

Login Register Search

Sponsor



SUPPORT WNYC & PLEDGE TODAY!



(Return To It's A Free Country Home Page)

NY26: Ugly Race Conceals Real Fear of a Region's Decline

Friday, May 20, 2011

By [Anna Sale](#)



Republican Jane Corwin is running an ad criticizing Democrat Kathy Hochul's position on Medicare. (youtube.com)

It's A Free Country

Read. Argue. Listen. Act.

[More »](#)

New York's 26th District sits between Buffalo and Rochester, and like the industrial centers it's sandwiched between, the district's rural and suburban communities have seen a steady decline in jobs and population.

In the center of the district is Batavia, a town that proudly proclaims itself as the "birthplace of Western New York." It was once an economic hub, which is evident by the infrastructure that developed around the town — all roads literally lead right there.

"Batavia really wasn't a bedroom community. They were their own entity for a long, long time," said Frank Ciaccia, the assistant superintendent in Genesee County. "They had a separate identity from Buffalo and Rochester. Over the years, with the loss of jobs here, it's forced people to go to Rochester and Buffalo for jobs."

Ciaccia's office sits in the bottom floor of a large stone courthouse in the center of town. Built in the mid-nineteenth century, its solid marble walls and thick wood accents are remnants of the town's former grandeur and proud sturdiness.

"The basic mentality in the community is self-sufficiency," says Ciaccia. "There's a strong work ethic and you take care of yourself, and there's not too much of an interest in government taking care of you."

That limited government sensibility has made this area a longtime Republican stronghold, but the special election to fill Rep. Chris Lee's seat has gone off script.

It started with the January publication of the shirtless photo of the married Lee sent to a woman in response to a Craigslist ad, after which he promptly resigned. The budget votes in the Republican House that followed were designed to give the GOP ammunition against Democrats and the Obama White House in Washington. But in this district, the impacts of the cuts — particularly to Medicare — have made a connection to Paul Ryan a political charge on the same order as one to Nancy Pelosi. And finally, there's the field, which got a lot more interesting after a local businessman started collecting signatures and got himself on the ballot alongside the Republican and Democrat. His ballot line: Tea Party.

Now, there's a three-way race between Republican Jane Corwin, Democrat Kathy Hochul, and independent Tea Party candidate Jack Davis that could have a surprising result. It's not a lock for the Republican this time around, as the district's hardy, working-class voters take a close look at what they need from government to preserve their proud history of self-sufficiency.

The [Washington budget battle](#) is front and center in the candidates' talking points and in the barrage of ads blanketing local television and radio. The debate has come down to saving Medicare (the Republican argument) versus preserving Medicare (the Democrats' argument) versus we-need-an-outsider-to-save-us-all (the independent Tea Party argument).

Jane Corwin embraced the Republican budget cuts passed in April, including the plan to change Medicare for people under 55 years old into a subsidy program for insurance plans on the private market. Kathy Hochul, the Democrat, seized on Corwin's position, [saying plainly](#), "I will fight any plan that tries to decimate Medicare." Corwin's responded to that damaging charge that without action, Medicare will be bankrupt by 2024, so she is the candidate that will ["save Medicare from bankruptcy."](#)

The reason all this back and forth on Medicare really matters, though, has nothing to do with Washington. It has to do with Jack Davis, the independent running on the Tea Party ballot line who is polling at over twenty percent. He's self-financing his campaign — he's vowed to spend up to \$3 million — and it's his campaign signs that

most frequently dot intersections of the district's rural highways. On top of the name recognition he's already built up from previous campaigns, he's focused this campaign on his outsider status and on rolling back trade deals that he says have benefited China while destroying the district.

That gets at the heart of a deeper, more stirring anxiety for district voters. The question isn't whether a party, Pelosi or Paul is better for them. They're yearning for something more simple and much more difficult: Who can stop the region's decline?

For seniors over 65, the debate about the future of Medicare fits right into that sense of losing ground.

"There's a lot of fear out there, and they're afraid that they're going to be left, and life is going to be shortened because of it," Elisa DiPietro said after hearing the candidates speak at a forum in Batavia. She's on Medicare and Social Security, which she noted did not include a cost of living adjustment this year. "It's a signal. If they could do that, they could do other things."

Down the road, sitting at the counter of a diner under a TV blasting campaign ads, 75 year-old Jess Meyer said that Medicare was the deciding factor for him.

"I think I go for Hochul," he said between bites of steak with gravy. "She seems to want to hold Medicare together, and that's what I'm on. When they want to take it away, it makes me mad."

A few tables over, Dave, a middle-aged handyman who declined to give his last name, had a broader fear — "whether somebody's going to be able to improve the standard of living."

"It's a shame. You wouldn't believe all the stuff that used to be made in this local area. It's heartbreaking," he said, pausing for a minute as he eyes glistened with tears. "Where's anybody going to work with all our jobs leaving the area? And people complain in Buffalo and Rochester about the job market being bad, they haven't come here. It's even worse."

For him, the back and forth about Medicare and outsourcing and Tea Party cred is missing that biggest question of what the future of this community could look like.

"It's getting to be a great big ball of confusion with everybody bad-mouthing each other," he said. "It's very discouraging because you wonder if they're really going to be able to do anything or not."

These concerns are not new in western New York. Campaign cycles have come and gone, each one bringing with it new promises and pledges to reinvigorate the sliding economy.

"What we've had is a lot of targeted programs that don't seem to wind up producing much in the way of results," said Jim Campbell, a political science professor at the University of Buffalo. And even if these candidates were able to articulate a larger vision for post-industrial America, he's skeptical how much it would matter.

"I don't think we really can count on national politicians or congressman to turn around what is fundamentally a more localized problem."

And in one of the great ironies, this expensive, fiercely fought race could end up being mostly all for naught. Once the national political spinsters tally the winners and losers, the residents here may be looking at another casualty of their slumping economy — their Congressional district.

When asked whether this district will survive New York's redistricting that has to cut out two seats, Campbell was curt. "My guess is no."

NY26 Race Brings Washington Budget Battle to Western NY

Read More: [ny26](#),

More in: [It's A Free Country™](#) »

Comments [1]

[Leave a comment](#)

 [RSS Feed for Comments](#)

Ike from NY

The larger question for all of America's industrial cities is what industry will replace our nation's declining manufacturing base? If we go forward as is, we only make the gap between rich and poor even more cavernous. I thought we could do a version of the New Deal by rebuilding our infrastructure based on going green.

May. 23 2011 12:01 PM

  Score: 0/0 

Leave a Comment

Register for your own account so you can vote on comments, save your favorites, and more. [Learn more.](#)

Please stay on topic, be civil, and be brief.

Email addresses are never displayed, but they are required to confirm your comments. Names are displayed with all comments. We reserve the right to edit any comments posted on this site. Please read the [Comment Guidelines](#) before posting. By leaving a comment, you agree to New York Public Radio's [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms Of Use](#).

Name*

Email address*

Comment*



Location

* Denotes a required field

Politics

Business

Education

Health Care

Transportation

Books

Food

Theater

Visual Arts

All Things Considered

Brian Lehrer

Fishko Files

Fresh Air

Leonard Lopate

Morning Edition

New Sounds

On The Media

Radiolab

Radio Rookies

Selected Shorts

Soundcheck

Spinning on Air

Studio 360

The Takeaway

This American Life

Specials

Gig Alerts

New Sounds

No Cover: WNYC's
Concert Series

Soundcheck

Spinning on Air

Q2

Events calendar

Book an Event

Directions

Giveaways

Schedule

Video

WQXR

The Takeaway

Radiolab

Studio 360

On The Media

Transportation Nation

Radio Rookies

It's a Free Country