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Washington Briefing

CAMPAIGN

Florida MAGA bastion draws comeback from ex-lawmakers who once represented other states

No former member of Congress has won over interstate lines since the Nixon years. The Trump-friendly open seat's candidate field may swell to more than a dozen.

By David Mark

FORT MYERS, Florida — The Sunshine State is famously a place where people go for a fresh start. In the political realm, a looming Florida congressional Republican primary is testing the outer boundaries of that adage.

The 12 Republican candidates, so far, for Florida's 19th Congressional District include a pair of former House members from other states: Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina and Chris Collins of western New York. Both left office under less-than-ideal circumstances.

A former state senator in Illinois, Jim Oberweis, is running to represent the 19th District, covering the Fort Myers and Cape Coral area, plus Naples to the south. So are businesswoman Ola Hawatmeh, who lost a 2020 congressional bid in New York, and Catalina Lauf, a Commerce Department official during President Donald Trump's first, nonconsecutive term. She twice lost House bids in Illinois, including a 2020 Republican primary defeat at the hands of Oberweis.

A candidate gaining some political momentum is a MAGA activist and radio station owner whose stations strongly promote the president's agenda, Jim Schwartzel.

The candidate field also includes a convicted Jan. 6 rioter, John Strand, who previously gained exposure, so to speak,



MAGA Beer, one of many products promoting President Donald Trump, at Seed to Table, in Naples, Florida. The store offers fresh produce from local farms, several restaurants and bars, and live music.



Starfish are plentiful along the Gulf coast of Fort Myers Beach, in Florida's 19th Congressional District. Particularly during the winter months when they reproduce.

as an underwear romance novel cover model. Trump's January 2025 pardon pen sprung Stand from prison.

The House seat is coming open because Rep. Byron Donalds (R-FL) is running for governor, where he's favored in the red state. The district is full of picturesque white-sand beaches and is a haven for retirees, particularly from the Midwest.

The GOP candidate field in the 19th District could still grow, ahead of the June 12 filing deadline and Aug. 18 primary. Winning the Republican primary is tantamount to being the next member of Congress for a district with a long and deep Republican pedigree, and where Trump beat 2024 Democratic rival Kamala Harris 64%-35%.

"This Trump Country, by 100," Collins said in an interview. "It's solid red territory."

FROM WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA TO SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Plenty of former House members seek comebacks. In the 2026 election cycle, there are 17, including Cawthorn and Collins. Some do make it back. In the 119th Congress, 15 lawmakers previously were House members.

Yet each of those House incumbents represents the same states as before. The last time a former House member won a comeback bid across state lines was 1968, with the Capitol Hill return of Republican Rep. Ed Foreman. He had previously represented a West Texas district for two years before getting washed out in the 1964 Lyndon Johnson landslide, when the Lone Star State was almost monolithically Democratic. Then, having moved next door to southern New Mexico, Foreman, in 1968, rode incoming President Richard Nixon's coattails to oust an incumbent Democrat. But Foreman lost in the 1970 midterm elections, along with several other House Republicans. Foreman died in 2022 at age 88.

Several other former House members have subsequently tried running in other states but came up short. Though, as the Trump era of politics has made clear, electoral precedents are true until they're not. That could make Cawthorn's brand



Former Rep. Madison Cawthorn, who represented a North Carolina House district from 2021 to 2023, is seeking a political comeback in Florida's 19th Congressional District.

of populist conservatism a good fit for the 19th Congressional District.

For Cawthorn, the race in Florida's 19th Congressional District offers a political reset of sorts. Cawthorn proved a political phenom in 2020 when, at age 24, he beat a crowded GOP primary field, including a runoff victory against Trump's endorsed candidate, for a western North Carolina district. Cawthorn then easily won the general election.

Cawthorn stood out that election cycle not only for his youth but also for his impressive life story, one defined by a near-fatal 2014 car crash at age 18, which left him partially paralyzed. Cawthorn went on to start a real estate investment firm before winning his congressional seat.

“Several other former House members have subsequently tried running in other states but came up short. Though, as the Trump era of politics has made clear, electoral precedents are true until they're not.”

He joined the House in January 2021, only five months after meeting the constitutional minimum age requirement of 25.

Cawthorn entered the House just ahead of Joe Biden's presidency. During Cawthorn's two years in the House, when Democrats held the majority, legislation he sponsored focused on issues such as preventing critical race theory funding, worker safety exemptions, term limits, Capitol security, and veterans' education.

But Cawthorn faced a tough renomination bid amid a series of unflattering headlines. That included racking up speeding tickets and being stopped with a gun at the Asheville, North Carolina, airport. Cawthorn also angered Republican colleagues by claiming in an interview that Capitol Hill was a den of drug use and scandalous sexual activity.

Cawthorn narrowly lost the primary to now-Rep. Chuck Edwards (R-NC). When Cawthorn's House term ended after two years, he moved to southwest Florida.

Cawthorn, in an interview, said a return to Congress would bring a focus on lowering costs for constituents while also supporting the Trump administration in its illegal immigrant deportation efforts.

"People are more concerned about their paychecks" than anything else, Cawthorn said. "A common refrain is, 'I can afford less even though I'm making more these days.'"

Fighting inflation is top of mind, Cawthorn said, adding that whoever Trump picks to replace Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell should sharply cut interest rates.

"The lower the better," Cawthorn said, leaning into his real estate background in his efforts to boost home ownership. Cawthorn also backs Trump's Jan. 20 executive order aimed at banning institutional investors from buying single-family homes.

"Having an entire generation of renters" is a big problem, Cawthorn said. "Homes are made for families. They're not made for investors."

More broadly, Cawthorn wants to enact a federal deregulation agenda. He cited out-of-control Environmental Protection Agency regulations, with environmental regulators hitting particularly hard on lumber and other home-building parts.

“We have an overblown and out-of-control federal government,” Cawthorn said.

Cawthorn’s legislative to-do list further includes continuing to push House legislation sponsored by Donalds, the Florida gubernatorial candidate, aimed at providing tax relief for residents who pay flood insurance premiums through the National Flood Insurance Program or with private insurance. The House bill is a companion to Senate legislation backed by Sens. Rick Scott (R-FL) and Ashley Moody (R-FL), which is designed to ease the financial toll stemming from flood insurance costs that have been increasing in recent years.

“Flood insurance is so high in the state of Florida,” Cawthorn said of complaints he’s heard from residents in the state’s southwest region. “Even if they can afford a home, flood insurance prices them out of the market.”

Cawthorn got an early boost when, on Jan. 16, Sen. Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) endorsed him for the Republican nomination. The pair were House colleagues, and Mullin is tight with Trump and a leading congressional voice backing the administration.

TRUMP’S FIRST CONGRESSIONAL BACKER RUNS AGAIN IN WARMER ENVIRONS

Southwest Florida has become a major hub for transplants from western New York, with a high concentration of former Buffalo-area residents. This migration is driven by a desire for warmer weather, lower taxes, and an escape from harsh winter conditions.

Collins, 75, is among them, putting him in the unique position of being a neighbor to many former constituents and possibly their next congressman. A mechanical engineer by training, Collins headed several successful businesses in the Buffalo area. He was elected Erie County executive in 2007. In 2012, he beat now-Gov. Kathy Hochul (D-NY) for a traditionally Republican western New York House seat she had nabbed in a special election a year-and-a-half earlier.

Collins’s House tenure coincided with the rise of Trump on the political



Former Rep. Chris Collins represented a western New York House seat for nearly seven years. In the 2026 election cycle, Collins is running for Florida’s 19th Congressional District.

scene, including his emphasis on populist economics. This struck a chord in a once-factory-heavy area hit hard by layoffs over the decades.

Collins was the first member of Congress to support Trump’s first bid for the White House in 2016. Once Trump was ensconced in the White House, Collins became a House liaison to the administration and frequently defended the president’s actions in media interviews.

However, Collins’s House career, at least what might be the first portion of it, came crashing down when he resigned his New York House seat on Oct. 1, 2019, and pleaded guilty to two felony insider trading charges. Collins started a 26-month prison sentence but was pardoned by Trump in December 2020.

Now back on the campaign hustings in southwest Florida, Collins said he is working with an experienced campaign team, going back to his western New York political career.

“My whole team has come back together,” Collins said, citing campaign manager Chris Grant, who helped run the Erie County executive campaign, then was a congressional chief of staff. Grant and his firm, Big Dog Strategies, became major MAGA players when, in the 2024 campaign, they helped run a super PAC effort for Trump, targeting seven swing states. Trump won all seven in his comeback victory over Harris.

Collins, in his House comeback race,

is focusing on local issues, including affordability.

“Cape Coral is a relatively low-income, working-class community,” Collins said. “These are really busy, young families living in modest homes.”

Cutting the deficit and national debt is key, Collins said.

America had a \$1.8 trillion deficit in 2025, according to the Congressional Budget Office. And as of Dec. 3, 2025, total gross national debt is \$38.40 trillion, per the congressional Joint Economic Committee. The nation’s finances are so strained that an increasing number of payments are going to debt servicing, rather than paying down principal. It’s a familiar debt spiral to anyone who has run up a credit card bill and finds themselves in a yearslong financial hole because they only have enough to make minimal payments, which worsens a perpetual cycle of owing more over time.

“Solutions are reducing expenses where we can, and one of the biggest is Medicaid,” Collins said. “That means taking the fraud and waste out of Medicaid. And at the same time, increasing our economy faster than on the debt side. There’s no one single thing to do, other than making sure our economy is growing faster than our debt.”

Collins is seeking a congressional return during Trump’s final two years in office. He’s not concerned about the president’s slipping approval ratings. Gas prices are falling, and inflation is cooling, he noted. Still, Trump haters aren’t going to let up, he added.

“Trump derangement syndrome is a real thing,” Collins said. “But Trump’s supporters from 2024 are absolutely locked into him. Put me in that category.”

Nor are Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s deportation tactics in Minnesota and elsewhere a concern for Collins, even as a growing number of incumbent Republican senators and House members raise questions about such operations of federal agents, following the deaths of two protesters. The overall rationale remains sound, Collins added.

“There’s a reason they’re called illegal immigrants — because they’re illegal,” Collins said.

Collins stands out from rivals as a lonely dissenter to calls to withhold salary from members of Congress when there's a federal government shutdown.

The intentions may be right, Collins said during a recent GOP candidates forum, sponsored by the Women's Republican Club of Naples Federated. But "no budget, no pay" efforts violate the Constitution's 27th Amendment, which stipulates congressional salaries can't be adjusted without an intervening election, when voters can choose if incumbents and others are worth a higher pay rate.

The amendment, ratified in 1992 after nearly 200 years, is aimed at preventing sitting lawmakers from giving themselves pay raises. Yet it also means they can't cut their own pay in a current congressional session.

Collins described the salary withholding statements from members of both parties as a political gimmick because they have to get paid by the end of a congressional session anyway. Yet in a game of congressional virtue-signalling, make it look like they're standing with beleaguered taxpayers amid government shutdowns.

FORMER ELECTED OFFICIAL IN ILLINOIS TOUTS BUSINESS BACKGROUND TO FLORIDA VOTERS

Illinois voters are familiar with Jim Oberweis, 79. Now it's his job to make the political sale to a Florida electorate.

Oberweis was a successful western Illinois business figure when he entered the political fray nearly a quarter-century ago. He was best known at the time as the owner of Oberweis Dairy in North Aurora, near Chicago. He had also established an investment management company, Oberweis Securities, and other financial services firms, and was a regular commentator on business talk shows.

In 2002, Oberweis sought the Republican Senate nomination but lost in the primary. He lost another Senate GOP primary bid in 2004.

Oberweis then lost a 2006 bid for the Illinois Republican gubernatorial nomination. His political luck wasn't much better as former President George W. Bush's tenure wound down, losing a March 2008 special election to now-Rep.



Jim Oberweis, a former state senator in Illinois, is running in his adopted state of Florida for the 19th Congressional District, citing his business background.

Bill Foster (D-IL), and again that November for a full, two-year term.

Oberweis finally won with a 2012 bid for state Senate. He won reelection in 2016 and, for a time, was the state Senate minority whip.

Oberweis was the 2014 Republican Senate nominee, keeping the race relatively competitive against Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), the second-highest-ranking Democratic senator. In one of the nation's bluest states, during a strong Republican year, Durbin, first elected to the Senate in 1996 after 14 years in the House, prevailed over Oberweis 54%-43%.

In 2020, Oberweis was the Republican nominee against Rep. Lauren Underwood (D-IL) in a House district west of Chicago. Underwood, then a freshman lawmaker, barely won reelection over Oberweis, 50.67%-49.33%.

In January 2021, Oberweis filed a notice of contest with the House of Representatives, alleging that irregularities in the vote recount would make him the winner of the election. On May 12, 2021, the House, with a Democratic majority, rejected Oberweis's challenge.

After that disputed election, "I packed my bag, said, 'I'm done with Illinois, and I'm done with politics,'" Oberweis said in an interview.

Yet when Donalds said he was running for governor, local supporters implored Oberweis to run in his adopted state of Florida, citing his business background.

Along those lines, Oberweis, like his 19th Congressional District primary rivals, cites the ballooning national debt as a major concern.

Without action, "we're going to face some nasty consequences in the future," Oberweis said, noting rising bond yields reflect investor concerns about the U.S. economy's strength.

Oberweis backs the Trump agenda to the hilt, including the administration's efforts to ban birthright citizenship, an issue now playing out in a Supreme Court case.

"I believe there should be no birthright citizenship for illegal aliens," Oberweis said. "There's been a business of transporting pregnant women to the U.S., so their kids can become American citizens."

Oberweis is focusing heavily on local issues, citing his yearslong membership in the Everglades Trust.

"People are moving here every month," he said. "We need to be prepared with infrastructure — roads, to handle the bottlenecks, and a fresh supply of water."

Oberweis added that he's no stranger to the Sunshine State.

"I've had a home in Florida for over 40 years. It was a vacation home until we bought a home in Bonita Springs," a growing 53,000-person coastal city in Lee County. "Some of the other candidates have only been here one year."

TRUMP'S COVETED ENDORSEMENT, WHICH MAY NOT MATERIALIZE

Cawthorn, Collins, and Oberweis, in interviews, each said they would love to have Trump's endorsement in the crowded Republican primary. But with so many Trump supporters in the primary race, the president may sit it out. And that's OK, each said, empathizing that the campaign burden is on them to prove their MAGA bona fides and support for Trump.

It all points to a wide-open race, in which a winner could emerge with less than 30% of the vote. And it leaves room for a first-time candidate to emerge, the founder of a prominent MAGA-oriented business in the congressional district said in an interview.

“It’s going to be a mess of a race. I just don’t see anybody who’s the right guy,” said Alfie Oakes, 57, an agriculture business owner who, in December 2019, opened up a 74,000-square-foot supermarket named Seed To Table. The Naples store, a quick drive from several gated communities, features an array of Trump-themed food products, such as “MAGA Beer.” It also offers restaurant-style food, making it a gathering place for the local MAGA faithful.

Oakes’s uncertainty about who would prevail in the Republican congressional primary reflects widespread voter sentiment six months out. And it has some local party activists talk up the chance of Schwartzel, the well-known local media executive. Schwartzel, who turns 50 this year, is working to differentiate himself from a candidate field that features, among others, the two former House members and an

ex-state senator, all of whom held office out of state.

“Just like President Donald Trump, I am a businessman — not a politician — and I’m ready to be your conservative fighter in Congress,” Schwartzel’s campaign website reads.

“Southwest Florida needs someone who understands our values, will stand up for our community, and refuses to

“**It’s going to be a mess of a race. I just don’t see anybody who’s the right guy.**

—Alfie Oakes, 57, an agriculture business owner whose Naples, Florida, supermarket, Food To Table, is a gathering place for local MAGA faithful.

bow to the D.C. establishment. That’s why I started 92.5 FOX News Radio — to give conservatives in Southwest Florida a voice. From the early days of the Tea Party to the heart of the MAGA movement, we’ve championed America First principles and provided a platform for real conservative fighters.”

It remains to be seen whether that kind of outsider message can break through when each candidate is positioning themselves similarly. But it could provide an edge over former lawmakers from other states, testing how far the notion of Florida reinvention goes.

It’s a decision, of course, to be made by voters, not pundits.

“I think there is room for a grassroots candidate to emerge,” Oakes said. ★

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