

# Fancy Farm 2025 shaping up to be Republican free-for-all

BY MCKENNA HORSLEY  
KENTUCKY LANTERN

This weekend, Kentucky politicians hoping to make an impression with voters will travel to far West Kentucky for the annual Fancy Farm Picnic.

However, Kentucky’s top Democrats will skip the event this year, meaning Republicans will largely dominate the stage at the political speaking event. But with a few Republicans also skipping this year’s event, some political strategists worry the time-honored tradition is losing its relevance.

Political speeches will begin Saturday at 2 p.m. local time under the shaded pavilion in Fancy Farm. The town is about a 40-minute drive southwest from Paducah. Barbecue goes on sale by the pound starting at 8 a.m, with \$17 per pound for mutton and \$13 per pound for pork. A fish fry and races, including a 5K, are held the Friday evening before the picnic.

The barbecue picnic, a fundraiser for the St. Jerome Catholic Church in Graves County held the first Saturday in August, has become a premier Kentucky tradition for elected officials and election hopefuls. In front of a fiery crowd politicians take to the stage to trade verbal jabs with their opponents, typically seated behind them watching the spectacle themselves.

Kentucky has no statewide elections this year, but the top three Republican candidates for next year’s U.S. Senate race — U.S. Rep. Andy Barr, former Attorney General Daniel Cameron and Lexington businessman Nate Morris — will give speeches this year. The primary is in May.

Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear said in a Spectrum TV interview that he will not attend the picnic this year because of a scheduling conflict. He did not attend last year, but was still the target of jokes from Republican speakers. The only Democratic candidate for the Senate invited to the picnic, state Rep. Pamela Stevenson, has declined to attend this year, along with Lt. Gov. Jacqueline Coleman. A spokesperson for Coleman told the Kentucky Lantern that she believes the picnic “should be reserved for candidates who are currently on the ballot so they can share their vision for the commonwealth with our neighbors in west Kentucky.”

In addition to the Republican U.S. Senate candidates, speakers for the afternoon are Republicans state Rep. Kim Holloway, state Sen. Jason Howell, U.S. Rep. James Comer, Attorney General Russell Coleman, Agriculture Commissioner Jonathan Shell and Treasurer Mark Metcalf.

Some Republicans — U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, Auditor Allison Ball and Secretary of State Michael Adams — are not attending.

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Republican and Democratic supporters cheer on Saturday, Aug. 3, 2024, during St. Jerome Picnic in Fancy Farm.

“It always bothers me when people skip unless there’s a really good reason, and usually there isn’t a really good reason,” said Trey Grayson, a former Republican secretary of state who has spoken on the Fancy Farm stage several times.

The picnic puts a political spotlight on a rural region of Kentucky that doesn’t always get the most attention from Frankfort, which is hours away. Grayson said that the picnic gives politicians a chance to interact with not just people in the region, but party activists, press and others from across the state. Before the Saturday speeches, both political parties have dinners and festivities to build up excitement and organize.

“There’s still elections in Western Kentucky,” Grayson said. “I always thought when Republicans didn’t go that it was a loss for our party, that we were letting down our party activists. So when Democrats who can otherwise go choose to not go, they’re letting down their Democratic activists.”

Grayson added that he does worry about the future of the event if politicians continue to skip. He noted that governors of both parties have skipped on occasion in recent decades.

Fancy Farm came about in a time before the “viral” moment that candidates can now use, said Morgan Eaves, the executive director of the Kentucky Democratic Party. She added that while candidates are out on the ground to meet Kentuckians across the

state, “they also have a lot of digital media opportunities to grow their fundraising and their name ID and influence voters and their opinion of that candidate.

“So looking at it through today’s political lens, it’s simply just a lot less relevant because there are a lot more opportunities for folks to get out in different communities in the state, and those events are covered on a much thorough basis than they were kind of in Fancy Farm’s heyday,” Eaves said.

Democratic candidates should be “everywhere a voter is, particularly in an election year,” but they should not “put themselves in a position in which they will be unfairly targeted, either by the other individuals on stage or or by the audience,” Eaves added. This year, she predicted that the Fancy Farm audience will see “a Republican bloodbath” as they rib each other heading into the primary or attack the record of U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, who isn’t seeking reelection and has not yet confirmed if he will attend this year. The three top candidates have tried to distance themselves from McConnell.

Because of its long history, Eaves said she expected Fancy Farm to continue, but some alternative ways to connect with voters exist, like town halls.

“There are already alternatives to Fancy Farm, but Republicans are throwing them (away). Republicans aren’t showing up to them. Republicans aren’t

going out in their different communities in their districts throughout the state,” Eaves said. “They are instead just using one standalone event in Western Kentucky when they should be using alternatives and listening to people across the state. They’re just not that interested.”

Belle Townsend, Kentucky State AFL-CIO spokesperson, told the Lantern that the labor union respects that it’s a fundraiser for a local church, but “the format of the event is more about political theater than substance.” Union organizers would rather focus on “working people and real economic issues affecting their lives, and that is rarely what is at the center of what happens on that stage.”

“This is not the only place to get angry,” Townsend said. “We can get angry on the picket line, in places where the energy can be put towards something that, once again, builds long term change.”

The event has become less important for Democratic candidates because they’ve been outnumbered in recent years, said Jonathan Miller, a former Democratic state treasurer who has also appeared as a speaker. He said it was hard to even hear himself speak at times because of the crowd’s yelling.

“It is just an unreal experience, and it becomes something that I think is helpful in character building for many candidates, but in other ways, reality is not reflective of true

policy or political reaction, because it is so, so loud, so angry and so noisy, so it’s become a bit of a spectacle, as opposed to have a meaningful political exercise,” Miller said.

The events leading up to the picnic are “the best of Kentucky politics, the best of American politics,” Miller said because people are coming from Frankfort and other parts of the state to an area “that’s often ignored, and having kind of traditional handshaking, baby kissing, types of interactions with grassroots political supporters.”

Up and coming candidates who want to make a name for themselves might find more value in going to the Fancy Farm Picnic, Miller said.

However, the event mainly featured Democrats when they were the dominant party in Kentucky. Republicans gained control of the state Senate around the turn of the century and the state House in 2016.

McConnell, a Republican from Louisville, began attending the event in the 1980s and was ultimately

elected to the U.S. Senate in 1984. Republican Party of Kentucky spokesperson Andy Westberry said that at the time “you could fit nearly every elected Republican in Kentucky into a phone booth.”

“It’s a shame Democrats no longer see the value in showing up,” Westberry added. “It wasn’t that long ago when we were the ones outnumbered. But no matter how hostile the crowd was, Republicans always showed up. That’s one of the reasons we now dominate Kentucky politics.”

The “event is just as important today as it was over 40 years ago,” he said, calling it a “a litmus test that shows voters in west Kentucky their support matters.”

Eaves said McConnell’s early attendance happened “when times were really different.”

“Social media wasn’t around,” she said. “People’s news sources were much different. The news cycle itself looked a lot different, and the opportunities for candidates and voters alike looked a lot different.”

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