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Profile of N.J.'s 12th Congressional race: Who will replace Rush Holt?



Democrat Bonnie Watson Coleman (left) and Republican Alieta Eck (right) are the major party candidates in the 12th District race.



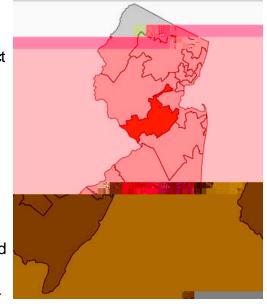
BY TARA NURIN

One outcome is nearly certain in New Jersey's 12th District race for Congress: A woman will win the election.

Both major-party candidates are women, and barring an upset from an independent, one of them will become the first to represent New Jersey in Washington, D.C., in more than a decade. The election also presents an opportunity for one candidate to break through a race and gender barrier: If Democratic frontrunner Bonnie Watson Coleman wins, she'll be the state's first female African-American in Congress.

The redistricting boosted the Democratic population of the district, which climbed from 33 percent to 37 percent of registered voters. Only 14 percent of district voters have registered as Republicans, and the rest of the population remains independent, though they've voted for Democratic presidential candidates for the last two decades and almost always sent Holt back to Congress by double-digit margins.

Nearly 60 percent of the population is white, with Asians and Hispanics each counting for 15 percent and African-Americans rounding out the remaining 18 percent, giving the district the second-highest number



of blacks in New Jersey. Highland Park, just outside New Brunswick, is home to one of the state's largest Hassidic Jewish communities.

According to BiggestUSCities.com, the state's 12th District ranks in the top 50 nationwide congressional districts for income per capita and household, as well as number of college graduates and Asians. The Route 1 corridor that traverses part of the district attracts many engineers, scientists, and entrepreneurs, thanks to its high concentration of pharmaceutical firms, tech startups, innovation-minded businesses, and academic institutions. Daniel Douglas, director of the William J Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton College, says Watson Coleman should have little trouble winning over voters in the district.

"It is based in Trenton and Princeton, where Bonnie Watson Coleman's family is prominent and well respected," he said. Watson Coleman's father was a pioneering African-American in the General Assembly.

The Candidates

For the past eight terms, Watson Coleman has represented New Jersey's 15th Assembly district, which includes Trenton, Ewing, Lambertville, East Amwell, Hopewell borough and township, Lawrence, Pennington, and West Windsor. The 69-year-old Ewing resident became the first African-American woman to serve as Assembly Majority Leader and holds the same distinction as chair of the New Jersey Democratic State Committee. She serves as vice chair of the Education Committee and previously chaired the Appropriations Committee. She headed up Barbara Buono's gubernatorial election campaign and is one of Christie's most vocal critics.

"We're treating a young woman who was paying \$900 per month for heavy psychological medications as a result of being raped and beaten for years by her father. We were lucky to have the medicine she needed," she said.

When asked what would have happened if her Zarephath Health Center, located in Somerset and named for her church, hadn't carried those particular drugs, she answered, "We would have found a substitute that would have been close enough."

Watson Coleman, for her part, agrees that the ACA falls short of perfection, but chuckles when asked her opinion of Eck's proposal. "Doctors volunteering their services is a good thing," she said. "But I don't think that's th

Eck would rather see less investment in public projects paired with a reduction in taxes and bureaucratic regulation, which she blames for overseas outsourcing and investment. She'd like to put a stop to government earmarks and assign oversight of the education system to local, rather than federal, agencies. In an interview with NJSpotlight, the candidate listed her potential constituents' top concerns as "jobs and the economy, national security, terrorism and those beheadings, immigration reform, and the Affordable Care Act."

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