

TO: Interested Parties
 RE: Pennsylvania's Democratic Primary for U.S. Senate Landscape
 DATE: July 23, 2026

Pennsylvania's 2028 U.S. Senate race opens as a toss-up - Democrats hold a narrow four-point edge on the generic ballot (42%-38%), well within reach for either party. But the defining story is inside the Democratic Party. Incumbent Senator John Fetterman has inverted his own coalition. He is now far more popular with Republicans than with the Democrats who would decide a primary. The incumbent's collapse with the Democratic base (-71 job approval among Democrats) is the destabilizing force in this field. If he runs for re-election, the primary likely becomes a referendum on him. If he does not, the dynamics somewhat reset.

In this scenario, the topline is uncomfortable and instructive, for moderates. In a hypothetical matchup between progressive U.S. Rep. Summer Lee and moderate U.S. Rep. Brendan Boyle, Summer Lee is dominant. The gap widens rather than narrows once voters are given a balanced description of both candidates.

Three topline takeaways:

- **Lee leads the unaided primary 28% to 11%, with 62% undecided.** The race is wide open in the sense that most Democrats have not engaged, but Boyle starts a distant second in a two-name field.
- **Majorities have never heard of Boyle, Lee.** Both tested figures are not well known by Democrats. 61% of Democrats have never heard of Boyle, and 54% have never heard of Lee. That is a strategic asset in this dataset, because a blank slate is the one thing a well-funded, disciplined campaign or outside effort can build on.
- **Information moves the race toward Lee, not Boyle.** After both candidates are described in balanced bios, Lee expands to 65% and Boyle rises only to 17%. Boyle's positive frame is genuinely strong, but the negative frame lands with the base - after the balanced profile, which includes the AIPAC/big-donor critique and his Laken Riley vote, Boyle draws just 7% of progressives and 1% of DSA-aligned voters, who together make up a large share of a low-turnout primary.

A conditional path for Rep. Boyle exists if he can define himself before Lee's campaign or the DSA-aligned left does it for him, consolidate the moderate-to-liberal lane that Lee does not own, in a hypothetical scenario where the Fetterman question is answered, which shadows the field.

The Ballot: Where The Hypothetical Primary Stands Today

Asked head-to-head with no additional information, Democrats break as follows. Figures are the share of all Democrats, ideological columns show the self-identified Democratic coalition.

Early Democratic Primary Ballot (Dems Only)						
	All Dems	Strong Dem	Progressive	Liberal	DSA-aligned	Moderate
Summer Lee	28%	27%	36%	26%	39%	23%
Brendan Boyle	11%	12%	7%	9%	4%	17%
Not sure	62%	61%	58%	65%	56%	59%

The early Democratic primary is defined by low name recognition and ideology. 61% of Pennsylvania Democrats have not heard of Brendan Boyle, and 54% are unfamiliar with Summer Lee (more below). Amid that fog, Lee holds a clear edge, strongest among base voters who view the socialist label warmly.

After Introductions, Lee Consolidates

Once voters read short, neutral profiles of the candidates, Lee expands to a commanding lead in both tested matchups. Her introduction lands more strongly than Boyle's: 86% of Democrats would consider supporting Lee after learning about her, versus 50% for Boyle. A similar progressive-vs-moderate hypothetical between Lee and Conor Lamb shows Lamb at 16% to Lee's 58%, but respondents were not given a description about Conor Lamb.

Informed Democratic primary head-to-heads (Democrats)						
	All Dems	Strong Dem	Progressive	Liberal	DSA-aligned	Moderate
Summer Lee	65%	67%	82%	70%	92%	51%
Brendan Boyle	17%	17%	7%	17%	1%	23%
Not sure	18%	16%	11%	13%	7%	26%

Favorability: The Definition Battle

Favorability is where Boyle's asset appears. Boyle is a blank slate (+10 net among Democrats, but ~80% no opinion). Whoever defines Boyle first - his own campaign, Lee's, or the online left - will shape the informed ballot. Lee is defined among those who know her, and base-beloved (+22 net among Dems, +33 progressives, +32 DSA-aligned). Her ceiling among the primary electorate is high and her floor is firm. Conor Lamb is the quiet variable. Lamb occupies the same moderate lane Boyle needs. If both run, they split and hand Lee an uncontested plurality.

Favorability			
	Net Fav (All)	Net Fav (Dems)	Never Heard/Neutral (Dems)
Brendan Boyle	-2	+10	79%
Summer Lee	-3	+22	70%
Conor Lamb	Even (0)	+23	62%
John Fetterman	-3	-68	10%
DSA	-24	+47	39%

The Democratic-Socialist Question

61% of Pennsylvania independents (51% all voters) say they are not likely to support a figure who identifies as a Democratic Socialist.

Likelihood to vote for a candidate who identifies as a Democratic Socialist		
	Independents	All
Very likely	7%	24%
Somewhat likely	8%	14%
Not too likely	12%	5%
Not at all likely	49%	47%
Not sure	24%	11%

Because Lee is aligned with the party's democratic-socialist wing, the survey tested how voters react to that label. The findings capture a real tension. Inside the party, “Democratic Socialists” are an asset - fighters for working people who bring fresh energy. But in the broader electorate, the brand is a drag. A self-described Democratic Socialist nominee nets -13 overall and -47 with independents, and pluralities call them “too extreme to win.”

Perceptions of “Democratic Socialists” (net agree)		
	Independents	Democrats
Fight for working- and middle-class people	-29	+72
Bring new energy and fresh ideas	-29	+65
Care about people like me	-43	+61
Are too extreme to win general elections	+25	-27
Would raise taxes on people like me	+27	-40
Would make it harder for Democrats to win	+30	-21

The General Election: A Toss-Up

Neither named Democrat outperforms the generic ballot, and Lee runs marginally better against a Republican than Boyle does. This may be opposite of the conventional “moderate is more electable” assumption, but it is too early to determine the extent of the electability case with these results driven by primarily name recognition.

General Election Hypothetical Matchups			
	Dem	GOP	Margin
Generic Dem vs. GOP	42%	38%	Dem +4
Summer Lee vs. GOP	43%	43%	Even
Brendan Boyle vs. GOP	41%	42%	GOP +1

Pennsylvania is genuinely competitive, and the generic House ballot is Democrat +5. This is a winnable seat, not a safe one, which is precisely why electability arguments carry weight with primary voters who remember 2016 and 2022.

Recommendations & Next Steps:

Boyle faces a difficult but not insurmountable path. Lee leads on current metrics and gains, not loses, from information. The primary electorate skews toward the ideological lane Boyle does not own. The negatives in his tested profile (AIPAC/big donors, Laken Riley) fall along the base's fault lines, while the positives are general-election strengths that primary voters discount.

But the assets are also real, and they are the kind that a serious, well-resourced campaign and outside effort can use as a foundation to win. Boyle is undefined, not disliked. His authentic blue-collar biography and record are exactly the profile that reassures general-election voters. The seat is competitive, so electability will be an active debate among voters.

In the meantime:

- **Define Boyle before the opposition does.** Commission a definitional message test that pits Boyle's blue-collar / anti-corruption / Budget-fighter frame against the tested AIPAC and Laken Riley attacks, to learn whether the negatives can be neutralized or must be avoided.

- **Top Issue for PA voters is Healthcare.** 56% of Democrats, and 41% of all Pennsylvania voters, say the issue candidates for public office should most focus on is the cost of healthcare. Use the opportunity to highlight the Choose Medicare Act to create Medicare Part E, a public option, to force insurers to compete with better coverage to lower costs.
- **Build and begin seeding a positive introduction.** Earned media, district-to-statewide profile-raising, and coordinating validators so those who have no opinion of him form one on his terms. Every month of delay is a month the opposition frame sets by default.

Methodology:

This memo draws on a Change Research survey of 1,074 Pennsylvania voters, conducted July 10-15, 2026. The full-sample modeled margin of error is approximately ± 3.3 percentage points. Figures are percentages, rounded to whole numbers, and may not sum to 100 due to rounding and omitted "not sure" responses.

Brendan Boyle profile:

Brendan Boyle is a 49-year-old Democratic U.S. Representative from Philadelphia, now in his sixth term and the top Democrat on the House Budget Committee. The son of an Irish immigrant and the first in his family to attend college, he has become his party's leading messenger against Republican budget and Medicaid cuts, co-founded the Blue Collar Caucus to win back working-class voters. Supporters say he is a strong, authentic fighter with a blue-collar story and a record of winning tough races. Critics say he is too close to party leaders and big-money donors, including pro-Israel PACs like AIPAC, to be a genuine fighter for the progressive base, point to his pro-Israel record and his 2025 vote for the Republican-backed Laken Riley Act, and argue his attacks on Senator John Fetterman are more about his own ambitions than principle.

Summer Lee profile:

Summer Lee is the 38-year-old Democratic U.S. Representative from Pittsburgh, the first Black woman to represent Pennsylvania in Congress and a member of the progressive "Squad." Supporters say she has beaten big money twice in a working-class district - including a 2024 primary in which more than \$600,000 was spent against her - won her general elections by double digits and delivered by her office's count more than \$2.7 billion in federal investment back home for infrastructure, housing, and clean energy. They point to her signature anti-corruption bills, her push that forced the release of the unredacted Epstein files, and her selection to give the Working Families Party's national response to the 2026 State of the Union. Critics say she is too far to the left for a battleground state, citing her repeated votes against aid to Israel, her opposition to fracking in a major gas-producing state, her support for Medicare for All and a wealth tax, and her past ties to the Democratic Socialists of America. Critics argue that a progressive could put a swing seat at risk if she decides to run for statewide office.