

DeFranco enlivens race against Tierney - Opinion - The Boston Globe

There are a few standard paths to entering politics. You start as a selectman or a school committee member and work your way up. Or you toil for years as a government official or a politician's aide, gaining knowledge and insider support. Or you have enough personal wealth — or access to other people's money — to enter a race in a blaze.

If you have none of that, you might look something like Marisa DeFranco.

DeFranco is waging what most consider a longshot bid to unseat US Representative John Tierney, in what has shaped up to be Massachusetts' most interesting political campaign this season. The Sixth District Democratic primary, in a North Shore district anchored by Salem and Lynn, has a set of credible candidates who fit the political archetypes.

Tierney, the 18-year incumbent, represents the system, and makes the not-trivial case that his contacts and seniority keep him valuable to the district. Seth Moulton is the well-funded challenger, with an appealing background as a Marine in Iraq, plus consultants and friends who are big political players.

And then there is DeFranco, an attorney from Middleton, whose solo practice focuses on immigration. She challenged Elizabeth Warren in the US Senate primary in 2012, but failed to make the ballot after she fell short of the 15 percent threshold at the state Democratic convention.

This time, DeFranco has collected the 14,000 signatures she needs to get on the primary ballot, but she's received far less attention than Tierney and Moulton. That's largely because she has so much less money. According to Federal Election Commission data, she's raised nearly \$78,000, compared to Moulton's \$1.5 million and Tierney's \$1.7 million. (The other two Democrats in the race, John Patrick Devine and John Gutta, have raised \$40 and \$0, respectively.)

It's not entirely fair, but not entirely wrong, that fund-raising is used as a shorthand for viability. Name recognition is an enormous obstacle. Money buys ads that can get you noticed. The ability to raise it can signal growing strength.

But in a primary race, in an off-year election, unusual things can happen. DeFranco's chances are larger than zero. She's running radio ads, and says she'll air a TV ad, too. She's been meeting Democratic groups, making calls, knocking on doors, scoring small victories. She inspired a veteran — and former Warren voter — to put a big DeFranco sign in his yard, across from a popular ice cream shop.

Still, while she's earned a few outside endorsements, from such groups as the National Women's Political Caucus, DeFranco has largely been ignored by the political establishment. (Warren endorsed Tierney; DeFranco tartly notes that Warren lost the district by 7 points in 2012.)

And despite years of volunteering for Democratic campaigns, DeFranco doesn't exactly talk the talk of the Democratic party. She opposes much of the Affordable Care Act. She objects to the way Democrats talk about the Paycheck Fairness Act, which she says won't address broader problems, such as sexual harassment and hostile work environments.

“They pretend this is a panacea,” says DeFranco, who has served on the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women. She calls the standard rhetoric a “lie that the party tells to women.”

DeFranco’s legal work, and her Main Street existence, lend her a specificity you don’t always hear from politicians. Her ideas about immigration reform are far more detailed than the typical broad brushstrokes. She rails against corporate subsidies from the standpoint of an embattled small business owner. This has the effect of making her sound both more and less realistic than her political foes; she grasps the complexity of tough issues, but it’s unclear how well she’d play with others in a chummy political culture.

But when you ask her how she’d accomplish anything in Congress, DeFranco brings up David Brat. He’s the Tea Party upstart who defeated former House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a Virginia congressional primary last June. They have little in common, ideologically, but they have a shared goal of shaking up the system. Indeed, DeFranco might be the closest thing the left has to the Tea Party’s grass-roots, pox-on-all-their-houses mindset. And her candidacy raises an interesting idea: If Congress had a critical mass of absolute outsiders, what would it do?

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