

Democrats hoping for better odds in 1st District congressional race

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/ann-roe-annc-1stdist-s450.png>



Will threat to abortion rights and new boundaries be enough to end 30-year GOP trend?

BELOIT - Wisconsin Democrats are hoping that the state's new congressional map and the pending Supreme Court ruling to overturn abortion rights will reset the political dynamics in the state's 1st Congressional District, where voters last elected a Democrat three decades ago.

The state's congressional map, affirmed in April, redraws the 1st District's boundaries to include the city of Beloit and a portion of the city of Whitewater, both of which had been carved off from the district in 2001. Restoring them added more historically Democratic voters to the district's rolls.

With that reconfiguration, the map resembles more closely the boundaries of the district in the 1990s and earlier, when Democrats previously held the seat. That change alone buoyed the hopes of Democrats looking to the November election.

"I am excited that we have a chance to have a fairer and more competitive 1st Congressional District," says State Rep. Mark Spreitzer, a Beloit Democrat.

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Then came the Monday night leak of a draft U.S. Supreme Court opinion overturning the high court's 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade* legalizing abortion nationwide.

The 1st District Republican congressman, Bryan Steil, responded the next day [on Twitter](#) from his official congressional account: "Today's news reminds us of the importance of protecting the sanctity of life. As we await the final opinion from the Court, I proudly stand as pro-life."

On Wednesday, Steil's likely Democratic challenger, Ann Roe, called a press conference where she drew a clear distinction between her pro-choice stance and Steil's opposition to abortion rights. (Despite her last name, she is not related to the individual referred to only by the pseudonym "Jane Roe" in the 1973 case and its title.)

"We need to trust women to make the best decisions for themselves, their families and their health," Roe said, speaking at a park in Janesville, where she lives. "It is wrong for politicians to dictate to women how to make their own medical decisions. When women do not have the freedom to control their own lives, they are robbed of their futures."

"This is a pivotal week" in the 2022 campaign, Spreitzer said in an interview Thursday. "I can't predict how this may change outcomes in November. But I certainly think it changes how some people are going to pay attention to the election, and what issues candidates are going to be talking about."

The maps battle

The more competitive 1st District boundaries were the result of new legislative maps that Gov. Tony Evers produced after vetoing maps approved by the Republican majorities in the state Legislature. Initially the Wisconsin Supreme Court [approved all three Evers maps](#) on a

4-3 vote. The U.S. Supreme Court [rejected the Assembly and Senate maps](#), however, sending them back to the state court, where [justices voted 4-3 for the GOP versions](#).

But the federal justices let the Evers congressional map stand.

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"I told Ann last summer that she was making the right decision to [get into the race early](#), and hope that we got a fairer map, and that's exactly what happened," says Spreitzer, who has endorsed Roe.

Cathy Meyers, who unsuccessfully sought the 1st District Democratic nomination in 2018, has endorsed Roe as well. "With the changes in the district, it is a far more competitive race," Meyers says. "Nobody's being handed anything, but we're going to work for it very hard."

By the most optimistic reading for Democrats, the GOP had a five-point advantage in the district as it was drawn from 2011 until this year. Republicans Steil and his predecessor, Paul Ryan, consistently defeated challengers by 12 points or better during those years.

In comparison, political odds-makers give Republicans just a two-point advantage in the redrawn district. That "makes this race a virtual toss-up," Roe contends. "And that's good for voters."

Roe has begun incorporating her connections with both Beloit and Whitewater into her campaign message. Her first job after moving to Wisconsin with her family two decades ago was in Beloit, as the executive director of the local symphony. She went on to teach marketing at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Adding Beloit increases the diversity in the district, while both cities bring in pools of college-age voters, says Yuri Rushkin, a Rock County Board member who represents downtown Beloit. "Those are things that make the district much more competitive for Democrats going forward."

Overturning abortion rights

Roe's supporters believe last week's leak of the draft Supreme Court opinion has the potential to rewrite the odds further.

The final opinion hasn't been issued; court-watchers have assumed it won't be released until

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June, and that between now and then it is likely to be rewritten. But abortion rights advocates and opponents alike expect its central finding to remain — eliminating any federal guarantee for the right to an abortion, effectively outlawing it in [half the states](#) .

“I would think that there are a lot of women out there who are just shocked at the possibility at this point,” says Tod Ohnstad, a Democratic state representative in Kenosha at the 1st District’s eastern edge. “I think that that certainly has the potential to move the needle.”

Roe says her own reaction to the draft opinion was echoed by people who contacted her after the document was published in Politico late Monday, May 2. The proposed ruling left her with an “overall sense of betrayal,” she says, because three of the four justices whose names were on the draft were “new Supreme Court justices [who, in confirmation hearings] acknowledged the law, affirmed the law, and then would appear to be prepared to overturn it.”

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Steil is one of 207 Republicans in Congress, including four in Wisconsin, who put their names on a January 2020 friend-of-the-court brief in a case involving a Louisiana law putting a new restriction on abortion providers. (The court ultimately struck down the restriction.)

The brief that Steil and his colleagues signed called the 1973 decision legalizing abortion “a radically unsettled precedent” and urging the court reconsider and “if appropriate” overrule it.

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At her news conference, Roe highlighted that brief. “This is an extremist belief and does not represent the views of people who he represents,” she said. “In fact, a clear majority of Wisconsinites support upholding Roe v. Wade.”

Roe also contrasted Steil’s support for overturning abortion rights with his vote against the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in 2021, which had no Republican support. The bill, she pointed out, included provisions that temporarily expanded the federal child tax credit, provided temporary enhanced subsidies that have made health insurance more affordable under the Affordable Care Act, and provided additional relief for schools

“He has consistently rejected funds that would provide much needed benefits for this district,” Roe said.

Will 2022 be different?

Since 2008 the 1st District race for Congress has always pitted a pro-choice Democrat against an anti-abortion Republican. If that made a difference to voters, it wasn’t enough to tip the race in the Democrats’ favor.

Ann Roe and her supporters believe 2022 can be different. In those previous elections, “you still had the protection of Roe v. Wade,” says Meyers. With the leaked decision overturning that ruling, “this is not theoretical anymore.”

Roe says Steil’s direct support for overturning abortion rights, the existence of a draft opinion to do just that, and trends such as the strict new Texas law banning abortion after six weeks have spawned a different atmosphere that “energizes” voters.

UW-Whitewater political scientist Louis Fucilla is skeptical. While he hasn’t followed the 1st District race closely this year, he doubts the new map is enough to change things.

“Incumbents running for re-election in the House win at incredibly high rates and the president’s party is usually at a disadvantage in the midterm elections,” Fucilla says via email. “This would suggest that the fundamentals of the race in the district have not changed substantially. I would

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think this to be the case even with the leak of the Supreme Court's draft decision in Roe on Monday."

Campaign [financial records](#) compiled by [OpenSecrets.org](#) show Steil, who has so far raised more than \$2 million, has a financial advantage of nearly 8 to 1 over Roe, who has raised just under \$264,000.

Roe says she's not daunted by the difference. "The support comes in all shapes and forms. And we are excited," she says. "I am very comfortable in what might be perceived as an underdog position."

by Erik Gunn, [Wisconsin Examiner](#)
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