NINA MOINI: One of the most closely watched statewide races in Minnesota is for us Senate. And tomorrow at noon, MPR News will be hosting a debate between Democratic candidate Peggy Flanagan and Republican candidate Michele Tafoya. It's the only debate the two have scheduled so far.

Joining us now with a closer look at this race ahead of tomorrow's debate is University of Minnesota political scientist Larry Jacobs. Thanks for joining us again, Larry.

LARRY JACOBS: Good to be with you.

NINA MOINI: Let's start with some news from this week, which is that President Donald Trump endorsed Michele Tafoya. And Tafoya's response was, "I heard about that." And she seemed to be distancing herself, perhaps a bit, from President Trump. She's painting herself as moderate, pro-choice, stressing that she's pro-choice. How do you think a Trump endorsement resonates with Minnesota Republicans right now?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think this episode shows you the box that Michele Tafoya is in as time ticks away. She is not going to be able to win unless she attracts independent voters, suburban moderates, along with a good turnout of Republicans. And so the Trump endorsement, in which he said you have to turn out and vote for Michele Tafoya, was an effort to try to shore up her support among Republicans, remembering that she was not the endorsed candidate.

There are activists in the Republican Party who were very disappointed, even angry, that their endorsed candidate was not the nominee. So that's one problem. The other problem, though, is, as I said, Michele Tafoya has got to broaden her base. And so I think that strange comment, "I've heard about that," is a way to put a little bit of distance between her and a very unpopular president.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Tafoya has an ad where she's telling voters, if I agree with the president, I'll go with what he says. If I don't agree with him, I won't go with it-- trying again to be really moderate. And then, meanwhile, in the primary, we saw Peggy Flanagan really energizing progressives. Do you think that momentum will be carried into election day for Flanagan?

LARRY JACOBS: For sure. I think Flanagan is going to be running her general election campaign as a referendum on Donald Trump. He is extremely unpopular. His disapproval rating overall, but on the economy and the Iran war, is 60% or more. And much of that disapproval is throughout the state.

So she is framing this election as are you angry at Donald Trump? If so, vote for me. And trying to stay away from the issues that will probably hurt her, like fraud in government, or the fact that she is perceived as ideologically extreme. She doesn't want to get into that. She wants to keep it focused on Donald Trump, and the Iran war, and the rise in inflation because of tariffs.

NINA MOINI: Sounds like what you're saying is both are really trying to appeal, right, to folks in the middle, or some folks who still may be undecided. And we've talked about that before. You mentioned fraud.

Obviously, it's been a big topic in this election cycle. Lieutenant Governor Flanagan has been in this administration for a while. Michele Tafoya hasn't been in office. She's kind of an outsider in that way-- a well-known sportscaster. It's been a top priority, though, of the Trump administration talking about fraud. Tell us a little more about how each candidate has been positioning themselves around this topic and how they should go into tomorrow's debate here on MPR News with our Brian Bakst.

LARRY JACOBS: Well, Michele Tafoya is hoping beyond hope that the debate moderators tomorrow ask Flanagan about fraud. Where were you? What was your role in it? How did you try to stop it? Reminding voters that she was lieutenant governor as this fraud was being committed.

And so far, I think Peggy Flanagan has been able to change the discussion, distance herself from that. Many voters may not even appreciate that she was in office as this fraud was being committed. So that's the strategy for Michele Tafoya is to really try to pin her down as, perhaps, bearing some responsibility for the fraud.

On the other hand, we're going to see Flanagan coming back again, and again, and again to Donald Trump on tariffs, on the war in Iran, and driving home the point that it's increased fuel costs. It's increased the table top costs that people have to fork over. She wants this election to be about Donald Trump.

NINA MOINI: Well, fraud, too, was the stated initial reason by the administration for the surge of immigration agents to Minnesota. It was known as Operation Metro Surge that took place here. How much is that impacting whether people vote for Tafoya, or Flanagan, or, even more broadly, a Democrat or a Republican?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think time has been passed by. And I think, frankly, there hasn't been sustained attention on this race, as important as it is. So I don't think fraud is really top of mind for many voters. And, frankly, I don't think this election is top of mind.

Instead, I think Donald Trump, though, is the top of the mind. He's on the news all the time. And that's why I think we're going to see Flanagan coming back to that again and again.

And I think we're seeing Tafoya doing her best to come back to that issue, but also to create an image of herself as more moderate, as someone who suburban voters can trust. She ran this incredible ad recently where she starts out saying, I am a pro-choice Republican. That tells you everything. She knows that she's in a pickle and that she's got to broaden her base, that the fraud issue is probably not going to be enough.

NINA MOINI: Well, I wanted to talk too, though, about ICE and immigration tactics with Operation Metro Surge. I think I saw Flanagan had an ad today on her Instagram differentiating-- Michele Tafoya is OK with ICE, and says ICE treats children well, and showing a lot of the video and the images that folks have seen over the last several months. How much of a factor do you think immigration and the type of enforcement that's been happening will play?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, it's going to be an important issue for turning out a very large number of voters in the metro area. I think that's what those ads are aimed at. It's really meant to remind folks in the Twin Cities about ICE, and the Metro Surge, and try to get them to the polls to say, you've got to turn out the vote. You've got to remember this.

And so I think it's really aimed at that particular audience. If Flanagan gets a huge turnout in the metro area and does well in the suburbs, she'll win. So that's the strategy here is to really engage, turn out, fire up her base of support who are still quite furious about Metro Surge.

NINA MOINI: Do you still think this is a rural versus urban type of a situation? I know when the primary was going on between Angie Craig and Peggy Flanagan, you and I talked a lot about the urban core, the Twin Cities metro here. But it seems like Michele Tafoya is also trying to hit suburban voters and make an impact there.

LARRY JACOBS: Absolutely. I think it is, to some extent, a regional battle. Each has its base of support, each candidate. Flanagan, as I said, needs a huge turnout in the metro area. Michele Tafoya is counting on strong support in greater Minnesota. But the real battle is going to come down to the suburbs. Who can get an edge in the suburbs?

We're not talking large majority, just a bit of an edge. That candidate will win. And we've been seeing that by statewide DFL candidates. They tend to get the edge in the suburbs, recently portraying the Republicans as too conservative for the state of Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: So we talked a little bit about the suburbs. But, generally speaking, Larry, do you have a sense for how many people are undecided in this race and what it would take to move an undecided voter?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, the polls say it's less than 10%. So it's not a huge number-- folks familiar with the candidates, for the most part. And I think they're sitting there on the sidelines. If those undecided were to break one way, in particular, that would probably have a big impact on the outcome.

And, unfortunately, when you're undecided, you're undecided. So we don't have a lot of polling data on that. What I would say, though, is that there's tremendous interest in this election. Early voting this year is already about 30% higher than it was in 2022. So that tells me that we're probably going to be looking at near record or very high turnout. And so those undecided people are likely to jump in and make a choice.

NINA MOINI: All right, Larry, thanks so much for your analysis, as always.

LARRY JACOBS: Good to be with you.

NINA MOINI: Larry Jacobs is the Founder and Director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota. The US Senate debate is tomorrow at noon, moderated by MPR Politics editor Brian Bakst. You can listen live, or you can watch the debate at MPRNews.org. Also, you can head to MPRNews.org/election where you can find your voter guide that lets you enter your address, see the candidates on your ballot, and their policy stances. Check that out.