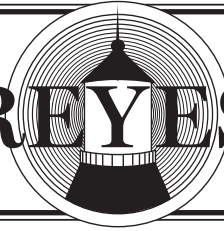


POINT REYES LIGHT



Bolinas independent to challenge Rep. Huffman

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By Sophia Grace Carter

Nicolette Hahn Niman, an environmental attorney and a rancher from Bolinas, is mounting an independent challenge to Representative Jared Huffman, the incumbent Democrat seeking a seventh term in California's Second Congressional District.

Her candidacy sets up an unusual contest in a newly gerrymandered district that stretches from the liberal coastal enclaves of Marin and southern Sonoma Counties to the conservative agricultural communities in the northernmost part of the state.

The race will test the district's new political tilt—and whether a candidate running outside the two-party system can gain traction in an increasingly polarized electorate.

Mr. Huffman, who lives in San Rafael, has built a national profile as an outspoken critic of President Trump and a leading voice on environmental policy.

Ms. Hahn Niman says she could better bridge the district's stark political and geographic divides by focusing on issues that cut across them, including affordability and the needs of working people, family farms and regional food systems.

"This is an incredibly large and diverse district," Ms. Hahn Niman said in an interview last week. "What attracted me to this race was the idea that I could relate to and represent the quite conservative northern parts of the district while also understanding the most liberal parts. I believe I can serve as a better bridge between the different camps—certainly better than Huffman, and probably better than most people."

Other candidates who filed by Friday's deadline for the June 2 primary include Greg Burgess, Kevin Eisele, Colby Smart, Paul Saulsbury and Rose Yee.

The district was redrawn last year under Proposition 50, a ballot measure pushed by Gov. Gavin Newsom to give his party five more House seats as Texas Re-



Bolinas resident Nicolette Hahn Niman is running as an independent for California's 2nd Congressional District seat. (David Briggs / Point Reyes Light)

publicans redrew their districts in hopes of flipping the same number.

Although California's Second District still leans Democratic, it now includes two of the most conservative counties in the state, Shasta and Modoc. Both were removed from the neighboring First District and attached to the Second, which Mr. Huffman has represented since 2013.

While more than 80 percent of voters in Marin supported Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election, 79 percent of voters in Shasta and 71 percent in Modoc backed President Trump.

Under the previous boundaries, the Second District's voters were roughly 54 percent Democratic and 19 percent Republican, with independent voters leaning left. Now, an estimated 47 percent are Democratic and 28 percent are Republican, with independents leaning right.

There is little that unites these areas politically, economically, climatically, culturally or historically. Yet they will now share the same representative in Congress.

"It's hard to exaggerate the breadth of that divide," said David McCuan, a political scientist at Sonoma State University. "When you look at the interests and political cultures between the northeast and the southwest parts of the district, they are like Mars and Venus."

Ms. Hahn Niman, who is 58, said her campaign will take a measured and compassionate approach in an era of partisan flame-throwing and a political climate "monomaniacally focused on Trump," including among elected officials such as Mr. Huffman.

Raised in Kalamazoo, Mich., by two college professors, Ms. Hahn Niman spent 33 years as a vegetarian and fought factory farming as a senior attorney for the Waterkeeper Alliance, where she investigated operations that contaminated rivers and streams.

The work also exposed her to farms practicing sustainable livestock husbandry, which led her in the early 2000s to her husband, Bill Niman, a pioneer in humane and sustainable meat production.

She later wrote several books making the case for pasture-based livestock farming, arguing that cattle raised on grass—rather than confined in feedlots and fed grain—can improve soil health, increase biodiversity and help capture carbon.

After graduating from law school, she served two terms on the Kalamazoo City Commission, her only elected office before joining the Bolinas-Stinson Union School District board five years ago.

The long-running dispute over ranching in the Point Reyes National Seashore, where the Nimans graze cattle on a 575-acre ranch, was a catalyst for her decision to enter the congressional race.

Last year, the couple sued the National Park Service over the legal settlement that shuttered most ranches on Point Reyes. In January 2025, the Nature Conservancy announced that six dairies and six beef ranches had agreed to close in exchange for shares of a \$30 million settlement. The park service said the former ranchlands would be rezoned and no longer available for commercial grazing.

Unlike most other ranching families in the park, the Nimans did not intervene in the lawsuit that led to the settlement, so they did not participate in the mediation or receive a buyout offer.

Ms. Hahn Niman said the saga led her to question whether Mr. Huffman—who played a role in bringing the Nature Conservancy into the settlement negotiations—was adequately representing rural communities in Washington.

“Huffman was not only in office when all of this happened, but he was absolutely involved in the masterminding of the whole plan,” she said. “The more I looked at what was happening, the more convinced I became that our community was not being well represented.”

The experience, she said, also left her with a broader concern that the congressman had grown disconnected from his

constituents as a whole.

“He’s been in Congress a long time, and I just really believe he is not as connected with his district as he probably once was, and certainly not as he should be,” she said. “I believe he’s making decisions based on wanting to be identified as an environmental advocate and taking guidance from national environmental groups rather than focusing on the actual impact on the communities and people he represents.”

Mr. Huffman has long defended the settlement as a pragmatic resolution to a decades-long legal conflict among ranchers, the park service and environmental groups.

After years representing this corner of California, he said he is prepared to take on the challenges of the redrawn district and has begun meeting residents in the newly added counties.

“It’s a huge new district, but it helps that I’ve been representing one of the largest rural districts in California for 14 years,” he said in a phone interview last week. “I’ve shown up to community meetings and ranching meetings over and over again. I’ve been on these farms and kicked the dirt, rolled up my sleeves.”

Dan Schnur, a political analyst and professor at the University of Southern California and the University of California, Berkeley, said the redrawn district could indeed present political challenges for Mr. Huffman.

“It’s pretty clear that he has a very significant political and cultural gap to overcome,” he said. “An independent, especially someone who can talk more comfortably to voters living in the new portions of the district, could have an opportunity to feasibly challenge Huffman.”

By running with no party affiliation, Ms. Hahn Niman—who said she leans Democratic on roughly 70 percent of issues—lacks the organizational advan-

tages and voter loyalty enjoyed by Democratic and Republican candidates.

Under California’s nonpartisan primary system, all candidates will appear on the same primary ballot. The two who receive the most votes advance to the general election regardless of party affiliation.

“A top-two primary system tends to advantage club members, so members of the Republican and Democratic parties get an advantage, and it’s incredibly hard to run as an independent,” Mr. McCuan, the political scientist, said. “But she is what we call a quality challenger, someone who has a combination of name recognition, qualifications and resources.”

No independent currently serves in the House of Representatives, though Rep. Kevin Kiley, who represents California’s Third District, announced this month that he will drop his Republican affiliation to run as an independent in the redrawn Sixth District.

According to Gallup polling, a rising number of Americans do not identify with either major party. But that shift does not necessarily reflect ideological moderation, Mr. Schnur said.

“We’re seeing more independents running for the House and Senate than ever before,” he said. “Voters are exhausted by hardline partisan politics, and many of these candidates try to appeal to that frustration. It isn’t that independents are more centrist than Democrats or Republicans; what tends to distinguish them more than ideological moderation is a disenchantment with politics and politicians.”

Ms. Hahn Niman said she shares that frustration. “What I really want to do is juxtapose the Trump-focused approach with one that is really focused on the district’s communities,” she said. “I want to understand what’s happening in your community, whether that’s Siskiyou or Modoc or Sonoma or Marin.”