

Who is Democratic Congressman Juan Vargas?

Kevin Mitchell SEP candidate for Congress
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Democrat Juan Vargas is seeking a fourth term in the US House of Representatives to represent California's 51st Congressional district. The heavily gerrymandered district includes the southern part of the city of San Diego, a narrow strip of San Diego County, adjacent to Tijuana and Baja California, then opens up to include all of agriculture-based Imperial County, California's most impoverished region, all the way to Arizona.

Vargas is favored to win another two-year term in the heavily Hispanic district (68.5 percent have Latino heritage, and Trump won only 23 percent of the vote in 2016). The Democratic incumbent faces competition on the June 5 ballot from three Republicans, an independent and the Socialist Equality Party. I am running against Vargas as part of the SEP intervention in the 2018 midterm elections in California, along with David Moore's campaign for US Senate against Democrat Dianne Feinstein.

As we stated in announcing our campaign, the aim of the SEP is not simply to win votes in the June 5 open primary, but to win workers, students, and young people to the program of international socialism. In stark contrast to many so-called third party and "independent" groups, the SEP is not seeking to push the Democratic Party to the left or to reform the capitalist state, but to build a movement directed at replacing capitalism with socialism.

The SEP's electoral campaign seeks to expose the rotteness of what passes for "democracy" in the United States. If the working class is to be mobilized in a truly independent party, it must know who its friends and enemies are, and there is no more dangerous enemy than one that calls itself a friend.

Juan Vargas' political profile is typical of someone making their way upward through the Democratic Party machine. He served in the San Diego City Council from 1993 to 2000 and then in the California State Assembly from 2000 to 2007. Vargas narrowly won a term in the

California State Senate from 2010 to 2013 and since 2012 has been in the US Congress representing California's 51st district.

The son of a Mexican immigrant who came here legally under the 1950s *bracero* program, Vargas has risen the corporate as well as the political ladder, gaining a Harvard law degree, where he was a classmate of Barack Obama, and working as general counsel and corporate vice president for Safeco, the big insurance company, when not holding political office.

Vargas has used his immigrant background to cultivate an image as an official deeply concerned both with immigrant rights and the "safety" of the entire country. In this role, he has spoken at numerous immigrant rights rallies and town hall meetings denouncing Trump and his policies, even going so far as to boycott the President's State of the Union address this year.

But in what does Vargas' opposition to Trump actually consist? Upon closer examination, Vargas' politics flow directly from the Democrats' program of war and austerity.

On the question of immigration, Vargas is opposed to free movement across the border and supports the role of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol, with a few criticisms of their more extreme methods.

At an event in 2016 at Friendship Park on the US-Mexico border, which saw parents and children separated by the border reunite for a few brief moments, Vargas took the opportunity to thank the arch-reactionary President Ronald Reagan for "comprehensive immigration reform." In this context, "reform" does not mean immediate legalization for all 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, but a drawn-out citizenship process under which some will qualify, while the vast majority live as second-class citizens, always under the threat of deportation.

More recently, Vargas attempted to placate genuine anger over ICE raids which tear apart families every day in San Diego with a cynical series of “town hall” meetings. The “Know your rights” meetings were attended by a largely Hispanic and immigrant audience wanting to know more about how to protect their homes and communities from ICE arrests.

Many in the audience were visibly scared and wanted answers but they were merely told that there was nothing they could do besides surrender to ICE without protest. Legal experts gave the crowd “advice” on how to best prepare in the event that they or someone they know is deported.

The congressman also co-sponsored H.R. bill 15, also known as the Border Security Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, which would end the visa lottery, an annual award for 55,000 visas distributed internationally on a random basis.

While Vargas is able to criticize Trump and his more extreme policies like the border wall—which would run along the southern edge of the 51st District for 140 miles—as well as Trump’s racist diatribes against immigrants, his own politics combine crocodile tears for immigrants with doing nothing to stop the repression. The Democratic congressman, of course, did not fight the Obama administration while it deported more than 2.7 million immigrants over eight years.

On the question of war, the great unmentionable in the 2018 midterm elections, Vargas is safely in the pocket of the Pentagon. In a 2015 congressional vote on whether to remove US troops from Iraq and Syria, he voted no. Vargas also voted in favor of a bill called the Justice for Victims of Iranian Terrorism Act, which banned the president from ending sanctions or starting a nuclear disarmament treaty “until all judgments against Iran have been made.” This legislation, and others which Vargas supported, is meant to whip Iran into line with the dictates of Washington.

In an op-ed column in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* from 2015 headlined, “Why I oppose the president’s nuclear deal with Iran”, Vargas attacked Obama’s foreign policy exclusively from the right. He called Iran, “the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism” and said that the nuclear “agreement does nothing to halt Iran’s aggressive imperialism in the Middle East.”

Vargas is also in favor of military escalation in Syria, giving a speech to Congress in 2016 under the title, “Genocide in the Middle East”. He said, “While I applaud the various actions and commitments the Obama

administration has made to alleviate the suffering of thousands of victims of ISIS, I strongly and firmly believe we can, we should, and we must do more.”

The arms manufacturers of San Diego took note and Northrop Grumman donated \$7,500 to his campaign. However, his biggest source of support according to *Opensecrets.org* came from “Finance/Insurance/Real Estate.”

In return for Wall Street contributions to his campaign, Vargas voted to approve the Volcker Rule Regulation Harmonization Act which made it easier for big banks to speculate with public funds. In this, Vargas was joined by 78 other Democrats in the House of Representatives.

Far from being a candidate of the people, Vargas has shown by his public statements and voting record that he is a tool of the big banks and the military, and a fitting representative of the Democratic Party’s merger of Wall Street and the Pentagon.

Workers and youth who are opposed of the bourgeois politics of the Democrats and Republicans should steer clear of Juan Vargas and support the candidacy of Kevin Mitchell and the Socialist Equality Party to represent the 51st congressional district of California.

The SEP campaign is the only one that demands open borders and an end not only to deportations but to all detentions and jailings for immigration “offenses.” We call for full citizenship rights for all 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the US. We fight for a world where people can live and work in any country they choose without fear of abuse and harassment.

Our campaign calls for the immediate end to the wars of US imperialism all around the world and an end to the war threats against Iran, Syria, North Korea, and others. We call for a break with the Democrats and Republicans and for the international mobilization of the working class against capitalism.



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