

Majority Makers: Pennsylvania's 7th Congressional District



Aliza Astrow

Senior Political Analyst

[@aliza_astrow](https://twitter.com/aliza_astrow)

Majority Makers is an ongoing series zeroing in on Congressional districts that have flipped, or came close to flipping, since 2016. Some flipped both up and down the ballot, while others split their results. Some became more favorable towards Democrats, some less so. By looking closely at these districts, we can better understand who gave Democrats their majorities and what they should prioritize to deliver on their promises and build on their strengths in the midterms.

This fourth profile will focus on Pennsylvania's 7th district, which is situated on the state's eastern edge, encompassing Allentown and the Pocono Mountains. The district was redrawn in 2018 after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled that its gerrymandered boundaries were unconstitutional. Since then, it has been much more competitive for Democrats.

In recent elections, Pennsylvania's 7th district has leaned blue, but only slightly. With the current district's boundaries, Hillary Clinton would have won the district by one point, down from Obama's

seven-point margin in 2012. Meanwhile, Joe Biden carried the district by five points in 2020.

At the House level, Democrats have held the district since its boundaries were redrawn in 2018. That year, Democrat Susan Wild carried the district by a comfortable ten-point margin. In 2020, Wild ran for reelection against Republican Lisa Scheller, a businesswoman with no political experience. Wild's reelection campaign got minimal media attention, as her district was considered safe enough and her opponent weak. But in 2020, she won reelection by a much-diminished four points.

The district's frequently narrow margins suggest that although national media is often focused elsewhere, it could be one of the key battlegrounds in 2022. The Cook Political Report now rates the district as evenly split between Republicans and Democrats, and new residents moving from out of state may unexpectedly benefit Republicans. A close examination of the district makes clear that the 7th district is anything but a safe district, and Democrats should keep a close eye on trends there to ensure it remains firmly in their column.

District Overview

Today, Pennsylvania's 7th district encompasses all of Lehigh County, all of Northampton County, and parts of Monroe County. Its new boundaries marked a substantial change from the district's previous shape, which extended to Montgomery County and the Philadelphia suburbs. A large portion of the district is in the Lehigh Valley, which is the third-most populous metropolitan area in Pennsylvania, behind Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Lehigh County is the fastest-growing county in the state, driven by its strong manufacturing, health care, finance, and professional services industries. Its GDP saw a 5% increase between 2016 and 2017 alone.

On the northern end of the district, Monroe County has also seen a boom in recent decades due to tourism from New York City. Monroe County includes the Pocono Mountains, a popular vacation and retirement destination for New York City residents. The politics of Monroe County are divided between urban and rural voters; longtime residents of the area have remained conservative, but the influx of new residents from New York City are typically Democrats. Hillary Clinton won this county by only 532 votes.

Northampton County, meanwhile, is a true swing county, with a near-perfect record of picking the presidential winner. It was one of three counties in the state to flip from Obama to Trump in 2016, and it also flipped back to Biden in 2020. Northampton County, like Monroe County, has seen an influx of new residents from New York and New Jersey. However, the county has grown redder in recent years, raising the question of whether New York and New Jersey residents who choose to move to Northampton County may be more conservative than one might expect, perhaps moving because of the area's lower taxes.

Because of the success the Lehigh Valley has seen diversifying its economy, the politics of the area does not fit the media narrative of Rust Belt areas being left behind, and as a result, moving towards

Trump. Rather, it is a story of a place in flux and motion, with a changing economy and a fair number of new residents. How those new people and industries interact with the old can tell us a great deal about Pennsylvania’s 7th district and what Democrats need to do to hold onto this changing place.

Demographics

Pennsylvania’s 7th District Demographics and Statistics

	District	National
Non-Hispanic White	69.3%	60.1%
Black/African American	5.7%	13.4%
Hispanic	19.5%	18.5%
Asian	3.1%	5.9%
Age	40.6	38.2
Median household income	\$69,105	\$61,937
% People below poverty line	10%	10.5%
Median home value	\$223,000	\$229,700
% college grads	30.1%	36%
Persons with language other than English spoken at home	19%	21.9%
Foreign-born population	9.8%	13.7%

Source: American Community Survey 2019 1-Year Estimates.

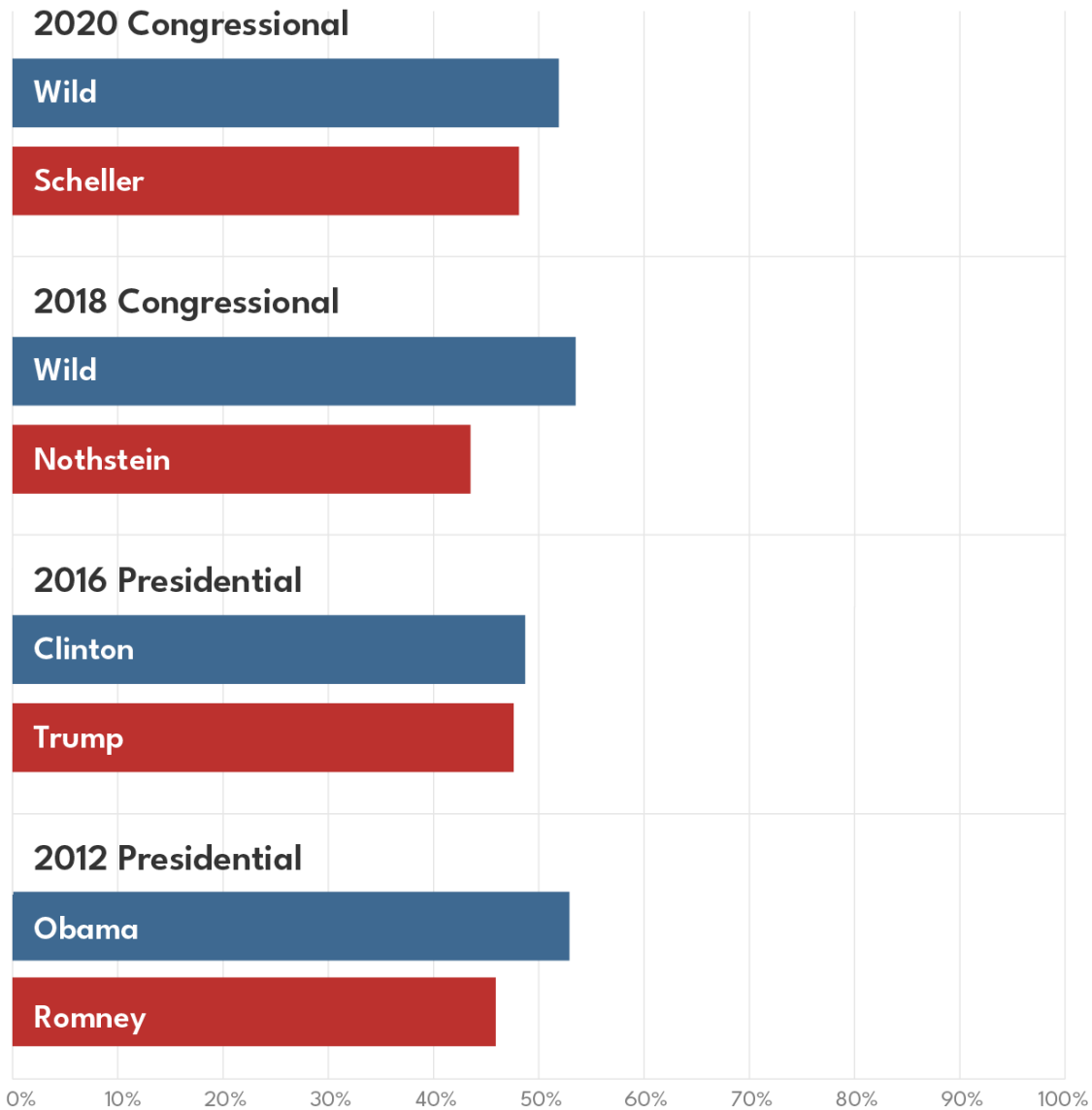


PA-07’s demographics track fairly closely to the United States as a whole. Its median income is \$69,000, which is higher than the national average of \$62,000. But the district is slightly less college-educated than the country at 30%. The number of people below the poverty line matches the national average.

The district has a large share of white and Hispanic voters; 20% of the district is Hispanic. This share has risen dramatically over the past decades, as an influx of Hispanic voters has moved to Northeastern Pennsylvania, including the Lehigh Valley. A little over two-thirds of the district is non-Hispanic white, while a smaller share (6%) of the district is Black.

Election Results

Election Results in Pennsylvania's 7th District



Source: Pennsylvania Secretary of State and Daily Kos Elections' Presidential Results by Congressional District.

Pennsylvania's 7th district has leaned towards Democrats in recent elections, but its voters have shown a willingness to support Republicans as well. The district went for Obama by seven points in 2012, before narrowing significantly in 2016, when Clinton won the district by just a point. In 2020, it went for Biden by five points. The past few election cycles at the top of the ticket have made clear that the district is not safe blue territory. Changing Cook Political ratings for the district also indicate that it is evenly divided: while its previous rating indicated that it leaned slightly towards Democrats, its new rating after the 2020 election rating is "even."

House-level election results reinforce the district's propensity to swing between Democrats and Republicans. While Democrat Susan Wild has won the district in the past two cycles, her margin in 2020 was about a third of what she won by in 2018. In 2018, Wild won the district by 10 points, and in 2020, she won by four.

County-level results reveal which parts of the district are most and least friendly towards Democrats. Between Wild's victories in 2018 and 2020, each county in the district moved slightly towards Republicans, although Wild still triumphed in both Lehigh and Monroe County. In 2020, Wild won Lehigh County by six points after winning the county in 2018 by 12. She won the portion of Monroe County in the district by 11 points after winning it by 16 in 2018. In Northampton County, on the other hand, she lost by less than a point, down from a six-point victory in the county in 2018. In 2016, Trump won Northampton County by 5,000 votes.

IRS data provides some explanation for why Northampton County has become slightly more favorable to Republicans in recent years. In recent decades, there has been an influx of voters from New Jersey and New York moving to the county. The biggest single contributor to Northampton County from New Jersey and New York is Warren County, NJ, with an average of 380 transplants a year into Northampton County. While New Jersey is a blue state, Warren County is solidly red; the county favored Trump by a 16-point margin in 2020 and 25 points in 2016.

Democrats should keep an eye on each county in the district, as they each moved towards Republicans between 2018 and 2020. And Northampton County, in particular, requires special attention. While Democrats might initially be inclined to celebrate blue-state residents moving to a swing district like PA-07, the new residents here are less favorable to the party than one might think.

Qualitative Analysis: Local News and Campaigns

A debate between Susan Wild and her Republican opponent, Lisa Scheller, helped illuminate top issues and rifts in the districts and brought out the difference in styles and temperaments between the two candidates. Economic issues were the major fault lines in the debate, including manufacturing, outsourcing, and job retraining programs. This makes sense, given both the importance of manufacturing in the district and the need for training as new industries gain traction.

Wild ran as a practical, moderate Democrat with a bipartisan record, repeatedly referring back to bipartisan legislation she has worked on and gotten passed. Scheller leaned heavily into her background as a businesswoman and CEO of a manufacturing company and tried to tie Wild to national Democrats and far-left policies like the Green New Deal and Medicare for All. Scheller did not frequently mention Trump by name but clearly took policy cues from his agenda by speaking repeatedly of illegal immigration, outsourcing jobs to China, and reopening the economy despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

In several key areas, Wild and Scheller did not disagree on specific policies, but rather, spoke of support for similar popular policies while Scheller dishonestly attempted to tie Wild to far-left positions. On COVID-19 economic relief, Wild talked about the importance of the PPP loans in the recently-passed relief bill. She also argued for more stimulus, and she stated that the economy could not fully reopen until people feel safe. She wanted to incentivize people to return to work once it was safe, stating “we want to be an economy of jobs, not an economy of unemployment.” Scheller, meanwhile, falsely claimed that Wild voted to include “ballot harvesting provisions and checks for illegal immigrants” in the HEROES Act, and she claimed that Wild wants people “sitting at home dependent on the government,” unable to work and get the economy going. Scheller, like Wild, was supportive of more PPP loans and economic aid during the pandemic, but she tried to distinguish herself from Wild by acting as if Wild wanted to keep the economy shut down for as long as possible.

On education, Scheller and Wild again did not diverge significantly on policy, although Scheller again tried to tie Wild to unpopular positions, suggesting that Wild believes everyone needs a four-year college degree. One of Wild’s top issues in office has been apprenticeships, and she talked extensively about the need for federal investments in community college and free community college while emphasizing that she does not support free college for all. Pennsylvania’s 7th district contains two out of the state’s 14 public community colleges, so the issue holds particular significance here. Wild also argued for increasing the value of Pell Grants, the federal government’s main program to support low-income students who wish to access higher education. Wild stressed the importance of attracting and retaining talent in the 7th district and emphasized that she sees apprenticeships, technical schools, and community college as key ways to do so. Scheller did not disagree with Wild’s positions here, but she emphasized the importance of technical schools and criticized those who think everyone needs to go to four-year college.

On healthcare, Wild similarly held a middle-of-the-road Democratic position, advocating for expanding the ACA to include a public option. Scheller stated that Obamacare was responsible for rising healthcare costs and once again lied about Wild’s record, claiming that Wild supports Medicare for All.

One repeated issue in the debate was manufacturing, because Pennsylvania’s 7th district has a strong manufacturing sector. The moderators asked about reshoring policies intended to return production of critically needed supplies to the U.S. from Asia and other places. Wild does support some of these policies and spoke about the *No Tax Breaks for Outsourcing Act* to incentivize manufacturers to keep work in the U.S., and she attacked her opponent’s company for outsourcing jobs. However, she also spoke about the need for apprenticeships to ensure that workers whose jobs were outsourced had something else to which they could turn. Scheller’s responses on manufacturing echoed Trumpian language on China and tariffs, as she blamed China for stealing American jobs and Democrats for allowing those jobs to be outsourced. Both Wild and Scheller clearly recognized the importance of manufacturing jobs in the community, although Scheller used

dog-whistles on the issue to stir up resentment, while Wild proposed practical solutions to help those in the district.

Wild continued her theme of taking a staunchly pragmatic, bipartisan tone when she talked about climate policy, and she connected those issues back to her ideas on apprenticeships. She introduced an amendment to the *Clean Energy Jobs and Innovation Act* to create opportunities for workers who are at risk of being displaced from their jobs so they can begin or continue a career in construction in the clean energy sector. When Scheller brought up climate and infrastructure, it was in a negative sense, as she claimed that Wild supported the Green New Deal, which she said would eliminate fracking, drive energy costs up, and kill jobs. Wild returned to this subject in her closing statement, hammering home that she does not support the Green New Deal but is on the New Democrats' climate task force, because she believes in working with industries to address climate change without putting companies out of business.

Wild did not always directly respond to Scheller's attacks and lies, perhaps thinking that they seemed too outlandish to merit responses. On energy policy, however, Wild made sure to refute Scheller's claims, hammering home her pragmatic and pro-growth stance on climate and energy policy.

The debate was notable for the clear differences in experience, knowledge, and seriousness between Wild and Scheller; Wild came across as an experienced legislator, while Scheller repeatedly referred back to a few rehearsed talking points about her experience in business. Scheller has already declared that she will run again in 2022, and it is possible that Republicans will also attempt to recruit a stronger candidate because of the district's surprisingly close result in 2020. Because of the race's margin despite Scheller's clear weaknesses as a candidate last time around, Democrats should regard the district as a battleground for 2022.

Conclusion

Pennsylvania's 7th is a Rust Belt district that has historically relied on manufacturing to spur its economy. But today, it bucks stereotypes of these kinds of places, with its large Hispanic community and impressive success in expanding and diversifying its economy into new industries in recent years. Its tourism and growing populations from nearby states give it a unique political bent as well.

Watching the debate between Susan Wild and Lisa Scheller, it is shocking that their race was so close. Wild proposed practical solutions, coming off as an experienced and knowledgeable legislator, while Scheller based her campaign off lies and a mixed business record. Both Scheller and Wild's policy stances make clear that voters of the 7th district are pragmatic, and voters there will reward politicians for addressing kitchen-table issues like jobs, manufacturing and education. But Wild and Scheller appealed to those interests in drastically different ways, as Wild proposed policy solutions and Scheller focused on fearmongering.

The relatively close result in the race suggests that Wild and Democrats might have benefited from investing more in refuting Scheller's outlandish statements. There should also be further investigation into the new residents of Northampton County, who may in fact be Republicans changing the makeup of the county. And Wild should continue her policy focus on both education and protecting manufacturing jobs in the district, as the issues hold sway with her voters. Democrats have a recipe for success in Pennsylvania's 7th district, and the party should pay close attention to trends in this changing place to hold their ground in 2022.

TOPICS

ELECTIONS 410

AMERICAN ELECTORATE 218