

# [***Takeaways from New York's high-stakes special election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BB6-6PY1-JBSS-S00J-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Democrat Tom Suozzi is heading back to Congress [*after defeating*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/ny-special-election-santos-02-13-24/index.html) Republican Mazi Pilip in [*the special election*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/13/politics/santos-seat-tom-suozzi-mazi-pilip/index.html) to replace serial fabulist and expelled former GOP Rep. [*George Santos*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/01/politics/george-santos-expel-resolution-vote/index.html). The [*result*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/results/new-york/special-election/us-house-district-3) will further narrow the GOP's already thin House majority and hand President Joe Biden's party a boost as the general election campaign comes into focus.

Suozzi's success provides [*Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) and national Democrats with a much-needed narrative reshuffle - a bit of good news during a period when concerns over the president's paltry poll numbers and intensifying worries over his age, or how it's perceived by the electorate, has stoked anxieties about the likely coming rematch with former President [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45). Yes, the district broke cleanly for Biden in 2020, but Democrats on Long Island had been losing there ever since - until Tuesday.

Both parties poured cash into the race for New York's 3rd congressional district, but Democrats' fundraising and registration advantage combined with Suozzi's brand - he's spent most of the last 30 years at or around the center of Long Island ***politics*** - and a fired-up base, angry over the Santos fiasco, delivered a victory that means the House GOP will now become even harder to corral.

For Pilip, who has vowed to run again in the fall, defeat meant an almost immediate rebuke from Trump, who called her a "very foolish woman" in a social media post Tuesday night. Pilip refused until the final days of the campaign to say whether she voted for Trump in 2020, though she did follow his lead in dissing a highly touted bipartisan Senate border bill - a decision that helped Suozzi tie her more tightly to the former president over the last week.

As Democrats celebrate and Republicans dust themselves off, here are the takeaways:

Immigration is a big issue - but is it a game-changer?

The campaign was staked on a series of issues from the beginning: immigration, inflation, Israel and abortion. Suozzi talked about reproductive rights but didn't make it a centerpiece of his campaign. Inflation has mostly leveled out. And there was no political or policy space to speak of between the candidates who both fully backed Israel.

Understanding this, Pilip and Republicans set about hammering Suozzi over the migrant crisis in New York City, claiming he caused it along with Biden - a line that ultimately didn't quite wash with voters who have long recognized Suozzi as a moderate or centrist. When Pilip suggested he was in league with the progressive "squad," Suozzi at their debate was prepared.

"For you to suggest I'm a member of the squad," he said, "is about as believable as you being a member of George Santos's volleyball team." (And that was before a knowing reference to Rick Lazio, which only seasoned New York voters would appreciate.)

Most notably, though, Suozzi and state Democratic leaders didn't repeat their mistakes from 2022. They aggressively countered Pilip's migrant message and it never felt like the issue, typically a winner for the GOP, put Suozzi on the backfoot.

Redemption for top New York Democrats

Suozzi's win is also a major coup for the New York Democratic Party and its leaders, who came under heavy criticism from within over its candidates' underwhelming performances in the 2022 midterms.

Backed by lots of outside cash, new grassroots organizations, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries and his political operation, along with top state and local Democrats - Gov. Kathy Hochul and state party chair Jay Jacobs, specifically - the party simply could not allow the seat to slip away again. Not after the Santos mess, not with the entire country watching and the White House desperate for a (proxy) win.

Victory has a hundred fathers, and they all did some well-deserved peacocking on Tuesday night. If not redemption, the New York Democratic Party in this special election earned a reprieve. Whether it can translate what worked - with different, perhaps weaker candidates - in the fall remains to be seen.

But there's no debating, after this result, that they'll be given every opportunity.

The weather mattered

Though not for exactly the reasons one might immediately expect.

It snowed heavily in the tri-state area for the first time in years Tuesday, which made travel tricky, closed schools and otherwise disrupted the normal flow of an election day. Good thing then for Democrats that, unlike many Republicans in thrall to Trump, they very much embrace the idea of early voting.

As the storm swept through Queens and Long Island on Tuesday, Republican groups and the Pilip campaign scrambled to drive - literally in some cases - their voters to the polls. The top GOP House super PAC made hay on social media over spending a relative pittance on plows to clear roads in Republican-friendly areas.

But if the snow didn't really stick, it appears GOP rank-and-file distaste for banking votes early did. As yet unknown statistics will provide a clearer picture of what went wrong for Pilip, but the weather definitely clouded the picture.

Democrats (still) have an Israel problem

There stood Suozzi, all smiles, as he prepared to begin his victory speech, when he was interrupted by protesters accusing him of aiding and abetting a "genocide" by Israel in Gaza.

Then it happened again. And again.

Nevermind his rival was arguably more inclined to support Israel - she was a member of the Israel Defense Forces before moving to the US, after all - in its deadly monthslong military campaign. The interruptions were as much a message to Democrats, especially Biden, as the once and now future congressman from a heavily Jewish district.

Though little will be made of a brief demonstration before a speech, the anger among progressive grassroots - young voters even more so - is real, and it is not going away. It might not add up to more votes for Republicans in the fall, but as things stand, it seems sure to eat away at Democratic support.

And in an era of fine political margins, that's a problem.

Don't take away too much

This race was always going to take on national significance, both because of the stakes in the House and the makeup of the electorate, which is largely similar to suburban swing districts in presidential battleground states.

But Democrats would be wise to remember that Suozzi was a unique - and uniquely talented - candidate with deep ties across Nassau County, where most of the voters reside. A former mayor, he became the first Democrat elected to the county's top job in more than three decades when he won it in 2002. After losing his bid for a third term and some time away, he returned to become a congressman - winning the seat three times, including a defeat of Santos in 2020, before leaving for a failed gubernatorial bid in 2022.

Simply stated, Suozzi had a record, and for all the ads launched against him, voters in the district knew who he was - a moderate who courts labor and will aggressively push for the return of the state and local tax deduction, or SALT, that just about everyone on Long Island wants back after Republicans jettisoned it as part of their 2017 tax cuts.

It also remains to be seen how exactly the district-wide vote broke down. Suozzi appears to have exceeded expectations in Queens - a diverse borough of New York City and not a suburb - which could yet mean the town helped him as much as the country. (Democratic Rep. Grace Meng from the neighboring 6th congressional district, and the area's Asian American voters, delivered above and beyond for Suozzi.)

Pilip, on the other hand, was a relative unknown going into the race and a relative unknown coming out of it. A county legislator, she made precious few public appearances, held a handful of notable events outside the district, and seemed unsure of how to position herself in relation to Trump.

By Gregory Krieg, CNN

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