

Southern Tier's Rep. Tom Reed faces spirited challenge from Tracy Mitrano

By [Sandra Tan](#) | Published October 30, 2018 | Updated 38 minutes ago



Rep. Tom Reed may support President Trump's policies and enjoy his endorsements, but for much of his time in the House of Representatives, he's worked hard to brand himself as a down-to-earth moderate working to break partisan gridlock.

His lawn signs say, simply, "Tom for Congress."

His eight years in Congress have been spent balancing on a tightrope across his 11-county Southern Tier district from Jamestown to Ithaca, appealing to his rural conservative base while trying not to alienate union workers in manufacturing towns or dismiss voters in the liberal stronghold of Tompkins County.

But in light of an expected wave of Democratic voters and a giant infusion of cash in recent months for Yates County challenger Tracy Mitrano, Reed's sweet, family-centered commercials have taken a back seat to a long-running string of attack ads. And he isn't apologizing for being on the offense in a race that could be one of the tightest he has faced.

"This is about defining someone who will say anything she needs to say to get elected," he said.

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Mitrano, who raised nearly a million dollars toward her campaign in the third quarter, has hurled similar accusations against Reed. His talk of bipartisanship is not supported by his voting record or his negative campaign style, she said.

"How he campaigns totally belies how he would depict himself," said the cybersecurity expert and former director of informational technology policy at Cornell University.

Republicans have a natural – but not insurmountable – edge in the 23rd Congressional District. The last Democrat to hold the seat, before the last redistricting, was Reed's predecessor, Eric Massa, who resigned in 2010. The district's makeup is 39 percent Republican, 32 percent Democratic and 21 percent unaffiliated with any party.

As Election Day draws nearer, both candidates agree that turnout will be a big determiner of the outcome. So both sides are appealing not just to their base but reaching out to independent district voters.

The Cook Political Report recently added the Reed-Mitrano race to its list of competitive races, changing its position from "solid" Republican to "likely" Republican. The fact that Mitrano has raised more than \$1 million in the past few months is another indicator that many consider her a serious challenger.

Her campaign commissioned and released the results of an online survey it commissioned from Change Research on Friday that placed Reed and Mitrano in a statistical dead heat with Mitrano only 1.5 percentage points behind Reed, with Reed at 48.8 percent and Mitrano at 47.3 percent. The survey included 510 participants had a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points.

"We are within striking, if not crushing, distance of Mr. Reed in this campaign," Mitrano said.



THE BUFFALO NEWS

Jim Twombly, professor of American Politics at Elmira College, noted that the 23rd District has elected Democrats in the past, and strong Democratic candidates can keep the race competitive, though Republicans are clearly favored. The fact that Reed has pushed so many negative campaign ads is a sign of concern by his campaign, he said.

"While I wouldn't necessarily say this district is winnable tomorrow for any Democrat, certainly there's some movement for it to be a closer, tighter race," he said.

Reed's campaign has worked to label Mitrano, a Penn Yan resident, as an "extreme Ithaca liberal," a tag his campaign has attached to prior Democratic challengers. Meanwhile, Reed promotes his own efforts to improve government at the national level and improve his district at the local level.

At the national level, he points to his work as co-chairman of the Problem Solvers Caucus, a bipartisan group that has spent more than a year trying to break through partisan gridlock. The group has [pushed rules reforms](#) that would blunt the the political "shenanigans" of party extremists and a small number of power brokers who block policy debates and stifle bipartisan cooperation.

In a meeting with The Buffalo News Editorial Board, Reed said his support for a new House speaker – Republican or Democrat – will be tied to whether that person would pledge to adopt House rule reforms.

"I will not stay down there if this doesn't happen," he said.

New Jersey Rep. Josh Gottheimer, the caucus co-chairman and a Democrat, said he has spoken almost daily with Reed over the past two years and appreciates his willingness to work hard and compromise to accomplish bipartisan reform efforts, whether it be on immigration or health care.

"I've just seen the way he's really worked with Democrats and Republicans up close, and getting things done for what's good for America," Gottheimer said. "The fact that he is standing up so vocally to try and change the way things are, nobody was really talking about it before."

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Reed serves with Rep. Brian Higgins on the influential Ways and Means Committee, which oversees all legislation related to taxes and key programs like Social Security and Medicare. Reed said he supports Trump's tax reforms and business deregulation but opposed Trump's budget proposal for its "unsustainable" levels of federal spending.

According to FiveThirtyEight, a data and polling analysis website, Reed votes with Trump's position 96.6 percent of the time. Reed said while he is upfront about his positions, he also looks for common ground with people who disagree with him, pointing to the more than 250 town hall meetings he has held with both supporters and dissenters across the district.

Mitrano dismissed Reed's work with the Problem Solvers Caucus and in Congress overall.

"I'm not taken in by his PR campaign," she said. "Problem Solvers have not accomplished a single, concrete thing."

Reed's name has been on only three pieces of legislation, she said, and two of them were for naming a post office, she said. She also criticized his vote on a compromise bill that would place a \$10,000 cap on state and local tax deductions and said he has done little to support local manufacturing jobs.

"He's really just let it go to seed," she said.

She pledges to champion issues of single-payer health care and lowering student debt, issues she said Reed has voted against or ignored. She also said she would fight harder to bring broadband Internet access to rural parts of the district.

Reed described Mitrano as someone who changes her position on hot-button issues like the Second Amendment and health care, depending on her audience. He said she is not someone whose word you can count on.

He said he also supports greater broadband Internet access, as well as immigration and health care reform, infrastructure improvements and addressing the national debt crisis. He pointed to successes with his support of advanced manufacturing centers, investment in the cleanup of the West Valley nuclear fuel reprocessing site, and support of wind and solar energy tax credits.

THE BUFFALO NEWS

He criticized Mitrano's support for "government-controlled health care," which he said would ultimately raise health care costs and "collapse the entire system." Mitrano has argued that a single-payer Medicare system would provide the government the best leverage to negotiate lower health care costs and minimize bloated administrative and advertising fees.

Reed has a clear fundraising advantage over Mitrano, starting off the year with more than \$1 million in his campaign fund. Altogether, he has raised more than \$3 million this election cycle, he said.

But campaign finance reports show Mitrano's fund-raising efforts have rapidly gained on Reed's over the past few months. Posted campaign filings after the start of the year show Mitrano raised about \$1.3 million compared with \$1.6 million for Reed. And according to the OpenSecrets.org website, a far higher percentage of her money has been raised within the district.