Patrick Murphy skated to an easy win in the Democratic primary Tuesday and will square off with U.S. Rep. Allen West for the District 18 congressional seat in the November general election.

Murphy, 29, and his supporters celebrated as the election totals confirmed a sound victory, and they began bracing for the more heated battle ahead.

Murphy, a Broward County accountant, moved to Jupiter to run against West, a Republican whom he casts as a divisive figure creating more rifts in a polarized Congress.

With nearly all precincts reporting votes cast, Murphy garnered roughly 80 percent of the vote. That gave him an easy victory over business consultant Jim Horn, 58, and retired firefighter Jerry Buechler, 60.

Murphy indicated he is eager to go toe-to-toe with West in the newly drawn district that encompasses Martin, St. Lucie and northern Palm Beach counties. West beat Robert Crowder in the Republican primary.

"We've been working very hard for this," Murphy said of his victory. "It feels so good to have so much support out there."

Murphy accused West of inciting the far-right fringe and backing the Ryan Budget Plan, which he contends would cut Medicare, protect tax breaks for the wealthy and slash funding for college education.

"There's no question that Allen West speaks his mind," Murphy said. "But often what he says can be dangerous."
Both Horn and Buechler said they jumped into the race before West and Murphy declared their candidacies.

"It's not unexpected," Buechler said of the contest results. "The party fell in line with the candidate with the most money because West is the primary opponent."

Horn couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday night. In an earlier interview he said he pursued congressional office to represent local constituents' interests rather than getting caught up in national policy-making.

"That's what I wanted — to bring home a local congressman who people know, who people could count on," Horn said.

Historically, candidates who spend the most money usually win or have the greatest chance of winning.

By the end of July, Buechler and Horn reported spending no campaign money.

Backed by the National Democratic Party, Murphy raised $2.3 million in campaign funds and spent almost $1 million of it during the primary. His biggest volleys were aimed at West in anticipation of a general-election showdown in the new district that analysts say gives a Democratic challenger a fighting chance, mainly because it includes more left-leaning St. Lucie County.

Tea party favorite West has raised $10 million so far and spent about $6.3 million. He is expected to amass another hefty war chest for the general election.

Still, despite West's ability to raise and spend more money than Murphy, the race will be competitive because the district is less favorable to West than District 22 where he won in 2010, said Kevin Wagner, a Florida Atlantic University political science professor.

"This kind of district, both parties have a shot at winning," Wagner said.

It also appears that voters' enthusiasm for the tea party has waned in the past two years, Wagner said, noting that 2010 was "a high water mark for the tea party."

West is popular with conservatives, as seen by his fundraising success, but some of his rhetoric provokes liberal groups, which could help Murphy, Wagner said. Murphy was a Republican for years and switched parties in January 2011. He has blamed the change on what he calls the divisive brand of tea party politics that took hold of the Republican Party and put West into office. "Our greatest strength is to find common ground and compromise," Murphy said. "Allen West — his biggest downfall is he only appeals to a very small group of people."