

# PRIORITIES

*What are your top three priorities for your first two years in Congress and how do they demonstrate your core values? What do you see as your role in trying to achieve these?*

## **Beth Ellen Aduato**

Housing costs, food insecurity, and medical costs are undeniable stressors for working American families. Even in some of the wealthier zip codes in our district, food insecurity is on the rise. Affordability is on everyone's minds, so most candidates will be—rightfully—running on this issue. As a person who is struggling to make ends meet, I completely understand the need to immediately address these so-called kitchen table issues. If my employer raises the premiums on my healthcare, I will have to make drastic cuts in my budget elsewhere.

The first steps that the new Congress should take must alleviate some of the everyday stress: Restore ACA cuts, make wealthy people pay their fair share, start subsidizing healthy foods for all Americans (other countries do it!), free lunch for all public school students and finally, raise minimum wage and end the gender-pay-gap! As for my overall, long-term priorities, the following will--by their essence--bring relief to middle-class families and working Americans. In my opinion they are inextricably linked. For clarity's sake, however, I will give them numbers.

1. Healthcare for all. I have been to a doctor or ER in five different countries. All of these places had more affordable healthcare than we do. My experiences have countered the usual rhetoric about countries with universal healthcare—can't get a timely appointment, the doctors are inferior, etc. I have found this to be patently untrue. Aside from my obvious bad luck in other countries, I am not an expert, so I look to those who are. According to former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, "Healthcare for All" is affordable and necessary because of the extreme jump we are about to see with premiums. Healthier young people, like my daughter, will drop their coverage, leaving a pool of less healthy people, creating a sort of "death spiral." I agree with Sen. Sanders and believe that progressive income/wealth taxes could pay for this. We should definitely be able to negotiate drug prices—there was a famous episode of "60 Minutes" that showed the same drug being manufactured in Ireland and selling for (approximately) eight times the amount in the U.S. than in Canada. It is a matter of our government having the will to provide a humane approach to our citizens vs. corporate greed. I will vote every time for universal healthcare.
2. We must restore the rule of law. I wrote this section a few days ago and this morning the Trump administration "took over" Venezuela. In doing so, he not only ignored the Constitution, but also ignored the rules-based, international order. He is obviously parroting Putin's actions of ignoring these laws that were set in motion after World War II which declare—among other things—that "bigger" or "more powerful" countries cannot just invade smaller countries, that we must respect the sovereignty of nations.

The very simple rule of law says it all—no one is above the law. So, we need to set in motion the reversal of the lawlessness that is plaguing our country right now, starting with the White House.

You may say, how can there be a complete overhaul in a two-year time period? The answer is that it must be begun. The reason that Republicans have been able to win on fear of crime, fear of immigrants, fear of minorities is because we do not shine enough light on the evidence of the criminal justice system. When people fear the “other,” they will believe lies, they will vote to build more prisons (and private prisons as that! And who gets the contracts to build these private prisons? Republican donors), and they will buy more guns. How many elected members of Congress take money from the NRA? It is quite the cycle.

Obviously, our criminal justice has never been perfect. We have inequality in sentencing, we have racism in all aspects of the system, most people have what is called an A2J problem (access to justice), and women are a forgotten part of the system. Still, a legal system based on our Constitution should be a starting point, not something that has been ignored. We are now a country that pulls people off the streets, out of their cars, out of kitchens of restaurants with no access to due process. We are a country that plans to increase ICE agents and cuts funding to Head Start. We are a country who would rather lock up people than put money into crime prevention.

So, what would be my role in trying to achieve this? I would try to join the judiciary committee, but even if I were not on that committee, I would be vocal about the issue. I am not trying to go to Washington., D.C. to be mealy-mouthed. Obviously, people who are in a “Trump bubble” do not believe facts when they are confronted. Perhaps, if we hold town halls across the state and the country and make people understand the truth about crime. Make people understand that their neighbors have been dehumanized in order to feed a political machine. We may not reach everyone, but we can reach enough people to stop our country from being a full-out police state.

For brevity’s sake (although not so brief so far...), let’s go to the next priority.

3. Preserve K-12 public education and stop the corporatization of universities. Right now, only 25% of the American population has children attending public schools. This erodes the support necessary for maintaining and improving public education. The trend toward home-schooling as an alternative to “woke” public schools conveniently allows for such things as the teaching of propagand and the whitewashing of history. We need to stand strong with union educators both on the collegiate and K-12 levels. The federal cuts to education can be supplemented in a wealthier state such as NJ, but they still show up somewhere. From speaking with elected officials across CD7, it seems that our public schools K-12 are okay for the meantime. Federal research funding that was cut from Rutgers has been restored...for now, but the smaller colleges are suffering. The elimination and/or reduction of student visas has had a deleterious effect on many university programs around our state. Additionally, they are cutting loans for graduate school, so anyone who is not wealthy enough to write a large check may not be able to pursue post-graduate education. As one Rutgers student rightly said, “This is by design.”

We need to restore the status of the college courses that the administration has recently “down-graded” to non-professional studies. Interestingly, the majority of those programs are those that are traditionally female-dominated. All of this is on purpose—to keep the masses undereducated and more readily influenced by the government.

Let’s also call it what it is...a return to an America when those who went to college were white, wealthy, Protestant, and male. The second committee I would try to join, therefore, is the Committee on Education and the Workforce.

Finally, these three priorities—as with most of public policy—affect women more than they affect men. We are in a time when women’s rights are--once-again—at issue. The Peter Thiels and the JD Vances and the Pete Hegseths are obviously trying to recreate the United States in a way that takes away freedoms, keeps more people poor, unhealthy, uneducated, and obstructs voting rights. Right in Project 2025, there is a section about women not having the right to vote anymore.

Before we can go back to progress, we must redress the social ills that have been inflicted upon our people.

## **Brian Varela**

My top three priorities are lowering costs for working families, protecting healthcare access, and defending our democracy and the communities under attack by this administration.

**First, affordability.** I’m the son of Colombian immigrants. My mother was a waitress and factory worker, my father drove trucks and limos. I know what it means to stretch a paycheck and worry about being behind on your mortgage. Too many families in New Jersey are working harder than ever and still falling behind because the economy is rigged for the ultra-wealthy and well-connected. I’ll fight to stop corporate price gouging, lower the cost of housing and childcare, and push back against reckless policies like Trump’s tariffs that are driving up prices on everything from groceries to gas. Working families shouldn’t pay the price for this administration’s chaos.

**Second, healthcare.** I watched my mother battle cancer while wondering which of the doctor’s visits would end up bankrupting us. No family should have to choose between putting food on the table and affording life-saving medication. I’ll fight to achieve universal healthcare as a right for all Americans, lower prescription drug costs, protect Medicaid from Republican cuts, and defend reproductive freedom. Politicians have no business making private medical decisions for women and families.

**Third, defending our democracy and targeted communities.** I was the first candidate in this race to reject corporate PAC money because I believe our government should work for the people, not special interests. But this is about more than campaign finance, it’s about standing up to an administration that is attacking the foundations of our democracy and going after immigrant families, including families like the one I grew up in. I’ll fight to protect voting rights, get big money out of politics, and be a voice for the communities this

administration is trying to scapegoat and tear apart. My parents came here for the American Dream. I won't let anyone destroy it.

These priorities reflect my core values: that hard work should lead to economic security, that healthcare is a right, and that democracy only works when it belongs to all of us. My role in Congress won't just be to cast the right votes, it will be to organize, fight back, and be a voice for working families who have been ignored for too long.

## **Megan O'Rourke**

1. Healthcare reform;
2. Protect labor rights;
3. Agriculture & Environment.

My core values include providing opportunity and a safety net for the working class and future generations. These priorities are requisite to turn this vision into a reality. As a Congresswoman, I will advocate to serve on committees such as the Agriculture Committee and Energy & Commerce committees. I was a senior advisor in Congress in 2023-2024 and know strategies to introduce bills and build coalitions and submit amendments. Moreover, I will hold constituent services in the highest regard to understand and serve individual needs in the district.

## **Michael Roth**

I have spent my entire career in service to make life more affordable and provide more opportunity to folks in New Jersey and across the country, and that is exactly what I would do once elected. My broad goals are to lower the cost of living for working families, bring home federal resources New Jersey is being denied, and make Washington work for the people it is supposed to serve. Each of these priorities can be advanced with a Democratic majority in the House with Trump as a lame duck President.

In my first two years in Congress, I would prioritize: 1) rewriting the tax code for the working- and middle-class, 2) making housing affordable for all generations, and 3) building a 21st century economy with six figure jobs here in New Jersey.

New Jersey is unaffordable, and taxes are a huge reason why. Republicans have used the tax code to reshape the American economy in favor of ultra-wealthy billionaires and multinational corporations. We need Democrats with a vision of how to rewrite the tax code for working families. The contrast between Tom Kean Jr. and me is clear. Tom Kean Jr. was the decisive vote on a tax plan that gave trillions of dollars of tax breaks to billionaires and corporations, leading to the largest wealth transfer from the poor to the wealthy in history. I invested \$1 trillion into working families when I led the Paycheck Protection Program and narrowed the wealth gap for the first time in decades. On Day One, I would work to repeal tax breaks for corporations and the ultra-wealthy through the reconciliation process to allow for the restoration of healthcare and SNAP benefits and clean energy investments and start building a coalition for a new tax plan that would:

- Cut taxes for middle-class families, working parents, small businesses, and seniors on fixed incomes so that people can keep more of their hard-earned dollars.
- Make billionaires and multinational corporations pay their fair share.
- Promote fiscal responsibility and long-term economic security by rejecting tax policies that primarily benefit billionaires at the expense of future generations.
- Fully restore the SALT deduction to end the double taxing of New Jersey families.

Nearly half of NJ residents say they're likely to leave because of the cost of housing. New families can't afford to move in. Seniors can't afford to move. And recent graduates have no housing options near opportunity.

I co-founded the Economic Opportunity Coalition, bringing together eight federal agencies and a bipartisan group of 26 U.S. Senators to align tens of billions of dollars of private investment for housing affordability. I successfully helped thousands of nurses, teachers, and first responders to afford to buy their first homes. With a nationwide housing crisis, I am uniquely suited to lead bipartisan comprehensive reforms to housing that would:

- Make it easier to build housing near new job opportunities and transit.
- Cut red tape and incentivize zoning reform to build more homes.
- Expand first-time homebuyer tax credits.
- Refund excess property taxes above 5% of income for seniors.
- Provide property tax credits for residents 65+ who downsize within New Jersey.

Even with a world-class education and workforce, New Jersey ranks 49th in business friendliness, 49th in wage growth, and last in kids returning home for jobs. The economy is changing rapidly and New Jersey is getting left behind. Through my work in both the public and private sectors to catalyze industries and to create millions of jobs, I would tackle this head on and:

- Make NJ-7 a hub for advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and life science jobs.
- Turn abandoned shopping malls, corporate parks, and brownfields into job and innovation centers.
- Bring home federal investments to build the industries of the future.
- End the unchecked development of warehouses across our towns.
- End Trump's tariffs on our allies to lower costs on groceries, construction materials, prescription drugs, and everyday goods.

In the first two years I will also focus on bringing resources back from Washington for New Jerseyans for clean water, flood prevention, and transit. These are all things that can be done in the first two years with Trump still as President.

From there, we need to build out legislation that can be passed in my second term with a Democrat as President with priorities to make healthcare affordable, accessible, and accountable with a public option and making Washington work for us by reforming government and ending corruption.

These priorities show that I will lead with the core values I have always led with — listening to the needs of the people I’m serving, dignity for all people, accountability for delivering for constituents urgently, and progressive pragmatism. I understand what a member of Congress can actually accomplish legislatively and through soft power during a Trump presidency.

I am ready on Day One to lead on these priorities because I have done it before. When I led the U.S. Small Business Administration during the pandemic, members of Congress called me day and night. They demanded answers, pressed for results, and held me accountable for delivering aid to their constituents. That is how Congress is supposed to work and the level of urgency and accountability I will bring to the office.

Too many members of Congress have abdicated that role. They stop showing up for oversight, outsource governing to lobbyists, and treat politics as performance instead of responsibility. My role in Congress will be to reverse that. I will legislate seriously, conduct real oversight, and use the power of the office to deliver concrete results for NJ-07. I know how Washington works when it is functioning properly, and I will not accept a version of Congress that does less than the people deserve.

## **Rebecca Bennett**

- Holding the current Administration accountable. The current Congress has completely abdicated its responsibility to be a coequal branch of government. Right now flipping the House is critical to provide some form of accountability to the current Administration. I’m a pragmatic, common sense leader who looks for common ground to work with people to make life better for all of us.
- Affordability. As a mom of two, I fully understand the challenges of balancing work & family while navigating inflation and the rising cost of living. I want to pursue policies in Congress that will help bring down costs for families in New Jersey.
  - Healthcare. After I left the Navy, I started working in healthcare. I’ve worked at earlystage startups and Fortune 50 companies, and I’m ready to stand up to anyone who tries to strip away healthcare from New Jersey families. We have to expand access and bring down costs for patients, and I’m excited to bring my experience in healthcare to Congress.

National security. I served in the Navy for over a decade as a helicopter pilot, experimental test pilot, and aircraft commander. The use of new and improving technologies, including AI and drones, are only making the world more dangerous. It’s time for Congress to have a new generation of veterans who can speak to national security issues with steady leadership and the experience necessary to help keep America safe.

## **Tina Shah**

As a practicing ICU doctor, I see patients who frequently have to make the tough decision between affording basic needs like rent, gas, and electricity and going into debt to pay for lifesaving medical care.

This affordability crisis has reached a boiling point, and it’s time we actually get our politicians to do something about it.

Instead, Trump and MAGA enablers like Tom Kean, Jr. have attacked our healthcare, rolled out chaotic tariffs, and have done nothing but make the rich even richer.

That's why priorities one, two, and three for me in Congress are lowering costs for the residents of New Jersey's 7th Congressional District. I believe every single American should have access to high quality and affordable healthcare – and that's just one piece of our current affordability crisis. As a doctor, I never planned to run for Congress, but after watching our healthcare system fail my patients again and again, and seeing how Congress is not doing its job to help Americans, I have to step up. I will bring the stories of my patients and our community members, along with deep federal policy experience to solve the challenges facing our district.

I'm running to repeal Trump's tariffs, which drive up the cost of groceries, household necessities, and cars, while causing job cuts, drowning small businesses, and tanking our economy. I want to lower housing costs for those just starting their families and for our seniors.

I plan to do everything I can to prevent medical debt from bankrupting people, by pushing for bans on reporting medical debt to credit bureaus and garnishing wages or using property liens or seizures to pay medical debt.