

Kathleen Riebe, the ‘moderate’ Democrat who wants to turn the 2nd District blue.

Utah State Sen. Kathleen Riebe says this is a unique opportunity for Democrats to flip the 2nd Congressional District

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Sen. Kathleen Riebe, D-Cottonwood Heights, poses for a photo at the Deseret News in Salt Lake City on Wednesday, Aug. 16, 2023. Riebe is running to replace retiring Rep. Chris Stewart in Utah’s second congressional district.

Utah State Sen. Kathleen Riebe didn’t have the luxury of focusing solely on a lesson plan the morning of her first day as an elementary school teacher in Magna, Utah.

She was on the phone with her mother who lived across the East River from smoke-filled Manhattan. It was 9/11. And Riebe’s brother and brother-in-law, like her father and grandfather before them, were New York City police officers.

Thankfully, Riebe’s patrolmen brothers, and firemen cousins, survived the tragedy. But the weight of public service, and the sacrifice it demands from family members, was something Riebe brought with her as she stood before that 4th grade class. Two decades of public service and two state policy-making positions later, Riebe is drawing on her blue-blood heritage to run an unlikely campaign to turn Utah’s 2nd Congressional District from red to blue.

As the Democratic nominee for November’s special congressional election, Riebe is relying on her status as the only schoolteacher and current state lawmaker in the race to persuade voters that the right person to fill Republican Rep. Chris Stewart’s seat is not a conservative, but rather a self-described “moderate” Democrat focused on issues that matter to working- and middle-class parents like herself.

“I think people are ready for a change,” Riebe said in an interview with the Deseret News.

Riebe sincerely believes this election could be a unique opportunity for a Democratic upset. For one, it is an open seat, and Riebe thinks the division between the Republican candidates hoping to fill it — Becky Edwards, Bruce Hough and Celeste Maloy — may harm the eventual GOP nominee in a general election.

However, the odds are, to say the least, not in her favor. The 2nd Congressional District is considered a safe Republican seat by the National Republican Congressional Committee. In 2022, Stewart was reelected by a 25-point margin. And in 2020, 2nd District voters chose former President Donald Trump over President Joe Biden 56 percent to 39 percent.

But as one of only six Democratic state senators in a body of 29 members, Riebe is used to making her influence felt in the face of a daunting majority.

“I’m really frustrated with all the wedge issues on both sides,” Riebe said. “I’d like to stop with that noise and get down to work for what’s really important to people.”

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Despite her best efforts to hide it, Riebe’s students never fail to ask about her faint but unmistakable New York twang.

Growing up on Long Island, Riebe was surrounded by stories of the city; of the days when her police officer grandpa had to chase down cars by bicycle and her firefighter uncle was kept so busy he would sometimes forget his car on the Staten Island ferry.

Such is the life of a civil servant, Riebe says. She remembers the missed birthdays, Christmases and vacations when her father was on duty.

“You don’t make a ton of money,” Riebe said, “but you are taught that it matters what happens in your community.”

To supplement her husband’s income, Riebe’s mother took a job at a private school, allowing Riebe and her twin sister to attend tuition-free, and leading to what Riebe sees as a pivotal life experience.

Riebe often recounts how observing her 5th grade teacher, Mrs. Hahn, as she made the classroom a place where struggling students could succeed, convinced her that education was her calling. Riebe later received a double major in elementary education and sociology from Hofstra University.

However, her plans were put to the side when her father passed away the same year she graduated from college. Riebe spent the next several months taking care of her mom and working at a school after hours.

The next decade saw Riebe explore her passion for pairing education with outdoor recreation — from catching baby hammerhead sharks at a Georgia summer camp to leading teenagers on guided tours of Europe — and her love of trying new things outside her comfort zone. Riebe worked as a truck driver, a bartender, a police dispatcher and the only woman on a wildland forest firefighter crew before permanently settling down in her favorite outdoor mecca, Utah,

As an avid skier and hiker, Alta, Utah, was the logical place to finally “grow some roots,” which she did, getting married and having two children, one of whom attends Brighton High School and the other who just started his first semester at the University of Utah, Riebe said.

Riebe and her family have lived in Cottonwood Heights for the last 21 years.

From school teaching to community advocacy

While in Alta, Riebe got her first job having to do with her college degree, teaching at Pleasant Green Elementary in Magna as an educational technology specialist. In the years since, Riebe has taught every grade K-through-6 at multiple elementary schools, including Fox Hills in Taylorsville and Robert Frost in West Valley. She currently teaches at Howard R. Driggs in Holladay and Rosecrest in Millcreek.

If prompted, Riebe will dive into an enthusiastic explanation of how technology can be used to make classroom settings more flexible and feedback-oriented to meet the needs of those who are struggling to keep up. But it wasn't long after she launched her teaching career that Riebe realized her results in the classroom were linked to problems in her community and the policies formulated to address them.

“I think when you are in a community where you see every layer of success and failure, you carry those faces with you,” she said. “And so when you think about a policy, you think about it from your own family, but then you also think about it with the families that you work with.”

After years of increasing community involvement, Riebe became frustrated that teachers and marginalized members of the community weren't getting a fair hearing at the state Capitol or state school board. What better way to craft policy, she thought, than to ask those who will be the most affected by it? And what better way to bring that approach to Utah, she decided, than to run for public office.

Riebe ran for and was elected to the Utah State Board of Education representing District 10 in 2016 where she emphasized the importance of supporting Utah Core.

Fellow board member, Carol Lear, says Riebe's motivation for running included wanting to bring a “practitioners viewpoint” to conversations about education policy.

“I think she feels like lawmakers at all levels are not understanding a teacher's experience. They're not understanding what it's like to be dealing with issues one after another, after another, every single day,” Lear said.

Riebe found this issue so pressing she decided to launch a campaign for the state Senate to try to increase investment in public education.

This issue carried Riebe to a 15-point victory over the Republican incumbent, flipping the district to Democratic for the first time since at least 2012.

Riebe entered office in 2019, representing Utah Senate District 8, which became District 15 after redistricting, and now serves on 13 committees, including executive appropriations, education and higher education appropriations.

In January, Riebe was chosen as Utah Senate Minority Whip, the second ranking minority position, just under Senate Minority Leader Luz Escamilla.

“(Riebe) knows how to work when you’re in a super minority and be able to communicate and articulate and still be an advocate for the constituents that she represents,” Escamilla told the Deseret News.

Escamilla said she is glad her colleague decided to run for Stewart’s soon-to-be vacant congressional seat, having challenged Stewart unsuccessfully herself in 2014. Escamilla says her experience in the minority has prepared Riebe to be an influential member of Congress.

“Washington D.C. needs more people that are effective leaders and be able to work across the aisle, which of course, any member of the minority caucuses here in the legislature are experts on,” she said.

During her time in office, Riebe has opposed bills that restrict abortion and close abortion clinics, saying such moves infringe on womens’ rights. She has also opposed Republican efforts to amend the income tax earmark for public education and legislation expanding needs-based school vouchers.

But Riebe says being in the minority does not mean being a perpetual “no” vote. Of the hundreds of bills passed every year, she explained, the vast majority are the result of compromise between parties, containing Democratic input as long as minority members are determined enough to make their voices heard in the final product.

Riebe’s congressional lesson plan

Although she ran for Utah Senate to support the public education system, Riebe says Congress is not the best place to decide issues regarding education.

As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Riebe said she would try to keep education a local issue, and devote her efforts instead to cutting spending and cutting costs for everyday Americans.

“The debt is something that I feel really strongly about,” Riebe said, mentioning how the country’s deficits have spiraled just in the years since she was in college. “Now we’re here again. It’s really upsetting.”

Riebe says Congress can start to address the problem by cutting fraud and waste in payments to government contractors and by eliminating as many “pet projects” as possible so appropriations bills focus only on those things that benefit the entire country.

When it comes to shrinking the large government welfare programs that are the main drivers of national debt, Riebe is supportive of reforming the programs instead of raising taxes.

“I don’t believe in spending foolishly or erratically. I think that they should be long term plans with goals that can keep people in secure jobs and security in our lives,” she said.

Riebe added that if elected, she would join the Blue Dog Coalition, a group of 18 Democrats focused on fiscal responsibility.

“Coming to a very rational decision and having very moderate ideas, I think that is what serves us best,” Riebe said.

On the issue of Ukraine’s war with Russia, Riebe says “supporting Ukraine at the rate we’re at right now is good” because if Ukraine were to lose there would be “more chaos in the world economy” as both Russia and China feel emboldened to attack their neighbors.

Despite living outside of the 2nd Congressional District, Riebe says her work in the district as a teacher and as a lawmaker, participating in rural caucus meetings every Friday and dealing with statewide issues, has given her a deep understanding of the district’s main concerns.

Riebe says the top three issues she will prioritize are: rural healthcare, infrastructure and affordable housing.

Riebe’s campaign announced a “Freedom First Agenda” and a video for digital advertising on Tuesday, focusing on “freedoms of access and affordability.” Riebe says she supports “pro-tenant,” “labor-friendly” regulations and expanding Medicare and Medicaid.

“For me, public service is the family business,” the announcement reads. “It’s time we send someone to Washington who will fight for a Freedom First agenda and bring dignity and respect back to Utah’s politics and Congressional delegation.”

The general election, where Riebe will face off against the GOP nominee, as well as nominees from other registered parties, is scheduled for Nov. 21.