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Democrat Jessica Morse running for Kevin Kiley's California Congressional seat in 2024

By Jenavieve Hatch

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Jessica Morse, a Democrat who ran to unseat Republican Tom McClintock in Congressional District 4 in 2018, announced on Tuesday that she'll run again in Northern California — this time in an attempt to unseat Republican Congressman Kevin Kiley in District 3.

“Kevin Kiley is a bomb thrower, and I'm a problem solver,” Morse said in an interview with The Bee on Monday.

“We need somebody to not just look at the next Fox News hit, or what to say that will rile up the community, but roll up their sleeves, look at the problem, and say: how do we solve it?”

Morse lost to McClintock by eight percentage points (close to 28,000 votes) in 2018, despite raising about double what his campaign raised. A run against Kiley won't be easy; the freshman from Placer County beat first-time candidate Dr. Kermit Jones in 2022 by more than seven percentage points (more than 24,000 votes) in a red part of blue California. Democrats in most counties north and east of Sacramento run as underdogs.

But Morse, 41, whose 2018 campaign brought in endorsements (and cash) from major Democratic organizing groups like EMILY's List and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, thinks she's got a shot at flipping the seat.

Running as a Dem in a red district

Today's political climate is different from the one in which Morse ran five years ago. And she thinks Kiley's ties to four-times-indicted former President Donald Trump, and his stance on abortion in a post-Dobbs world, are going to work against him.

“Trump was very popular, and now he is not,” she said.

“After January 6th, and watching the insurrection and the conspiracy theories and the lies ... the community recognizes that we have to defend our democracy. Kiley is a Trump-endorsed Trump apologist, who has refused to acknowledge that Joe Biden legitimately won the election, and has promoted these conspiracy theories that created the fervor that led up to January 6th and the degradation of our Capitol. I think this community is looking at that and saying, ‘enough.’”

Kiley has not made an endorsement in the 2024 presidential election, but Trump did endorse his 2022 Congressional run.

Morse also believes her stance on abortion will set her apart from Kiley, and bring moderate votes her way.

In 2022, Placer and other counties that voted for conservative representatives also supported pro-choice Proposition 1, which enshrined abortion access in the California constitution.

“This district cannot afford to have to have somebody who is an anti-choice advocate in that seat,” Morse said. “The reason women across the political spectrum support abortion rights is because we recognize that it’s not just about the right to not have children — it’s about the right to have children safely.”

Kiley opposes abortion except in cases of rape or incest, or if the mother’s life is at risk.

Abortion isn’t the only culture war flashpoint likely to come up in the 2024 election cycle. Congressional District 3 encompasses many of Sacramento’s more conservative suburbs like Roseville, Rocklin, Folsom, Lincoln and Loomis, where school board politics have become increasingly turbulent.

“It was heart-wrenching to see that decision,” Morse said of Rocklin Unified School District’s recent vote to enact a parental notification policy that would require teachers and school staff to tell a student’s parents if the student requests to change pronouns, go by a different name, or use facilities that don’t align with their bio-logical sex.

Her cousin, whose spouse is trans, was at the meeting, which went until 1am.

“Of course, parents want to know what’s happening with their kids at school,” she said. “But parents who have good relationships with their children and ... create a loving environment at home can have those conversations, and the kids that don’t feel safe talking to their parents need a place that is safe ... and schools should be a place where children can feel safe and loved, in particularly trans children.”

Kiley endorsed members of the Rocklin school board who voted in support of the policy.

Wildfire prevention ‘is part of my motive for running for Congress’

Since her loss to McClintock, Morse worked on wildfire resilience at the California Natural Resources Agency. She started in Butte County, volunteering with

displaced survivors of the Camp Fire, California’s most destructive wildfire that flattened the cities of Paradise and Magalia and killed 85 people.

The trauma stuck with her. She compared it to her time in Baghdad, where she was on assignment for USAID in the early 2000s.

Morse worked on projects to make homes and residential areas more resistant to embers and wildfire spread, and to create fuel breaks in the landscape that prevent wildfires from sweeping at the speed of something like the Camp Fire, which spread more than 100,000 acres in its first two days.

Wildfire prevention is “part of my motive for running for Congress,” Morse said. Because the federal government owns such a large percentage of the land in District 3, “we will not get ahead of the fire crisis if the Feds don’t do what we just did in California, and there’s not anybody at the federal level advocating for this resilient-specific program. And that’s what I would do in Congress.”

For the fifth-generation Northern Californian resident who hiked 500 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail in District 3 (from Cedar City to Mount Whitney) the connection to the land — and the communities who inhabit it — is personal.

“I want to protect my family, and my community, and my beautiful Sierras from all of these threats,” she said.

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CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported Rep .Kevin Kiley’s margin of victory over Kermit Jones. It was more than 24,000 votes.

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