

Danbury, Elections

## Coelho Takes Aim at Senate Opponent, Outlines Education Plans

— Robert Storage, 7.14.2024



Republican Michelle Coelho is challenging State Sen. Julie Kushner, D-Danbury (CT Examiner).

DANBURY — In a hotly contested State Senate race, Republican Michelle Coelho criticized State Sen. Julie Kushner, D-Danbury, for accepting an award two years ago that has connections to the Communist Party, a controversy that Coelho says motivated her to run for the seat in 2022.

That motivation, Coelho recently told CT Examiner, has remained strong as she challenges Kushner again this November.

“Julie Kushner’s acceptance of the Connecticut People’s World Amistad award in December 2021 motivated my decision to run for the state senate in 2022,” said Coelho, who lost to Kushner by about 1,400 votes in that race. “My opponent’s record and sponsored bills reveal a troubling ideological shift from a republic toward socialism, the same policies and rhetoric that led to the recent economic collapse in Venezuela and Cuba only one generation ago. ... My opponent’s actions and rhetoric reminded me of the disastrous consequences that Communism brought to Cuba. I am committed to ensuring that Connecticut’s 24th District does not follow the same path.”

Coelho, a first-generation Cuban-American, added, “I am intimately aware of the devastating impact Communism has on families and societies.”

The **award ceremony** also marked the 102nd anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party USA.

The senator didn’t directly respond to questions about the award, but said in a statement to CT Examiner on Wednesday that Coelho, “Is thoroughly MAGA. These are all just typical MAGA attacks and grievances because the last thing she wants to talk about is her desire to restrict abortion or defund our public schools. ... The voters in our area know me and the things I’ve gotten done for working families, and they won’t be fooled by Michelle Coelho’s MAGA extremism.”

Coelho, emphasizing local control in education and zoning as core issues, was also critical of Kushner’s opposition to bringing a charter school to the city and supporting a bill that would have paid striking union workers.

The bill, which was vetoed by Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont, was called a “striking workers slush fund” by Coelho.

Coelho, a member of Danbury’s Board of Education, said she will fight to bring a charter school to the city if elected. The 24th Senate District covers Danbury, as well as parts of Ridgefield and New Fairfield.

There has been a strong push by Republicans for a charter school in Danbury — which has been approved but not funded — but the city's Democratic legislative delegation generally opposes the idea.

“We are the only city in the state with the largest high school [of almost 4,000 students] that has no charter school,” Coelho said. “We don't have choice; that is my main issue, choice. I have a son who had some issues and putting him in only one environment, you just might as well pull the string and watch him spin. A charter school provides you everything that the public school does. It provides them opportunity in a smaller environment.”

Also on the education front, Coelho said there are too many unfunded mandates being imposed by the state at a time when the district is struggling with absenteeism and other issues.

“We can't get teachers; we can't get staff. We can't get our kids to show up at school,” she said.

Specifically, Coelho pointed to the Right to Read law passed 2023 that requires schools to shift to a reading program aligned with the science of reading and mandates that curricula incorporate phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, fluency, reading fluency, oral skills and reading comprehension.

“We spent the money [about \$3 million] on the mandated program; it's a lot of money and I'm not sure about the results,” she said, noting that imposing such a program uniformly may not be sensible given the differing needs of urban and rural school districts.

Coelho has lived in a section of Danbury that borders New Fairfield for 23 years. She has been a small business owner for three decades, having run a health club and as a construction developer. She said more needs to be done to help small businesses in the state thrive.

She called small businesses “the character and engine of our district” and said she would support measures related to tax abatements and tax breaks if elected. She also said the minimum wage, which now stands at \$15.69 an hour, has hurt the small business community and believes the market should dictate what the wage rate should be.

On other issues, Coelho said she supports abortion rights but is against late-term abortions and believes abortions should be a rare occurrence.

“That is not a subject that is easy. It’s so layered,” she said. “It should be with the doctor, and we should not have the government [involved in] this issue.”

Regarding the 2020 Police Accountability Act, Coelho said the law ties the hands of police officers, noting she’s strongly against a provision in the measure that makes it easier for officers to be sued directly.

Coelho said she also supports the Second Amendment, and believes there are enough laws in Connecticut regarding gun control and gun safety.

Asked about rumors within the district that she attended former President Donald Trump’s speech at the Ellipse in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6, 2021, Coelho responded, “I’m not responding to the distraction. ... There’s too much going on here.”

## **Robert Storace**

Robert Storace is a veteran reporter with stints at New Britain Herald, the New Haven Register, the Connecticut Post, Hartford Business Journal and the Connecticut Law Tribune. Storace covers the State Capitol for CT Examiner. T: 203 437 5950

 [Robert.Storace@ctexaminer.com](mailto:Robert.Storace@ctexaminer.com)