It’s a whole new brew for brash tea party hero West

By Sean Lengell

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Rep. Allen B. West, whose acerbic tongue and unabashed conservative swagger made him a tea party hero nationally two years ago during a successful run for Congress, is finding life on the campaign trail different — and more difficult — this year as he is locked in a battle to save his Florida seat.

His rock-star status in conservative circles has helped him raise more than $10 million — an astronomically large sum for a freshman House member. But the Republican lawmaker may need every penny, as Democrats — eager to defeat one of the signature faces of the tea party movement — have made winning the race a priority.

With Mr. West facing a young but determined moderate opponent in 29-year-old political newcomer Patrick Murphy, a politically mixed electorate and an ebbing of the tea party wave since 2010, the race is shaping up to be among the most competitive and expensive House contests in the country.

“The question here is whether voters view Allen West as a courageous government slasher or a tea party enemy of Social Security and Medicare,” said David Wasserman, who covers House races for the Cook Political Report. “Most voters have already formed their opinions, but it’s [a] very, very close” race.

He added that, aside from former Republican presidential candidate Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, no one is more polarizing on Capitol Hill than the lawmaker from Florida, one of two black Republicans in Congress.

The redistricting process left Mr. West’s district with a majority of Democratic voters, so he chose to run for re-election in the neighboring 18th Congressional District, which holds about an equal number of registered Republicans and Democrats, along with a substantial number of independents. President Obama four years ago carried the district — as it’s configured now — with 51 percent of the vote, while President Bush won the support of 50.5 percent of its voters in 2004.

With new voters to win over, Mr. West’s bombastic nature is viewed by many as a double-edged sword.

When House Majority PAC, a liberal super PAC, recently announced it was spending $1 million on efforts to defeat Mr. West, it focused its first TV ad attacking Mr. West for a 2011 speech in which he said liberal women were “neutering American men.”

There is no shortage of controversial statements from the lawmaker that Mr. Murphy and other Democrats can throw in his face. He has called liberal Democrats communists; said Democratic National Committee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz was “not a lady” and therefore should “not be afforded due respect”; said the Democratic Party “propaganda machine” would make Nazi Germany’s Joseph Goebbels proud; and said Democratic calls for “ever-increasing redistributionary handouts” were the “most insidious form of slavery remaining in the world today.”
“He doesn’t want to lose that image as a sort of straight talker and blunt talker, but he has to be a little more cognizant that some of things that he can say in a more conservative district is going to make it harder for him to win,” said Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University.

“I don’t know how successful it is to call Democrats ‘communists’ anymore when you have a substantial Democratic population in the district.”

David Dew, chairman of the Martin County Democratic Party Executive Committee, said Mr. West was “way too radical” for the diverse district, a mix of agricultural and suburban communities.

“We’ve got a chance to get some representation here finally with a moderate,” he said, referring to Mr. Murphy. “We would love to have somebody down the middle of the road [politically] as our congressman.”

Mr. Dew added that Mr. West is a “slave to Grover Norquist,” referring to the anti-tax advocate and author of the “Taxpayer Protection Pledge” who critics say wields egregiously excessive influence among Capitol Hill Republicans.

Yet Mr. West rarely, if ever, is apologetic or backs away from his comments — a trait that has endeared him to fans.

“Allen West is who Allen West is. He’s never tried to hide that,” said Jessica Taylor, a senior analyst and reporter with the Rothenberg Political Report. “He’s a really fascinating politician.”

Kate Boland, a member of the Martin County Republican Party Executive Committee, predicts Mr. West will win easily in November because his positions on fiscal discipline, entitlement reforms and a push for a strong national defense in the wake of rising anti-Americanism in Libya and elsewhere resonate with the district’s voters.

She added that Mr. Murphy is a “carbon copy of every new Democrat candidate … that doesn’t particularly have a strong position on anything.”

“He’s sort of bland, and I don’t think he had much traction here,” she said. “This is a candidate that shouldn’t be causing any trouble at all.”

Yet Mr. Murphy, an accountant and a vice president with his family construction business, is running what many political analysts say is a strong race. He has raised more than $2 million, an impressive sum for a House challenger, though it pales in comparison with Mr. West’s total.

The Democrat has attacked Mr. West in TV ads, calling him “radical” and criticizing his positions on abortion and contraception.

Meanwhile, Mr. West has attacked Mr. Murphy for “supporting” Mr. Obama’s economic stimulus package, even though the Democrat has never been a member of Congress. He also has accused the Murphy family’s construction business of profiting from the package to the sum of “millions.”

The Murphy campaign replied by accusing the Republican of shamelessly attacking a successful family business that played by the rules.
Ms. Taylor said that while the race likely will remain tight through Election Day, she gives a slight edge to Mr. West, as his challenger has “some work to do” to get himself known and to convince voters he is a better alternative than the incumbent.

“You can’t run just on an ‘I’m not Allen West,’” she said.