

NINA MOINI: On Monday, MPR News will host a debate in one of the most closely watched primary races in the state, the democratic race for US Senate. Congresswoman Angie Craig and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan are the top contenders. The two of them will be in studio Monday at 11:00 AM in a debate hosted MPR News Politics Editor Brian Bakst. This is ahead of the August 11 primary. Joining me now with a preview of the debate in this race is Larry Jacobs, Political Science Professor at the University of Minnesota. Thanks for coming back on the show, Larry.

LARRY JACOBS: Yeah, always great to be with you.

NINA MOINI: I mentioned how closely everyone seems to be watching this race. What's standing out to you so far in this race?

LARRY JACOBS: Close. [LAUGHS] It's just so close. If you and I were here flipping a coin, that might give us some guidance. It's just-- I think part of the issue is, who's going to turn out?

Peggy Flanagan has a strategy of supercharging the progressive base of the DFL and is counting on their energy, their organization, their commitment to turn out and vote. We've seen that kind of strategy, for instance, in New York where there was a tremendous mobilization of progressives, and they kind of moved out a bunch of veteran Democrats and brought in progressive candidates instead. So question is, will that work in Minnesota?

On the other hand, you've got Angie Craig, who has been pursuing, I would say, a more traditional type of campaign in which she's focused on turning out the vote in the suburban areas in greater Minnesota, places where in the past we've seen primary voters come from more often. So she's counting on that strategy, and believes that Minnesota is not New York City. It's not nearly as urban or as progressive, and she can prevail.

NINA MOINI: So it's sort of sounding like that moderate versus progressive. I wonder about this race. Is it that nasty of a race, like if you had a meter of 1 to 10? It seems like we're seeing a lot of ads and a lot of back and forth. What is your take on just the tone of these campaigns?

LARRY JACOBS: I'll confess, I was born in Brooklyn and raised in New York.

NINA MOINI: [LAUGHS]

LARRY JACOBS: So this race in Minnesota stands out for sure. Just the duration of the negativity, the volume of it, the harshness of some of the criticisms of opponents as insufficiently opposed to Trump or compromised or hypocritical. I mean, these are really harsh ads that are being run and attacks that are being made. So that stands out in Minnesota. Also, the amount of money that's being spent.

On the other hand, it's not entirely unprecedented. We saw in the past, for instance, Tim Walz's first campaign against Lori Swanson, who is the attorney general. Then it got nasty at the end. We saw in the Tim Pawlenty and Jeff Johnson race that that got pretty nasty too. But I would still say this stands out in Minnesota.

If you look, though, in other states-- like right now in Michigan, there's a fiery battle between two Democrats for the Democratic nomination. That has been very expensive, very tough, negative, and it's been going on for a while. So that may be even more negative than what we're seeing here in Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: And you touched on this, but tell me about who typically shows up for a primary, and if you're thinking there's a different kind of momentum this time.

LARRY JACOBS: Well, first thing to say is that the number of people showing up for a primary is much smaller than what we see in the general election. Minnesota's usually first or second in terms of turnout. We're going to see maybe a third of that kind of turnout, or half of that turnout.

But then the question is, well, who is turning out? And here in Minnesota, compared to, let's say, in New York City primary, it tends to be more-- well, obviously more rural, more suburban, more moderate in the past. So the question is, will that pattern of turnout continue? In which case, those are probably going to be Angie Craig voters. But the Flanagan campaign is banking on a tremendous turnout by progressives, particularly in the urban areas. And they believe that that's going to bring them across the finish line first.

NINA MOINI: There are issues around health care, immigration, fraud here in the state of Minnesota. If you were each of these candidates, Congresswoman Craig and Lieutenant Governor Flanagan, what would you be thinking, I really have to get my opponent on this during the debate with Brian Bakst, I have to make sure to mention? What would you mention?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think you can count on Peggy Flanagan raising the issue about immigration and really standing up to ICE. Angie Craig voted for the Laken Riley Act back at the very beginning of the Trump administration, which allowed ICE to detain undocumented who were charged with nonviolent crimes like theft. She came out about a year later and said, oh, that was a big mistake, but Peggy Flanagan's not letting her forget about it. So I think you can expect a pretty heavy dose of that from Peggy Flanagan.

On the other side, I think we're going to see Angie Craig playing up the fact that she's more pragmatic. She's more moderate. She can win in the fall. Electability is her big theme. She thinks Peggy Flanagan is too far to the left. She may well do well in the primary. But when it comes time to the fall when you've got a much larger electorate and more diverse in terms of political views, that Peggy Flanagan is going to struggle, particularly because she's going to get hammered by a lot of national money coming in and heightening divisions, including on the issues that you're talking about, such as fraud.

NINA MOINI: We know Lieutenant Governor Flanagan has gotten the endorsement of the person who holds the seat now, Senator Tina Smith. Notably, Governor Tim Walz has not endorsed anybody. What would a Walz endorsement mean at this point? Are most people set in their ways, or do you think that would make a difference?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, clearly there are a lot of folks who are set in their ways. And in terms of voting already or coming up on August 11, they probably made up their mind. But there are a critical number of folks, and perhaps some of the folks listening now, who haven't made up their mind. Governor Walz is unusually prominent in the state. There's a whole kind of contingent of media who follow him around. That's not the kind of attention that any other politician in Minnesota gets. So I do think it would matter.

But it poses a challenge for him, because of course, if he came out and endorsed Angie Craig, who's probably closer to his political views, he would be turning his back on his partner in governing for the last seven years. So this is going to be a big decision. Will Walz come off the sidelines or not?

NINA MOINI: I know this isn't Brooklyn, but it has been a contentious race here. And some people wonder if that is a worthwhile way for Democrats as a party to be spending their time, or if it's a better idea to just get behind one person so that people can't replay all these tapes when the Democratic nominee goes up against the Republican nominee. What do you think about that?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, that's the question. Which one of those candidates? And as we're seeing in other states and cities, there's a very big debate going on in the Democratic Party about how far the left should be. How confrontational should it be? Clearly, Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress have pushed the Democratic Party to respond more forcefully. And we're seeing that all over the country, including in Michigan.

So I don't think it's as simple as saying, well, we only got behind one candidate, because that begs the question. Politics is about making choices, and those choices often require feisty debates that draw out the differences. We're not really used to this level of animosity in Minnesota, but I think the times are quite charged, and that's why we are.

NINA MOINI: What do you think it'll take for either of these candidates to win, being that a lot of people are already set in their ways? What do you think each of them could say in this debate come Monday that might actually turn a voter?

LARRY JACOBS: Well, I think both of them are going to make it clear that their opponent is odious, you know? Their opponent is really not someone who stands for their values, who may actually lose the election and allow Republicans to maintain control in the United States Senate, and they-- you know, not reflect Minnesota values.

So I think they're going to raise the stakes. What is at stake here? And my opponent is the wrong choice for Minnesota. This is going to be no holds barred. If you like acrimony, this is a debate to turn into. And I think particularly at this stage, because we're getting closer and closer to Election Day, people are already voting in significant numbers, and the candidates appreciate that.

Plus, the polling that is going on-- and the campaigns are polling constantly-- is showing this race to be coin flip. So they know that if they can come on MPR and move even a small number of voters, that may well be the difference. So strap in and get ready for something I think will really be quite intense.

NINA MOINI: Larry, always appreciate your insights. Thank you so much.

LARRY JACOBS: Good to be with you.

NINA MOINI: That was Larry Jacobs, Founder and Director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota. Again, this debate between Congresswoman Craig and Lieutenant Governor Flanagan is Monday at 11:00 AM live on the air on MPR News. You can find a video stream of the debate as well at mprnews.org. And stick around, because immediately after the debate, we will have analysis for you on Minnesota Now at noon.