

CONGRESS

Central Michigan district a bellwether for House majority fight

Lansing-based seats have already switched partisan control twice in the Trump era

By David Mark

Michigan's 7th Congressional District and its similar Lansing-based predecessors have long been political microcosms of a premier swing state.

In recent decades, two of its Democratic occupants have won Senate seats after representing districts that roughly mirrored Michigan's relatively diverse demographics: former Sen. Debbie Stabenow and her successor, Sen. Elissa Slotkin (D-MI). A longtime Republican House member, Mike Rogers, came close to winning a Senate seat in 2024 and still could this year in his second bid for statewide office.

So, it's hardly surprising that the 7th Congressional District, covering the Lansing area and northwestern Detroit exurbs, is a top battleground for House control in November. Freshman Rep. Tom Barrett (R-MI) will aim to defend the seat from the winner of the fiercely contested Aug. 4 Democratic primary, setting up a three-month campaign crucial to both parties' chances of winning a House majority.

House Republicans effectively have a 220-215 edge, including a few of vacant seats that tilt strongly red or blue. And Democratic plans to nab the necessary

three seats for a majority — and in their view, a whole lot more — begin on the ground in the south-central Michigan district that includes the state capital, Lansing, and Michigan State University next door in East Lansing.

That's the most Democratic part of the district, filled with state government workers, MSU students and academics, among others. Yet there's also a substantial rural area in the district, where Republicans can run up the score. In between are a mix of white-collar communities, white working-class areas, and a significant Asian American population.

Michigan's 7th Congressional District and its Lansing-area predecessors will, at the end of this Congress, have had Democratic representatives in Washington for 28 years and Republican members for 24 years, making for one of the most evenly balanced political battlegrounds in the nation. The House districts' contours have shifted, sometimes giving an edge to Democratic-majority Lansing, while in other years favoring Livingston County, one of Michigan's most Republican areas. Nonetheless, it's one of the most consistently competitive regions in the country.

A MARQUEE CONTEST

Barrett won the 7th Congressional District in 2024 when it came open, as Slotkin re-

linquished the seat to make what would be a winning Senate run. She beat Rogers, the Republican nominee, 48.64%-48.3%. Rogers is running for Senate again in 2026, for another open seat, and is the GOP nominee-in-waiting, while Democrats face a three-person primary.

In 2024, 7th Congressional District voters backed President Donald Trump over Democratic rival Kamala Harris, there 49.9%-48.6%. That roughly matched Trump's win in Michigan over the then-vice president, 49.73%-48.31%, as he nabbed a second, nonconsecutive White House term.

The 2026 midterm electorate looks to be somewhat more Democratic-leaning, based on national and Michigan polls showing Trump's approval ratings dropping. In Republicans' favor, the contested Democratic primary, three months out from Election Day, compresses the time the party's eventual nominee has to make the case against Barrett.

One Democratic candidate is a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Bridget Brink. Tapped by then-President Joe Biden for the uber-sensitive diplomatic post, Brink won Senate confirmation and took up her Kyiv assignment in May 2022, months after Russia invaded Ukraine in what remains an ongoing war. The career foreign service officer had been the U.S. ambas-



sador to Slovakia immediately before. She stayed in the Ukraine ambassadorship until three months after Trump reentered the White House.

Brink faces primary competition from William Lawrence, a political organizer and progressive activist, and Matt Maasdam, who was a Navy SEAL and an Iraq and Afghanistan war veteran. He became a White House military aide during the Obama administration.

Maasdam “carried the nuclear football – the briefcase that contains the tools the President would need to respond decisively in the face of a catastrophic threat, including the nuclear codes,” according to the candidate’s campaign website.

Lawrence is running the most left-wing campaign, touting his involvement in the Sunrise Movement, advocating strict environmental regulations to counter climate change, and the implementation of the Green New Deal. Brink and Maasdam, with their high-level national security credentials, are likely closer to the district’s median voter, who is more centrist, all in a district that has often, though not always, supported Barrett in his runs for office.

Barrett, 44, enlisted in the Army after high school and was deployed overseas multiple times, including to Iraq and Afghanistan, where he served as a Black Hawk helicopter pilot. He retired as a chief warrant officer in the Michigan Army National Guard. Barrett earned his bachelor’s degree from Western Michigan University.

Barrett’s political career began with a bang as he ousted a state House Democratic incumbent in 2014. He moved to the state Senate after four years. He “established himself as a conservative foil for Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer,” the *Detroit Press* wrote of his statehouse tenure.

In 2022, Barrett challenged Slotkin, a former CIA and Defense Department official, for the Lansing-area House seat where, in 2018, she had beaten a GOP incumbent. Slotkin won 52%-46%, taking 67% in Ingham County, home to Lansing and a major population center in the region.

Two years later, Barrett rebounded politically and beat a former state Senate colleague, Curtis Hertel, scion of a prom-



Freshman Rep. Tom Barrett’s (R-MI) seat in the 7th Congressional District of Michigan, is a top battleground for House control in November.

inent Michigan Democratic family. Over Barrett’s first 15 months in the House, he’s largely backed the Trump administration agenda. He supported its signature budget and tax bill, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. More recently, he said he supported the Trump administration’s strikes on Iran.

Democrats are confident Barrett will be vulnerable in November, with Trump’s approval ratings sinking.

“Career politician Tom Barrett won’t be able to outrun his broken promises of raising costs instead of lowering them, cutting health care instead of delivering relief for struggling Michiganders, and rubber-stamping tax cuts for billionaires instead of working families,” DCCC spokeswoman Katie Smith said in a statement to the *Washington Examiner*. “Barrett is just another failed politician and political insider who works for himself and his Washington party bosses, not for Michiganders.”

House Republicans scoff at Democratic efforts to unseat Barrett.

“While Congressman Tom Barrett delivers commonsense wins for Michiganders, Democrats are stuck in a messy, race-to-the-left primary,” NRCC spokesman Zach Bannon said in a statement to the *Washington Examiner*. “Whoever escapes the Democrats’ late primary will be another radical, out-of-touch liberal that Michigan voters will reject.”

MARCH AND MICHIGAN MADNESS

The 7th Congressional District fight takes place in a political environment that rivals Michigan State men’s basketball for competitiveness. Its Lansing-area predecessor, the 6th Congressional District, and later the 8th, became a top political

background a few years before the 1979 Spartans won the first of the school’s two NCAA championships.

The late Democratic Rep. Bob Carr held the seats for a cumulative 18 years, starting in the “Watergate Babies” class of 1974. Republican James Whitney Dunn rode President Ronald Reagan’s extensive 1980 Republican coattails into Congress for two years, only to lose to Carr in a 1982 rematch.

Something similar happened amid the 1994 Republican Revolution, which ended 40 years of House Democratic control. Republican Dick Chrysler won the Lansing-area seat but promptly lost it two years later to Stabenow, a former state legislator. Stabenow, after four years as a House member, in 2000, moved up across the Capitol after beating a sitting Republican senator.

Her replacement for the Lansing-area House seat, though, was a Republican, Rogers. In 2000, then-state Sen. Rogers, who had served in the Army and then became an FBI agent, won that year’s closest House election. He nabbed the seat by 111 votes out of 297,609 cast.

After that close call, state legislators and their Republican governor made it much redder in the 2002 round of redistricting. That held through Rogers’s House retirement after the 2014 election, and as he was succeeded by another Republican for four years, until Slotkin won it in 2018.

Heading into the November midterm elections, the 7th Congressional District’s history of close calls in the district and its predecessors suggests it will be one of the most expensive and intensely contested of this cycle. For Barrett, in his first House reelection bid, it could mean being a congressional one-hit wonder, like the short-term House members who squeaked through in the GOP landslides of 1980 and 1994.

Or, with another House win under his belt as a top Democratic candidate, Barrett could be a viable Senate or otherwise statewide candidate in the future, as a bipartisan roster of his predecessors has shown is possible. ★

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