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With clear path to re-election, Cedric Richmond can look to a bigger platform in Democrats' future

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U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond, Louisiana's lone congressional Democrat, appears well-positioned to retain his 2nd Congressional District seat and could see his influence rise on Capitol Hill should his party regain control of the House after this fall's midterms.

The race for the district, which stretches from New Orleans and into parts of Baton Rouge, appears well in hand for Richmond. He has raised $1.4 million and has over $800,000 available to spend against three underfunded, long-shot candidates, none of whom are affiliated with a political party. His role as a vocal critic of President Donald Trump is also an asset in a district with a majority-minority voting populace.

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The only intrigue concerns whether Richmond, who was elected chairman of the influential Congressional Black Caucus in 2016, will see his political star rise if Democrats get the seats they need to control the House.

As the lone Democrat in a deeply Republican state, Richmond has tried to thread a delicate needle by maintaining close ties to his more powerful colleagues in the majority, such as Republican House Majority Whip Steve Scalise, while serving as a strong voice in opposition of the Trump administration.

He has worked with his Republican colleagues on issues on which both parties agree. That has allowed him to move forward legislation that forgave more than $335 million in federal disaster rebuilding loans rewarded awarded to Southern University at New Orleans, Dillard University and Xavier University after

Hurricane Katrina. He also helped secure funding for plans to build a new levee system to protect parts of St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes.

Still, he hasn't been afraid to speak forcefully against Trump from his position as head of the 49-member Black Caucus, a group that plays a considerable role in shaping priorities for the national Democratic Party and whose leaders can go on to wield greater influence on Capitol Hill.

For the past two years, he has urged the president to advance policies that benefit black Americans, and he derided Trump as “racially challenged” — a term Richmond later conceded was interchangeable with “racist.”

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Richmond this week derided Trump as "the worst president in my lifetime, who has taken the country to a dangerous place, especially for African-Americans."

Richmond said he would consider running for a leadership post should the House flip to Democratic control. But any position he might seek will depend on the moves of his colleagues, particularly his longtime friend Assistant Democratic Leader James Clyburn, of South Carolina.

Clyburn has said he would likely run for speaker of the House if former Speaker U.S. Rep Nancy Pelosi declines to do so. For his part, Richmond said he would support Clyburn if he were to make a bid for the gavel.

Richmond said he would defer to Clyburn before running for several available spots. Any position in the Democratic leadership, however, would help Louisiana's relatively junior delegation punch above their weight. Richmond would also be in line to lead a subgroup of the House Judiciary or House Homeland Security committees on which he now serves, he said.

A New Orleans native, Richmond served more than a decade in the state Legislature before eight years in Washington. He's recently begun to broaden his power base at home, backing candidates in local races in the same way some of his predecessors have.

He said a Democrat-led House will bring swift change.

"If Democrats get in the majority — which I think we will — you will see us very quickly vote to raise the minimum wage, for paid family leave ... and for criminal justice reform," Richmond said.

Still, Richmond's three opponents in the race — Belden Batiste, Shawndra Rodriguez and Jesse Schmidt — claim his efforts to push for change have been inadequate, that he doesn't appeal to his conservative constituents and that it's time for a fresh face in Congress.

Belden "Noonie Man" Batiste, a 44-year-old community activist from New Orleans, calls himself "the people's candidate." If elected, Batiste will fight for a federal minimum wage of $15 an hour and for restrictions on the use of certain semi-automatic assault rifles. He would also work to unify the 2nd District, which he said is too fragmented.

"Whatever is working in New Orleans, let's apply in Gretna. Whatever is working in Gretna, let's see it in New Orleans. We've got to build stronger communities," he said.

Batiste pulled no punches when discussing Richmond in a recent interview.

He accused the congressman of failing to help more than 50 residents of the Gordon Plaza subdivision atop the former Agriculture Street

landfill in New Orleans' Upper 9th Ward move from that toxic site, and of ignoring residents in the River Parishes who have been exposed to pollution.

Batiste also scoffed at Richmond's relationship with Scalise and said Richmond hasn't gone after Trump often enough.

Batiste, who isn't registered with a political party, defines himself as an "independent progressive democrat." He said he isn't taking donations because he doesn't want to owe anyone any favors.

Shawndra Rodriguez, 46, is a conservative who abandoned the Democratic Party when she became a Christian three years ago, at the end of Barack Obama's second presidential term.

She said she realized she had been "fed the same lies" by Democrats for years.

She supports the reversal of Roe v. Wade, the controversial 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion. She also wants to bring prayer back to public schools, and doesn't

believe in the "fear-based agenda" that she believes influences how scientists and others discuss climate change.

Rodriguez supports deportation and said media images of children separated from their parents who illegally crossed U.S. borders seek to play on public sympathy and help people dodge the legal process.

Rodriguez also criticized Richmond for not backing the policies of Republicans and Trump, the latter of whom "has done a great job," she said, particularly in creating more jobs for Americans by enticing companies to make more domestic products.

Rodriguez has nearly 20 years of experience in the financial services industry, a career she recently gave up to pursue politics. She said she

has raised less than $10,000 for her campaign; federal finance reports show no direct contributions.

Jesse Schmidt, the 40-year-old owner of fire alarm and security company Gulf Coast Special Systems, said he is getting into national politics because he is tired of seeing partisanship hinder Capitol Hill.

Whenever Schmidt, registered with neither party, has gone to vote, he has been presented with "two polar opposites with very little common ground," he said. "Once they got into office, they just talked and talked about how bad the other side was, and it seemed like nothing was actually really getting done."

He supports creating a law that would stop an immigrant who travels to the U.S. illegally from filing lawsuits in civil courts and would allow that immigrant to be deported even if lawsuits were filed on their behalf.

Schmidt said the national political arena is no place for debates about abortion and other social issues that have already been litigated. He also supports the federal legalization of marijuana.

He has raised about $16,700. About $13,000 of that was left over as of the last reporting period.

The 2nd District covers most of New Orleans and large parts of Baton Rouge, and snakes through several communities between those two cities. The winner in the race will serve for a two-year term.

Early voting began Tuesday, and runs through Oct. 30, except for Sunday, Oct. 28. The primary is Nov. 6; a runoff, if needed, will be Dec. 8.

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