

Democrats choose 5 more military-intelligence veterans as congressional candidates

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24 June 2026

While the bulk of the public and media attention to the results of Tuesday's primary elections has focused on the shift to the left among voters in New York City, the Democratic Party as an organization has further cemented its ties to the military-intelligence apparatus, selecting a former Navy admiral and four veterans of wars in the Middle East as congressional candidates.

Three of the military veterans were chosen to challenge Republican incumbents in New York state. Christopher Gallant, a military air traffic controller and helicopter pilot deployed several times to Kuwait, will be the Democratic nominee in the First Congressional District, which covers the eastern half of Long Island, including most of Suffolk County.

The seat is currently held by two-term Republican Nicholas LaLota, and before that for four terms by Lee Zeldin, chosen by Trump to be administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Under its current boundaries, the district would have been a dead heat between Trump and Biden in 2020, so it is considered competitive despite being held by Republicans since 2014.

The highest-profile Democratic contest outside of New York City was for the congressional nomination in the 17th District in the Lower Hudson River Valley, including parts of Westchester, Putnam, Orange and Rockland counties. The seat is currently held by two-term Representative Mike Lawler, one of a handful of Republicans elected in districts won by Kamala Harris in 2024.

The Democratic primary was won by Caitlin Conley, a West Point graduate with six tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, where she became the first woman to command a unit of US special forces. Such units were responsible for some of the bloodiest atrocities in those wars. After 16 years in the Army, she worked for the

Biden administration on the National Security Council and at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

Conley defeated four other candidates, including Beth Davidson, a Rockland County legislator with a more conventional political background, widely supported among local elected Democrats with considerable financial backing. However, Conley raised far more money, \$3.2 million to \$2 million, and had national endorsements from gay and lesbian groups (she is lesbian), and from Vote Vets, which finances Democratic candidates with military backgrounds.

She also had two crucial endorsements from military-intelligence veterans already in Congress: Jason Crow of Colorado, perhaps the most prominent of the "CIA Democrats" elected in 2018 who is still in the House of Representatives; and Pat Ryan, a former Army intelligence officer with two tours in the Iraq war, who was elected in the neighboring 18th Congressional District of New York in 2022.

The 24th Congressional District is much less competitive, since redistricting created safe Democratic seats based on Syracuse and Rochester, while connecting the remaining areas along Lake Ontario, from Niagara all the way to the Adirondack Mountains, into a single largely rural district. Trump won the district easily in 2024 despite losing the state to Kamala Harris by a 57-41 percent margin.

The Democratic nomination to challenge incumbent Republican Claudia Tenney was won by Alissa Ellman, an Army veteran of the Afghanistan war, who went on to work at the Department of Veterans Affairs, until she was fired in early 2025 as part of the rampage against federal workers spearheaded by Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

In South Carolina, former Vice Admiral Nancy

Lacore won a runoff for the Democratic nomination in the state's First Congressional District, which includes the city of Charleston and much of the Atlantic Coast. The seat is held by right-wing Republican Nancy Mace, who stepped down in order to run for governor, where she ran a poor fifth in the Republican primary.

Lacore is a 36-year veteran of the Navy, commanding units during the war in Afghanistan as well as Camp Lemonnier, the US base in Djibouti near the critical Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Her highest position was as head of the 60,000-strong Navy Reserve, from which she was removed in August 2025 by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, as part of a broader purge that targets officers believed to be unsympathetic to the Trump administration, particularly women and minorities.

She has made her removal and forced retirement a central issue in her congressional campaign, seeking support from the large number of current and retired naval personnel who live in the Charleston area. Lacore has raised \$1.6 million already, more than four times the amount raised by Jennifer Honeycutt, who won Tuesday's runoff for the Republican nomination. Honeycutt is expected to make up that gap quickly as the national Republican Party and the White House will pour in funds to hold the seat given up by Mace.

The fifth military-intelligence Democrat to win nomination Tuesday was Jonny Larsen, a Marine veteran of the Iraq war, who boasts on his campaign website that his battalion tore down the statue of Saddam Hussein in 2003 when the US forces seized Baghdad.

Larsen is given little chance in his race in the Fourth Congressional District of Utah, against first-term Republican Mike Kennedy. The Republican-controlled state legislature adopted a gerrymander that broke up Salt Lake City into four separate districts, each with Republican majorities. A court decision earlier this year forced the restoration of a Salt Lake City-centered district with a Democratic majority, thereby increasing the Republican majorities in the other three districts, including Kennedy's.

If Larsen and Alissa Ellman have little chance, the other three military-intelligence Democrats, Caitlin Conley, Christopher Gallant and Nancy Lacore could well end up elected to Congress. They would go to Washington as part of an increasingly influential faction of the Democratic Party.

Of the nearly two dozen former military officers, intelligence agents and State Department officials elected to Congress as Democrats since 2018, five have moved up to higher-level statewide office: Elissa Slotkin and Andy Kim hold Senate seats from Michigan and New Jersey; Abigail Spanberger and Mikie Sherrill are governors of Virginia and New Jersey; Jeff Jackson is attorney general of North Carolina.

At least nine are current members of the House of Representatives, and that number could easily double based on current nominations, if the Democrats gain significantly in November.



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