

# [***New York Democrats are worried about Tuesday's special election. They have good reason to be***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B9M-89X1-DY7V-G00X-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Plainview, New York (CNN) &#8212; How bad were the 2022 midterm elections for Democrats in New York? One way to explain it: Republican [*George Santos*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/05/politics/george-santos-replacement-seat-suozzi/index.html)' victory in the state's 3rd Congressional District might have been the highlight of their year.

Santos' troubles began in earnest six weeks after his surprising win, and after a year of scandal and outrage that sullied and undermined leading local Republicans, he was gone - one of only six members to have been bounced from the House and only the third since the Civil War - and the seat was open. Democrats would get another bite at the apple.

But as the special election to succeed the disgraced former congressman has made painfully clear to Democrats, Santos' victory was not a fluke or anomaly. What had been a safely blue suburban Long Island seat for most of the past three decades is, once again, shaping up to be a political battleground.

Days out now from [*Tuesday's expensive and fiercely contested matchup between*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/takeaways-new-york-3-special-election-debate/index.html) Democrat Tom Suozzi, 61, a former House member and a staple of Nassau County ***politics*** since first being elected mayor of Glen Cove in 1993, against little-known Mazi Pilip, a 44-year-old Ethiopian-born, Israeli American county legislator, the race is widely considered a toss-up. Suozzi's brand is still strong; he ran the county during some of its best economic times, before his first election to Congress in 2016. But Pilip, though her ideological bearings remain fuzzy and she has been at times hard to find on the campaign trail, has the prevailing political winds at her back - and the opportunity to both put a stamp on the GOP's restored primacy on Long Island and emerge as an up-and-coming national figure ahead of the fall's general election.

Ten or 15 years ago, the political dynamics currently roiling the New York suburbs might have seemed as far-fetched as Santos' claims to a career as a Broadway producer. (Less so 40 years ago, when Republicans ran roughshod here and Ronald Reagan alluded to Nassau County as a Republican's idea of heaven.) But cascading crises, from a home-building and affordability crisis to more recent panic over crime and immigration, have swung back the pendulum.

Nassau County in 2024 is sharply divided and - in a word - angry. It's a lot like other places across the country that could determine President Joe Biden's fate in his expected November rematch with former President Donald Trump.

"Long Island is running hot, and when people run hot, they run Republican," said Alyssa Cass, a Democratic strategist. "George Santos was not an accident. His election was the direct result of years and years of careful Republican recruitment, party building and outreach in Long Island."

Democrats on the brink, and Republicans on the rise

Though the district broke for Biden over Trump by 8 points in 2020, the signs of a Republican renaissance - and diminishing returns from a disjointed Democratic state party - were soon to come on display.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer lost the county while otherwise cruising to reelection in 2022. The year before, Democrat Laura Curran, the top official in Nassau County, was ousted by Republican Bruce Blakeman. GOP gains continued into 2023 - well after the Santos fiasco was in full flight - and Republicans are now close to dominant in local offices.

Tuesday's special election, though, is unique in a number of ways. Where New York Democrats garnered little national attention in 2022 - until their slew of losses in suburban seats across the state helped the GOP win control of the House - the party is full throttle behind Suozzi this time out. It also helps that Brooklyn's Hakeem Jeffries is now the top House Democrat.

"Hakeem is a beast - for better or for worse," said one progressive Democratic operative, who spoke anonymously because of the delicate nature of intrastate ***politics***. "I appreciate the fact that he's realized that, if you leave the race in the state party's hands, we're all going down."

New York state and Nassau County Democratic Chairman Jay Jacobs, who rejected calls to resign after the Santos debacle, praised Jeffries and his leadership team for their support - particularly when it's come to campaign cash - but also suggested that, back in 2022, the local party suffered as much for a lack of interest from national Democrats as their own missteps.

"Everybody's paying attention, where they really weren't and we were on our own the last time," Jacobs told CNN. "The county organization did its job last time. It's doing its job this time. No Democratic voter is going tell you they didn't hear from the party."

Still, questions remain about the recent Democratic failures, most notable on the island, but also across the state.

"Historically, there has never really been a strong (Democratic) party infrastructure here because the state party was just the governor's thing," Curran told CNN. "He could boss it around and tell it what to do. So there's not a machine, there's not a real boots-on-the-ground operation."

It's been a different story this campaign. Grassroots progressive groups like Engage Long Island, which is part of the Indivisible network, have been feverishly knocking on doors - taking their case directly to like-minded neighbors. And Suozzi has massively outraised Pilip, taking in $4.5 million to her $1.3 million, according to Federal Election Commission filings that cover the beginning of October through January 24 of this year.

Curran, a centrist ally of Suozzi, doesn't blame former Gov. Andrew Cuomo or Jacobs for the state party's failures - her ire is directed at leftist Democrats in New York City Hall and the state Legislature. But more liberal New York Democrats often point to the current problems as Cuomo's legacy. And even with Cuomo gone, Jacobs is now, again, a trusted ally of the governor, Democrat Kathy Hochul, who clinched a full term in 2022 - but only by a little more than 6 points. (Four years earlier, Cuomo had won reelection by 23 points, with about 60% of the vote.)

Suozzi, Curran and others said the special election might be Democrats' last best hope to stop Long Island's red tide from surging further, noting Suozzi's name recognition and personal political brand - a straight-talking, go-everywhere moderate - in comparison with Pilip's aversion to gladhanding on the trail.

"Here's someone who has proven that he can fix the problem and wants to fix the problem. But is that what people are looking for right now, or are they just so mad at the Democrats that they're not listening?" Curran said of Suozzi and district voters. "Honestly, Tom is the one who can win this race - if a Democrat can win it."

Larry Levy, a former local journalist who is now the executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University, offered the same mixed blessing to Suozzi and Nassau County Democrats.

"The outcome (of the race) will be a measure of how the Democratic brand can affect races all over the country," Levy said. "If Suozzi can't withstand the damage the Democratic Party has sustained over inflation, Israel and immigration, then I'm not sure who could."

In an interview with CNN, Nassau County GOP leader Joe Cairo agreed that Suozzi has a unique brand but said the former mayor, county executive and congressman's long record in office cuts both ways.

"Tom Suozzi on his signs, he's saying, 'Let's fix it.' Well, who broke it, Tom?" Cairo said. "You were in Congress."

Hot button issues such as the migrant influx, mixed in with the fight over abortion rights and a housing and cost-of-living crisis on Long Island, have driven a special election campaign that has seen the airwaves dominated by ads and mailboxes stuffed, almost daily, with campaign literature from both parties.

Though no single contest - much less an almost pop-up special election conducted under unusual circumstances - can claim to foretell what comes next in national ***politics***, "Suozzi vs. Mazi" (it rhymes) comes awfully close. In a nod to the dim views of Democrats and Republicans in this swing district, neither Suozzi nor Pilip advertise their party affiliation on the thousands of lawn signs now staked out across the district. Pilip initially refused to say who she voted for in 2020, before eventually telling the New York Post over the weekend that she "proudly" cast her ballot for Trump. In sum, Nassau County looks a lot like the suburban areas around the country that are expected to play an outsize role in determining the 2024 presidential race.

"You'll hear from Democrats, if they lose, that this really isn't a bellwether because Nassau County has been an outlier nationally," Levy said. But, he added, while nothing is certain, "the reality is that the issues are going be the same, whether it's ... Montgomery and Bucks counties in Pennsylvania or Oakland County, Michigan."

What distinguishes Nassau County from some of those other traditional battlegrounds is its proximity to America's biggest city, where political moods tend to filter out into the suburbs and, in recent years, concerns over public safety and, more recently, a growing migrant housing crisis are dominating the headlines.

"We look west and we see what's happening in New York City, whether it is crime, migration, affordability issues. Even if it's not here in our backyards, because we live off of New York City, basically," said Mike Florio, a former top Suozzi staffer in Congress turned CEO of the Long Islanders Builders Institute. "What the Republicans are able to do is tie the issues you see in New York City and say, 'If you go with the Democrats who control New York City, you know, we can end up like that.'"

Some of the asylum-seeking migrants whose presence has scrambled local ***politics*** are currently living in a relief center near the Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens Village, which sits inside the 3rd District's borders. During their Thursday night debate, Pilip - as she's done in commercials and mailers - claimed Suozzi, who represented the district from 2017 to 2023, and Biden were responsible for the mess. (The city's migrant surge started when Republican Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas began busing people north in 2022.)

"Tom Suozzi opened the border. Tom Suozzi funded the sanctuary city. Tom Suozzi kicked ICE from Nassau County," she said, before addressing Suozzi directly: "You have to own it."

For his part, Suozzi has sought to brush off the attacks as absurd. His fight with ICE, he said, came at the behest of a police chief whose officers clashed with ICE agents more than 15 years ago during his time as county executive. The broader thrust of similar attacks, he said early on in the debate, was not credible.

"For you to suggest I'm a member of 'the squad' is about as believable as you being a member of George Santos' volleyball team," Suozzi said to some laughter in the hall.

In fact, Suozzi did once express affinity for "squad" members - an informal coteries of House progressives - though not in the context Pilip and other Republicans have described. Suozzi made the remark in 2019, shortly after then-President Trump said Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib - all of whom are American citizens - should "go back" to their countries.

"I don't agree with all the ***politics*** of the squad. I'm a Democrat. I don't agree with a lot of their ***politics***," he said that summer. "But today, I want to be an honorary member of 'the squad.' Because I want to fight against this un-American, racist type of behavior."

Suozzi, too, has sought to lump in Pilip with more divisive characters, including Santos. On Thursday night, he called her "unprepared and unvetted" and then sought, during a tense and protracted exchange, to get her to explain contradictory positions on abortion and gun laws.

Pilip says "every woman should have that choice (on abortion) to make their decision" but also calls herself "pro-life." She opposes both a national ban on abortion and the codification of Roe v. Wade, backing the Supreme Court's Dobbs decision and saying that the issue should be decided at the state level. Pilip has also said "automatic weapons" should be banned - which they are - but does not support a new assault weapons ban, which would outlaw firearms such as the semi-automatic AR-15.

Suozzi also zeroed in on Pilip's rejection of the bipartisan border security deal, hatched in the Senate, as a cop-out to Trump, who denounced it.

"We finally have a chance to have a solution," Suozzi said, "but we're not going to do it because President Trump said it'll help Biden?"

Nerves, not excitement, among voters

On the ground in Nassau County, though, there is less talk about the nitty-gritty of the issues and more of a prevailing dissatisfaction with both parties and their leaders - even a candidate like Suozzi whom they know and mostly like.

Jim Fornaro, 66, a local resident and former registered Democrat who once backed Suozzi and still calls him "a great guy," told CNN on Thursday that he plans to vote for Pilip this week.

"A lot of things in the country, in my opinion, aren't going in the proper direction. So another person who votes with Biden 100%, I don't look at it," Fornaro said. "I'm really voting against Suozzi."

Others are planning to sit out the election, bummed over the choices.

"Suozzi has shown for a long time who he is - just a bureaucrat. And Mazi, I don't know," said Nestor Oginar, a Macedonian-born former professor and Republican who doesn't intend to vote. "I think she's a newcomer, so we don't know what she is. But I think she's pandering to certain groups of (voters)."

Though Santos rarely comes up in conversations with voters, his saga enraged rank-and-file Long Island Democrats, who had previously spent time writing post cards to encourage voters in states like North Carolina. Now, that mail is landing here.

Suozzi canvassers Rachel Klein, 44, and Stephanie Visconti, 47, leaders with Engage Long Island, told CNN that Suozzi might not have been their first choice - but the stakes, at home and with the whole country watching, are too steep for hair-splitting.

"I hope Democrats have learned like what it's like to not have representation and how important it is to flip this seat back so that they'll show up," Klein said Thursday, after a morning canvassing here and in New Hyde Park. "But I guess we'll see on Tuesday."

Visconti's message was similarly pragmatic.

"I definitely am left of his center," she said of Suozzi, but his election to a closely divided Congress would have one main upside for her.

"We'd be one step closer to having Hakeem Jeffries be our speaker," Visconti said, "of flipping and moving forward as a nation."

By Gregory Krieg and Veronica Stracqualursi, CNN

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