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Elections

# Gottheimer, McCann debate as vote nears



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Democratic U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer and Republican challenger John McCann met for the final time Thursday in a debate that saw Gottheimer tout his bipartisan credentials while McCann, his opponent, sought repeatedly to tie Gottheimer to the Democratic Party establishment.



The debate, which was moderated by WRNJ's Dave Kelber and broadcast live throughout the Hackettstown-Mount Olive area, saw McCann emphasize his support for the Trump Administration's policies on the economy, taxation, immigration and border enforcement -- all of which he suggested would be undercut by handing Gottheimer and Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi a majority.



"A vote for Mr. Gottheimer is a vote for Nancy Pelosi," McCann said. "The Democratic Party has nationalized this election with the various spurious and ugly attacks on Republicans throughout the country, including here in the 5th District."

Gottheimer, without mentioning Pelosi by name, responded that "you keep bringing this up, but I've said clearly that I think we need a change in our leadership." He went on to tout his record of working not only with congressional colleagues of both parties but also with municipal officials and mayors in Sussex and Warren counties, the vast majority of whom are Republicans.

"I think my record shows I've done a lot to fight for the things that matter to Sussex and Warren counties, whether it's fighting to stop the waste mountain in Vernon that keeps growing, or to get on-site health services for veterans in Newton, or getting a new fire truck in Wantage, or clawing back money through federal grants to save us money on property taxes," Gottheimer said.

Gottheimer pledged that if re-elected, he would continue to support bipartisan efforts "to lower taxes, to stand by our veterans and cops and first responders, and to ensure we have tough borders that live up to our values."

More than anything, the congressman said, "I really believe my job is to help everyone locally do their jobs."

Gottheimer said he has also worked with local mayors and officials to expand high-speed internet access to underserved rural areas of northwest New Jersey, saying, "It's as essential as running water these days."

McCann, however, said the real culprit for the lack of internet infrastructure in parts of Sussex and Warren counties is the toxic regulatory environment of New Jersey, which he said is the result of Democratic Party policies that have also led to an exodus of money and retirees leaving the state.

"Why should businesses invest (in internet infrastructure) if they're going to be paying higher taxes and be regulated almost out of business?" McCann asked.

McCann, a former Cresskill councilman, went on to suggest that Gottheimer, a former Bill Clinton speechwriter and Microsoft executive, was insufficiently knowledgeable about how local government works. McCann also suggested the federal grants that Gottheimer has championed on behalf of local communities often have strings attached that raise property taxes in the long run.

"Being the only candidate in this race who's served in local government, I understand that federal grants often raise taxes because they require additional spending that has to be offset elsewhere in your budget," McCann said.

On immigration and border security, McCann said President Donald Trump was right to raise the question of whether children born inside the United States to illegal immigrant parents are entitled to birthright citizenship. In doing so, he faulted Gottheimer for voting last year against the "No Sanctuary for Criminals Act," which would withhold funds from state and local jurisdictions that bar officials from cooperating in federal immigration law enforcement.

Gottheimer, however, noted that he had also crossed party lines to support "Kate's Law," which would increase penalties for those who re-enter the country after being deported. The bill, which has since stalled in the Senate, is named for Kate Steinle, a 32-year-old woman who was shot and killed by an authorized immigrant while walking a popular tourist spot in San Francisco. Authorities later identified her killer as a man with seven felony convictions who kept returning to the United States despite being deported five times.

"There's a reason I have the backing of state law enforcement because I believe we need tough borders -- and my voting record, whether it's saying gang members should get out of the country or supporting Kate's Law, or calling for putting more resources at the border, reflects that," Gottheimer said.

On health care, Gottheimer faulted McCann for wanting to privatize Medicare and Medicaid -- an accusation McCann said was "a flat-out canard" -- and for wanting to gut the Affordable Care Act.

McCann, however, said "Obamacare has failed on its two central premises -- that you could keep your doctor if you want to, and that it would cut health care costs. Those two things never came to fruition. The Democrats have lost all credibility on this issue."

Gottheimer noted that he has pushed for repealing the Affordable Care Act's medical device tax and the tax on so-called Cadillac health plans, but he rejected calls for the wholesale repeal of the law, which he said has enabled 800,000 New Jerseyans to obtain medical insurance and care they would not otherwise have.

"We need to fix it, not throw it out," Gottheimer said of the Affordable Care Act.

When asked their views on President Trump, Gottheimer did not answer directly but said that Democrats and Republicans both need to make more of an effort to find common ground. He suggested doing so was never more important than in the face of hateful acts, such as the recent spray-painting of a swastika on the garage door of a Christian family in Hampton who had signs in their yard supporting Gottheimer.

"The answer is not to politicize these things," Gottheimer said.

McCann accused Gottheimer of doing just that by way of a fundraising letter sent out on his behalf shortly after the Hampton incident that implied McCann supported white supremacists. Gottheimer, for his part, told the New Jersey Herald after the debate that any such letter did not come from his campaign.

McCann, however, said the media and some Democratic politicians had done the same thing in response to the recent massacre of 11 people at a synagogue in Pittsburgh.

"The press's response to Pittsburgh was to blame President Trump," McCann said. "Why don't you (Gottheimer) stand up for the president and tell the members of your party that the president's not responsible for what happened in Pittsburgh? That would be real Jersey values. You can't have selective outrage if you want to be bipartisan."

The audio of Thursday's debate is available for listening and downloading from the **WRNJ website** and in the player below.

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