

Berkshire County man challenges veteran lawmakers for 1st District seat

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- [local](#)
- [politics](#)

Bill Shein is running for Congress because he thinks the Democratic party has lost its way.

A writer, information technology consultant, and former professional comedian who has never before run for elected office, Shein will face 11-term incumbent U.S. Rep. Richard Neal of Springfield and former state Sen. Andrea Nuciforo Jr. of Pittsfield in the Democratic primary Sept. 6 for the 1st Congressional District.

Shein, 45, who lives in Alford and announced his candidacy in January, says he is running for Congress because he believes corporations and lobbyists have too much influence on lawmakers.

In an hour-long interview at the Gazette last week, Shein called his two opponents prime examples of legislators whose loyalties are to their campaign contributors.

Shein said Neal is like many Democrats "who play the same status quo game inside a broken system."

"They are not championing the kind of change we need to the system to successfully address the issues we face," Shein said. "As long as he is spending his nights spent at fundraisers thrown for him by status quo interests that are looking out for the next quarter or the next year, then that's not going to change."

A native of New York state, Shein began his professional career working in 1990 and 1991 for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in Washington, D.C. But he soon left and spent four years working as a stand-up comedian. After several jobs that included briefly writing jokes for Al Franken, a former Comedy Central comedian who is

now a senator from Minnesota, and contributing to several television shows, Shein moved to the Berkshires a decade ago.

He splits his time working as an information technology consultant, writer and, until he announced his candidacy, a columnist for the Berkshire Eagle. The column, "Reason Gone Mad," was honored with the National Press Club Award for Humor in 2005, 2008 and 2009,

Matt Barron, a Democratic political consultant from Chesterfield, said Shein's message could gain traction in the newly configured 1st Congressional District.

"Shein is an unabashed progressive," said Barron. "He's going to make the race interesting."

Shein on offense

The new 1st district includes all of Berkshire and Hampden counties, the western parts of Franklin and Hampshire counties and a southwestern portion of Worcester County.

Much of the new district is territory now represented by retiring U.S. Rep. John Olver, D-Amherst, Barron pointed out. Consequently, Neal will be running in a district with 311,000 people he has never represented, Barron said.

And Nuciforo, the current Berkshire Middle District Register of Deeds, will have to introduce himself to voters outside of Berkshire County.

Shein criticized Nuciforo for cozying up to corporate interests during his time as a state senator, in particular for his vote to repeal the Clean Elections Law approved by the voters in 1998.

"I know a thing or two about humor and I find it laughable that either of the candidates in this race are truly have been or will be progressive champions," Shein said.

The public's low opinion of Congress may lead to an opening for Shein, Barron said. "I think Neal and Nuciforo are cut from the same corporate cloth," he added.

Neal, a senior member of the House Ways and Means Committee, raised \$705,000 in 2011, including \$535,450 from political action committees, according to the Federal Elections Commission.

Nuciforo, who served as chairman of the Senate Banking Committee while in the Legislature, had \$132,000 in his campaign account at the end of 2011, according to the FEC.

However, Shein will face difficulties, Barron said. Because Shein has said he will not accept campaign contributions greater than \$99, that will make it more difficult to get out his message against better-financed opponents, according to Barron,

In addition, he said, Shein will need to broaden his platform to appeal to more conservative Democrats in areas such as Holyoke, West Springfield and Westfield on issues like trade, health care and energy.

Shein said he supports legislation called the "people's budget", which would cut military spending and use the money to fund New Deal-style jobs programs that employ out-of-work Americans. The measure, which Neal opposed, was defeated by the House last year.

Shein's jobs plan centers around the "relocalization" of the economy. And Shein said he supports a progressive tax system that would impose a higher rate on capital gains and dividends.

However, any meaningful policy reform on issues ranging from the environment to health care to tax policy cannot be made without eliminating the influence of corporate influence in elections, Shein said. To compete with Neal and Nuciforo, he said he would rely on social media and door-to-door campaigning to get out his message.

But he won't be taking any corporate donations.

"If we can't figure out a way as Democrats to win elections without relying on money from the folks we are fighting against