for younger people when they reach retirement.

Their ideological leanings come through in other areas. Frankel said global warming is real and human activity contributes to it. Hasner doesn't have a public position. "I'm not going to argue as to whether temperatures have increased or decreased or whether man has an impact on it," he said.

Frankel said the bailout of the U.S. auto industry was appropriate, and that it saved jobs at South Florida car dealerships. Hasner said he generally doesn't support the concept of federal bailouts. On the auto industry, he said, "I haven't tried to play rear view mirror or Monday morning quarterback on the issue."

Both candidates are Jewish, and say they're strong supporters of Israel. But Hasner is skeptical about Frankel's depth of support. He said her website didn't have any mention of Israel for the first year she was running for Congress.

Frankel, whose website currently has a statement on Israel, said that's a silly way to judge a candidate. "I've been supporting Israel for longer than Adam Hasner has been born," she said.

The candidates don't want to do anything to turn off their bases, but are competing strongly for the middle because the 22nd District is so competitive. National attention from both sides is focused on the Frankel-Hasner race because the outcome will help determine if Republicans retain control of the House.

The district's boundaries were changed for this year's election to reflect population changes uncovered in the 2010 Census. The new, more Democratic leanings prompted freshman U.S. Rep. Allen West, the Republican darling of the tea party movement, to abandon the 22nd District and seek a second term in more friendly territory in northern Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties.

With West's departure, Hasner dropped his bid for the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate and started running for Congress. Frankel began her campaign in March 2011, when West was still running in the 22nd District.

The Republicans who control the Florida Legislature and are responsible for district boundaries placed Frankel's home just outside the 22nd District. That map has been challenged in the courts; if it stands, Frankel has said she'll move so she lives in the district.
Major independent political analyses — the Cook and Rothenberg political reports and Sabato's Crystal Ball — say the contest could go either way on Nov. 6 but is leaning Democratic.

Political scientist Kevin Wagner of Florida Atlantic University said a Hasner win is unlikely but not impossible. "The makeup of the district makes it a very tough challenge for Hasner," he said.

Thanks largely to his not facing a primary challenge — while Frankel was fending off Broward Commissioner Kristin Jacobs in the Aug. 14 Democratic primary — Hasner has been able to amass a large war chest. Each candidate had raised $2.9 million by Oct. 1, and campaign finance reports showed Hasner had $679,583 in the bank for the crucial final weeks of the campaign. Frankel trailed him at $380,919.

A WPTV-Ch. 5/FL Democracy 2012 poll released Wednesday showed Frankel with 47 percent, Hasner with 44 percent and 9 percent not sure. The poll of 500 likely voters was conducted Monday and Tuesday by Public Policy Polling, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points.

Even though the candidates are scrambling for every vote, the matchup has cost Frankel one of her earliest political supporters.

In 1986, when Hasner was 16, his mother, Judy, managed Frankel's first campaign for the Florida House of Representatives. He said he was a Republican back then and disagreed with his Democratic mother's choice — so much so that he said it was tough to get the car keys to go out on a Friday night when he wasn't willing to help put up yard signs on Saturday morning.

This year, Hasner said, his mother is supporting him.

Watch video of Frankel and Hasner and see a sampling of campaign ads, including Hasner's new spot that has a woman sitting on a toilet, at SunSentinel.com/BrowardPolitics.

Lois Frankel

Age: 64

Residence: West Palm Beach

Family: Divorced, one son

Education: Bachelor's degree, Boston University. Law degree, Georgetown University.

Occupation: Candidate for Congress

Key endorsements: Planned Parenthood, Florida Alliance for Retired Americans, League of Conservation Voters

Adam Hasner

Age: 42

Residence: Boca Raton

Family: married

Education: Bachelor's degree, University of Maryland at College Park. Law degree, Florida State University.

Occupation: Business consultant


Key endorsements: U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Voters Coalition of Palm Beach County, Palm Beach County Police Benevolent Association.