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How the first potential transgender member of Congress plans to navigate the House GOP

Sarah McBride said she sees “the importance of representation. But it’s also my job to make clear to people that I’m more than just one thing, that I am a multi-dimensional human being.”



Sarah McBride, left, takes a selfie with volunteers going out canvassing in Dover, Delaware, September 9, 2023. | Nicholas Wu/POLITICO

By NICHOLAS WU
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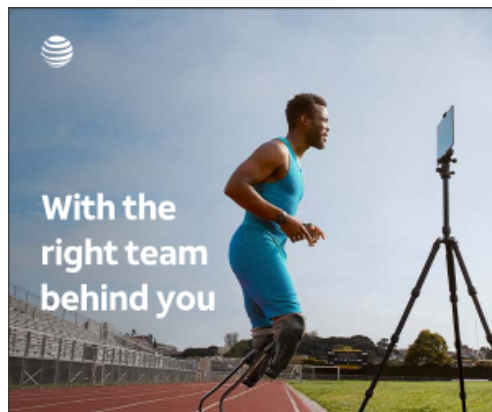


REHOBOTH BEACH, DEL. — Sarah McBride touts that she’d be the first openly transgender member of Congress. She also wants to be known for more than just her

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gender identity.

Sitting outside a coffee shop blocks from Joe Biden’s favorite beach, the 33-year-old said she sees “the importance of representation. But it’s also my job to make clear to people that I’m more than just one thing, that I am a multi-dimensional human being.”

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McBride isn’t the first candidate challenged to strike a balance between being a political “first” and winning over voters with more than her personal identity. If she can prevail in the competitive primary, though, she’s pretty much guaranteed to nab the deep-blue seat — plunging her into tense workplace dynamics. She insists she’s ready to work with colleagues who openly question transgender identity itself, saying she hopes to bring a “cultural change” to Congress.

When a campaign volunteer asked McBride if she was ready to “educate” firebrand conservatives like Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) — who hung an office sign in 2021 that read “There are TWO genders: MALE & FEMALE.” — she replied with a laugh: “Absolutely.”



Sarah McBride, right, speaks to campaign volunteers who are heading out canvassing in Dover, Delaware, September 9, 2023. | Nicholas Wu/POLITICO

During several campaign stops on a muggy September afternoon, McBride leaned into her gender identity in largely friendly territory, arguing that recent antagonistic rhetoric about transgender rights made it impossible to ignore. Still, she said there are other parts of her story that have been more formative than her gender identity, namely serving as a caregiver to her late husband Andrew Cray during his terminal battle with cancer.

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“That’s the experience that informs my priorities and informs my policymaking more than any other,” she said.

Her first step is getting through the yearlong slog of the Democratic primary. Sen. Tom Carper's decision to retire and Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester's bid for his seat opened opportunities for a host of ambitious Democrats. McBride won't have the field to herself in the deep-blue, close-knit state, and she could face stiff competition from State Treasurer Colleen Davis and State Housing Authority Director Eugene Young. Blunt Rochester is expected to stay neutral in the race to succeed her.

The candidates have largely shied away from attacking each other so far, with Young pitching solutions for housing affordability, and Davis leaning on her statewide record as Treasurer. McBride [posted strong fundraising numbers](#) out of the gate — over \$400,000 in contributions in just the first week of her candidacy, though Young and Davis haven't posted public fundraising numbers yet. There's no independent polling of the race yet, but the Human Rights Campaign's political arm, which has endorsed McBride, on Friday released [results from a survey](#) it commissioned showing McBride with a 44 percent to 23 percent lead over Young, Davis at 13 percent, and 20 percent undecided.



Sarah McBride speaks to the Delaware Stonewall PAC at Shrimpy's Bar and Grill in Rehoboth Beach, September 9, 2023. | Nicholas Wu/POLITICO

Democratic rivals are bound to cross paths in such a small state. That's what happened when McBride gave a speech Saturday to the Delaware Stonewall PAC at a seafood restaurant in Rehoboth Beach. The group had endorsed her recently, ensuring a McBride-friendly audience.

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“We’re a state of neighbors. We run into each other all over the place,” noted New Castle County Executive Matt Meyer, who hasn’t taken a side in the congressional primary.

McBride is already something of a local celebrity, and no stranger to national politics. She made national headlines in 2011 when she came out as transgender, serving as the American University class president at the time. And she has [longstanding ties](#) to the Biden family. President Joe Biden wrote the foreword to her 2018 memoir, and McBride said his late son, former Delaware Attorney General Beau Biden, was one of her mentors.

The local star power certainly doesn’t hurt on the campaign trail. Delaware State Sen. Russ Huxtable, who’s supporting her, observed that voters tend to recognize her when they’ve campaigned together: “People are like, ‘Oh my gosh, is that Sarah McBride?’”

On top of the name recognition, her leadership record and two election victories at the state level “diminishes a lot of doubts” that voters might have over her identity, said Rep. Mark Takano (D-Calif.), who was the first openly gay person of color elected to Congress. “She has already shown that she can win.”



Sarah McBride, left walks with Aaron Rodriguez on the way to a campaign event in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, September 9, 2023. | Nicholas Wu/POLITICO

If elected, McBride would likely land on the left side of the House Democratic Caucus, saying she “wouldn’t be surprised” if she became a Progressive Caucus member. She calls herself a “pragmatic progressive,” and one of her flagship efforts in the state Senate — where she currently represents a Wilmington-area district — was enacting a law that provided statewide paid family and medical leave.

Celine Mentzer, 58, was out biking through Delaware’s Amish country when she stopped by to talk to McBride’s volunteer group in Dover. Despite being a Republican, she was considering supporting McBride because she and another Delaware state representative helped her brother get unemployment insurance during the Covid-19 pandemic when he couldn’t get through to state authorities.

“They still cared for him. So I was very impressed,” she said.

McBride could be entering an increasingly **charged congressional climate**, as partisan confrontations over transgender issues have become the norm. But she shrugged off any concerns that the GOP’s harder-line stances could affect her work in the House — or that her bathroom choice could become a flashpoint.

“My perspective is to let their cruelty contrast with my approach to politics, which is one of kindness and compassion,” she said. “Let their rhetoric of fear and division and meanness contrast with my approach that’s seeking to bring people together and bring out the best in all of us.”

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