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# Senate District 17: Democratic incumbent Stewart faces GOP challenger Dixon



Anna Watts/The New York Times

FILE — Primary election voting booths at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Academy in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, on Aug. 23, 2022. Publications owned by the hedge fund Alden Global Capital, the second-largest newspaper publisher in the country, will no longer endorse political candidates in their opinion pages.

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A Democratic incumbent and a first-time Republican candidate will face each other this November as they seek to represent District 17 in the Florida Senate.

Sen. Linda Stewart, a Democrat elected in 2016, is running against Republican Steve Dixon, to lead a district covering much of east Orange County, including Conway, Lake Nona, the University of Central Florida, Christmas and Wedgefield.

The district leans toward Democrats, with about 60% of voters there having cast their ballots for President Joe Biden over Donald Trump in 2020, [according to MCI Maps](#). Democratic gubernatorial nominee Andrew Gillum carried a similar margin against Gov. Ron DeSantis in 2018.

Stewart is a longtime elected official, having served in the Florida House of Representatives from 2012 to 2014 and as Orange County Commissioner from 2002 to 2010. Her campaign focuses on protecting women's reproductive rights, combating climate change, reducing insurance premiums and supporting tax cuts.

On the other side, Dixon, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who works for a large defense contractor, is running on a "Freedom to Live Platform" that prioritizes for pro-life policy, expanding parental rights in education and pushing for a strong economy.

Both candidates acknowledge the need for more affordable housing in Orlando and the housing crisis driving rental prices up, which both said can be helped with changes to zoning.

"What we need to do is find ways through zoning that would possibly allow affordable housing to be combined with everyday housing," Stewart said.

Dixon also wants to push to bring financial help for those affected by Hurricane Ian.

“We have to see how we can bring disaster relief money here to help the people that are currently in need, but also plan for the future with the insurances and stuff, and also have a nest egg in our Florida coffers, so that we have money available to help also,” Dixon said.

On the topic of public education, the two candidates differ on recent laws affecting what can be taught in schools.

The role of parents in education is essential to Dixon’s platform. The candidate stands against what he calls the indoctrination of children with the incorporation of critical race theory and conversations about sexuality and gender.

“We don’t need to be teaching CRT and sexual education and multiple genders to third graders, second graders, first graders, you know, so I think our state is moving in the right direction,” Dixon said.

Dixon, a supporter of the voucher program in Florida, said parents should be able to choose where to send their children and have a say in the topics they are being taught.

Stewart criticizes the recent Parental Right in Education law, dubbed “don’t say gay” by critics, and the “Stop WOKE Act,” which she said could drive teachers out of the state.

“We have gone backwards and we have not provided for our teachers and you know, the bills that are coming out have been very harsh,” she said. “And our teachers, they can go somewhere else and get a job, and that’s what they’re doing.”

Stewart wants more accountability and transparency from private schools that benefit from the voucher program but don’t have to report to the state about students’ performance the way public and charter schools do.

“We’re using taxpayer money to finance private schools, some of these schools that are private, they don’t even have an educated teacher with a teaching degree,” Stewart said. “They don’t have administrators that have degrees, for some of the administrators for private schools only have a high school degree.”

Stewart said Florida's teacher shortage is a result of low wages and the introduction of unqualified teachers to classrooms.

"They are professionals and they have a right to teach the way they've been taught to teach and not have people come in just off the street and throw them in a classroom and call them a teacher ... They're not professional teachers," she said.

Dixon said teacher raises should be based on an evaluation of their performance and each educator's expertise.

The candidates differ starkly on abortion.

Dixon said he would support a total ban on abortion, which he argues is harmful to communities.

"I know it's a very tough decision for people, you know, and it wounds people across the board," Dixon said. "It is harmful to men, it's harmful to families when you know, abortion takes place. It's gonna be emotionally destructive to men."

Dixon said he views most abortions as a form of birth control, with rape and incest cases relatively rare.

"There's many loving families that would love to take care of a baby, for a child that they just simply can't afford to get through the adoption process. So maybe there's things we can do there to improve that whole situation," Dixon said.

Stewart opposed the 15-week abortion law that took effect in July. She says the law was arbitrary and intrusive to women's private health decisions — and argues more severe restrictions are on the horizon.

"This election is going to be one of the things that will hopefully stop the upcoming ban on abortion because it will happen if everybody stays in place the way that they are now, I see a complete ban on abortion through the government that exists today," Stewart said.

Stewart's platform also promises environmental protection reform, transitioning septic to sewer systems and preventing green algae in Central Florida rivers. She also advocates for solar energy.

Dixon said he prefers to encourage constituents to choose greener consumption rather than implementing laws that could have an effect on the state's economy.

“We want to use less gas, we want to use less electricity, but I think it has to happen a little bit more naturally than having the Green New Deal forced on us, which is gonna cost many people jobs,” Dixon said, referring to federal climate change legislation proposed by some Democrats. “It’s just terrible policy, you know, and it’s gonna wreak havoc across the nation.”

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