

Impatient for change, progressives line up to challenge DFL incumbents

Emerging voter blocs that have transformed DFL seek a seat at the table.

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A bevy of progressives are challenging longtime Democratic incumbents in the Legislature in next year's elections, potentially sending more women, millennials and people of color to the State Capitol while shifting the DFL dialogue to the left.

The movement is a muscular show of influence among emerging voter blocs that have already transformed the DFL coalition but now seek the real prize: an election certificate that will earn them a seat at the table and the opportunity to move billions of dollars in state funding.

Tanner Sunderman, a 25-year-old Roseville resident challenging longtime Rep. Alice Hausman of St. Paul in the first-ring suburbs, said now is the time. "We're done waiting," he said.

The strategy is not without risks, however. Senate Democrats are just two seats shy of a majority, and some DFL operatives and officeholders fear the insurgent campaigns could drain much needed money, time and energy from the effort to win in the fall, while exposing more moderate candidates in the suburbs to the charge that their party has moved too far left.

State Sen. Kari Dziedzic of Minneapolis, who heads up the Senate DFL campaign operation, acknowledged discomfort with intramural contests before the fall election.

"Of course it makes it more challenging to take back the Senate, but we're just going to keep plugging forward," she said.

With all 201 legislative districts up for election in 2020, the stakes are significant. In 2021, the Legislature will craft a two-year state budget expected to top \$50 billion and draw new legislative and congressional districts using data from the 2020 census, which will shape Minnesota politics for the next decade.

The progressive drive to reshape the Legislature matches a national effort, most notably among a group of younger women who won seats in Congress in 2018 often by defeating more established political veterans.

New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez beat a longtime incumbent from an old Democratic machine who no longer fit the demographic profile of her district. Closer to home, U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar beat former House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher in the DFL primary on her way to Congress, and before that she was an insurgent candidate who defeated longtime state Rep. Phyllis Kahn.

In some ways, the upstarts are mimicking the insurgent ethos of Republicans. Just a decade ago, candidates identifying with the Tea Party movement toppled once-powerful Republicans like Rep. Eric Cantor of Virginia, Sen. Bob Bennett of Utah and Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana.

Applying more pressure

The Minnesota effort has two tracks. In the House, ambitious office seekers are running in often solidly DFL districts. Their supporters are seeking fresh faces that they say represent metro districts better than incumbents who have been around in some cases for decades.



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARII — STAR TRIBUNE

U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar upset an incumbent in the Legislature and challenged a moderate in the primary for her House seat.

On the Senate side, progressives are in the early stages of organizing a drive to reshape the DFL caucus — which could mean toppling powerful Minority Leader Tom Bakk, a moderate Iron Range senator from Cook who's loyal to mining and construction interests.

So far only former Rep. Erin Murphy of St. Paul, who unsuccessfully ran for governor in 2018, has announced a run. She is taking on Sen. Richard Cohen, a Capitol fixture who would likely become the chairman of the powerful Finance Committee if the DFL wins back the majority.

Progressives acknowledge the challenge of recruiting candidates to take on incumbents.

“Potential challengers and candidates are coming forward, but it's a process,” said Kenza Hadj-Moussa, a spokeswoman for TakeAction Minnesota, which is pushing hard to change the makeup of the Senate DFL caucus.

Challengers are less apprehensive on the House side. They are citing a need for more pressure on progressive priorities, including affordable housing, climate change, gun control and legalizing marijuana.

Esther Agbaje, who is running against DFL Rep. Ray Dehn for a downtown Minneapolis seat, called affordable housing “one of the challenges of our time.” The 34-year-old attorney said she has seen in her pro bono work the impact that rising rents can have on residents.

Dehn, elected in 2012, said he expects to face even more challengers ahead of the local endorsement vote. Such bids, he said, reflect a feeling among young people that change isn't happening fast enough. “If there are people stepping up in the community to run for office, it's a good sign,” he said.

In some races, identity and representation are a driving force. Hoang Murphy, 28, is running against longtime incumbent Rep. Tim Mahoney in a House district that covers St. Paul's East Side.

Murphy and his family emigrated from Vietnam to St. Paul when he was a young boy. At that time, the neighborhood was predominantly white and working class; now roughly two-thirds of residents are nonwhite.

Murphy, a former Teach for America fellow who also worked in the Obama administration, thinks his profile and his policies make him a better fit for the district than Mahoney, who was elected in 1998. He's “not reflective of what the new East Side looks like now. A lot has changed in 20 years,” Murphy said.

Mahoney, a retired pipe fitter who chairs the House Jobs and Economic Development Committee, said he's still weighing whether to run next year. But he defended his record, calling arguments that a candidate is too old or doesn't look enough like his constituents “political rhetoric.”

“I think I still have it in me to do a good job,” he said.

Athena Hollins, who is running against Rep. John Lesch, DFL-St. Paul, said as an African-American woman, she “brings a different set of lived experiences that need to be heard at the Capitol.” An attorney by trade, she is president of the Payne-Phalen Community Council and works in diversity and inclusion.

Lesch, who chairs the Judiciary Committee, said he has legislative “irons in the fire” like paid leave and lowering prescription drug costs, but welcomes challengers.

“I absolutely encourage more folks to get involved, including running for office, and I look forward to a robust campaign,” he said.

House Speaker Melissa Hortman downplayed concerns that challenges could hurt her effort to protect the DFL majority in the lower chamber next year. In heavily Democratic seats, she noted, a preferred candidate will likely emerge from local endorsement votes taking place this winter, months before the general election heats up.

'So much at stake'

Those endorsement battles may be crowded affairs. Several DFL incumbents already have multiple challengers. Another Hausman rival, 43-year-old Cari Ness of St. Paul, cited "incremental or insufficient progress" on issues like climate change and paid family leave as her motivators: "We're at a time when we need to make great big structural changes, and we need new voices to do that," she said.

Ness, who works for a nonprofit, said she spent years building a relationship with Hausman as she considered whether to run for office herself someday. She's tired of waiting for an open seat, she said: "It's not a lifetime appointment."

Hausman, the Housing Committee chairwoman, said now is not the time. The 30-year incumbent advised aspiring legislators to wait until incumbents retire and allow for what she described as more open, competitive races under new district maps set to take effect in 2022.

Intraparty fights, she argued, could be a distraction as the DFL works to win back the upper chamber and elect Democrats statewide.

"This is one of those elections where focus, focus, focus on the big picture is more important than ever," she said. "There's so much at stake."

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