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Jenkins confirms run for Congress

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Senator says he's ready to fight criticism for switch

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The Herald-Dispatch

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HUNTINGTON -- State Sen. Evan Jenkins ended weeks of speculation Wednesday when he switched his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican and announced he will run for West Virginia's Third Congressional District seat.

Jenkins' candidacy sets up a scenario in which he will face longtime Democratic incumbent Nick J. Rahall in the 2014 General Election if Jenkins makes it through the GOP primary. No other Republican has declared candidacy for the position.

"This decision comes from the heart, from my years of being in the Democratic Party and seeing the struggle," Jenkins said during a news conference at the Cabell County Courthouse. "They talk a lot now, and you'll hear words about loyalty and that I'm a traitor. But, I'm telling you, I cannot be loyal to the Obama agenda."

The 52-year-old attorney and executive director of the West Virginia State Medical Association said he will not resign from his Senate seat, meaning he will finish out his term in 2014 as a Republican. Jenkins represents Cabell County and a small portion of Wayne County with Sen. Bob Plymale, D-Wayne, in the Fifth Senatorial District.

Senate President Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, removed Jenkins from his leadership positions in the Senate on Tuesday for refusing to dispel rumors that he was switching parties and running for Congress. Kessler said he does not want anyone on his leadership team who does not show decisiveness or loyalty.

Jenkins was chairman of the Minority Affairs and Pension committees. He also was vice chairman of Health and Human Resources Committee.

"There's a lot of people who will not like the fact that I have stood up for what I believe in and will want to try and tear my house down," he said. "It's a fight I think I have to step up to the plate and take on."

According to Cabell County voter registration records, Jenkins registered as a Republican in 1988 but switched to Democrat in February 1993 just before he entered state politics. He first served in the House of Delegates from 1994 until 2000 when he lost a bid for a seat on the state Supreme Court. He was elected to the state Senate in 2002 and was re-elected in 2006 and 2010.

"Our Constitution is clear. You can vote for whoever you want, and you can align yourself with whatever party you want," Jenkins said in response to questions about his second party switch in as many decades.

Jenkins wasted no time during the news conference launching an attack on President Obama's policies and claiming that Rahall has closely aligned himself to them.

"Nick Rahall claims to stand up for coal but voted for the budget that would destroy coal jobs in our state and significantly increase utility rates on all West Virginians," Jenkins said. "He says he supports health care, but he was an Obama Democrat who pushed through Obamacare.

"We need a member of Congress to fight Obama's dangerous agenda, not campaign for it."

Jenkins is likely to receive support from the National Republican Congressional Committee, which announced in April that Rahall was one of seven Democrats in the House of Representatives that it

was target-ing for defeat in 2014. All of the House members on the list represent districts that have voted for the Republican nominee for president in the past three elections.

Jenkins' announcement also gained attention from national Republican leaders who welcomed him to the party.

"Evan recognizes that President Obama's Democrat Party has lost touch with the people of West Virginia," Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus said in a prepared statement. "As Democrats con-tinue to abandon American workers, more leaders like Evan will abandon the Democrat Party."

Democratic leaders in West Virginia, meanwhile, labeled Jenkins as an opportunist influenced by money.

"After years of supporting Congressman Rahall, it is clear Evan Jenkins is loyal only to the dollar," state Democratic Party Chairman Larry Puccio said. "When Washington Republican money came a knockin', Jen-kins went a walkin'."

The shifting political landscape in the Mountain State brought on by coal-sympathetic residents furious with President Obama also figures to make a possible contest between Jenkins and Rahall as among the most intriguing in 2014.

For starters, Democrats represented 61 percent of the registered voters in the 3rd Congressional District in October 2012, down from 68 percent in October 2006. While the GOP's representation of registered voters in the district remained unchanged at 22 percent during that same period, independent voters grew from 9 percent to 14 percent.

Rahall also has seen diminishing margins of victory. In 2006, the 19-term incumbent received 69 percent of the vote in the General Election. In 2010, after President Obama's first two years in office, Rahall received 56 percent of the vote to Elliott "Spike" Maynard's 44 percent. Rahall defeated GOP candidate Rick Snuffer by an 8-point margin in 2012.

Rahall said in a phone interview Wednesday that Jenkins should worry about a potentially contested GOP primary before targeting the Democratic incumbent. Snuffer issued a statement prior to Jenkins' news con-ference that should he enter the race, he thinks he would do well.

"Given the difference between Evan's legislative voting record and mine, plus the large lead I have in the internal polls which Washington conducted between the two of us in a primary contest, our team is confident we can be more than competitive," Snuffer said.

Regardless of who becomes the GOP's nominee, Rahall said he expects them to use the same election strategy that the Democrat has faced in the past two elections.

"Every problem we have in this state will be blamed on Obama-Rahall. If (Republicans) have a picnic and it rains, they'll blame it on Obama-Rahall," he said. "How long are they going to continue to expect that tactic to work when I've disagreed with this president on the issues that are important to West Virginia even more so than the previous Republican president? I'm talking about gay rights, abortion, trade deals, immigration, contempt citations for the attorney general, Afghanistan, NSA surveillance and, first and foremost, the EPA."

Rahall also took aim at Jenkins' party switches.

"This latest opportunity grab of his is purely for self-service, not public service," Rahall said. "All I can do is travel from one end of this district to another meeting people and not take one vote for granted. I certainly won't be at home with my family and rely on out-of-state special interests and money to get me across the goal line."

Follow H-D reporter Bryan Chambers on Facebook or Twitter @BryanChambersHD.

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Manchin appears in television ad for Rahall

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Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., hit the airwaves on Monday, in a television advertisement supporting Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., in his re-election fight against Republican challenger Evan Jenkins. The ad focuses on how Rahall and Manchin are working together to oppose what both men call President Obama's "war on coal.

"We hear a lot of outrageous things in politics today, but none worse than the lies being told on TV against our friend Nick Rahall, Manchin says in the ad. "Don't let anyone mislead you. Nick Rahall knows West Virginia values. We need Nick Rahall in Congress.

Rahall then says he approves of the new ad's message "because I'll never let anyone change our way of life.

Asked whether Manchin plans to record ads for any other candidates - specifically for Secretary of State Natalie Tennant, running for the U.S. Senate against Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., and three other candidates -- Jonathan Kott, a campaign spokesman for Manchin, said, "I don't know what the plans are.

"As far as I know, we have done only one ad for Nick Rahall. I don't have any idea if any other ads are coming out, Kott said.

The ad, called "Straight Shooter, is the first television advertisement Manchin has done this year for any political candidate, although he has campaigned in person for Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., according to a Politico story from last week. In that story, Manchin said he would welcome the chance to campaign for other conservative Democrats, but said he wouldn't campaign against any current U.S. senator.

Rahall, first elected to Congress in 1976, is involved in a tight race against Jenkins, a state senator from Cabell County and executive director of the West Virginia State Medical Association.

Jenkins left the Democratic Party in July 2013 to run against Rahall as a Republican. That came 20 years after he switched the other way, from Republican to Democrat, and was elected to the House of Delegates. He lost his bid for a seat on the state Supreme Court in 2000, then was elected to the state Senate in 2002.

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