

# [***Democrats scramble to stave off defeat in battle for Santos' House seat***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B88-9HW1-DY7V-G00B-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Great Neck, New York (CNN) &#8212; President Joe Biden carried New York's 3rd Congressional District by 8 points just four years ago. The freshman GOP congressman here, George Santos, was [*expelled from the House*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/01/politics/george-santos-expel-resolution-vote/index.html) after a damning scandal.

Then Democratic bosses made a safe choice by selecting a former congressman from the area with decades of political experience - [*Tom Suozzi*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/09/politics/former-rep-tom-suozzi-launches-campaign-for-george-santos-house-seat/index.html) - to take on a little-known Republican, [*Mazi Melesa Pilip*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/14/politics/mazi-melesa-pilip-new-york-santos/index.html), who is new to the national scene.

And, leaving little to chance, Democrats are pummeling the airwaves, outspending Republicans by nearly $4 million in the two-month race to fill Santos' seat.

Yet just over a week before the February 13 special election, it's Democrats who are sounding the alarm.

"It's a very tough seat," Suozzi told CNN. "Democrats have been losing everything on Long Island and northeast Queens for the past three years. The Democratic brand is in trouble here, and we have to do a lot to overcome that."

The blunt warning from Suozzi underscores what officials in both parties are seeing in the closing days of the race: Voter anger over the handling of the southern border has become a central issue - especially as scores of migrants have been [*sent to New York*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/26/us/new-york-city-asylum-seekers/index.html), many of whom now live in this district that encompasses parts of Queens and Long Island. It's a strategy that mirrors the GOP's successful campaigns from 2022 when Republicans railed on crime in New York City - something Suozzi concedes still hurts the Democratic brand.

It's Suozzi who now has endured an onslaught of GOP attacks over immigration - forcing him to put out two ads defending himself - as he tries to seize on the issue by promoting his own push for legislative action and support for the Senate's bipartisan deal.

And the 61-year-old Suozzi - a former county executive who represented the 3rd congressional district for six years before launching an unsuccessful bid for governor in 2022 - is doing all this as he tries to keep his distance from an unpopular president of his own party, whom Republicans are trying to tie to him.

"I can pretty much guarantee the president is not going to be coming to campaign," Suozzi said when asked if he wanted President Biden to join him in the final days of the race. "I don't think it would be helpful, just as I don't think Donald Trump would be helpful to my opponent."

Suozzi added: "This race is really very local. It's Suozzi versus Mazi."

Pilip has a different assessment of her party's presidential front-runner.

"He's a great president," she said of Trump. Asked if she wanted to campaign with him, Pilip said, "Of course he's welcome to help me ... if he can come to help me, I will appreciate that."

What happens in next week's special election will be felt across the political spectrum. A Pilip win would be a huge jolt for the GOP and would give it a playbook to replicate - railing on immigration and Biden - in swing districts and states across the country.

Yet a Suozzi victory would mark a major step for Democrats in their quest to retake the majority - where a handful of seats occupied by New York freshmen Republicans will be central in the fall fight for control of a chamber where the GOP holds the slimmest of majorities.

But even though Biden won this district by 8 points, turnout is expected to be considerably lower in a special election, meaning it's unclear which party will be favored. Moreover, the Nassau County Republican Party is widely considered a well-organized political machine and could give Pilip a key boost. And the diverse district has a strong contingent of independent voters and working-class Democrats, a mix of voters who have made the GOP successful in local races for years.

Moreover, Pilip - a 44-year-old Ethiopian-born Israeli immigrant who served in the Israel Defense Forces - has presented a unique challenge for Democrats. As a county legislator since 2021, Pilip is little-known district-wide. And despite being the choice of local party leaders to be the GOP candidate in the special election, Pilip is a registered Democrat.

Yet in its first ad attacking Pilip, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee labeled her as "hand-picked by MAGA" - an ad that frustrated Suozzi and his allies, according to multiple sources. The reason: Democratic critics were worried about giving her credence with the GOP base and energizing Trump supporters in a low-turnout election.

Asked if he agreed with the DCCC's attack on Pilip, Suozzi said: "The right characterization is we don't know what she is. We don't know what she stands for. She's really been so opaque, so non-transparent in this race that we really don't know what she stands for."

Pilip wouldn't call herself a "MAGA Republican," but says many immigrants initially registered as Democratic voters - just as she did.

"But you know what: The Democratic Party left me and many others," Pilip said.

Suozzi has attacked Pilip for being private about her views - a notion she is trying to dispel.

"It's just another lie," Pilip said. "He's under a lot of stress. He's feeling it. I'm about to win this election."

Pilip weighs in on hot-button issues

In her interview with CNN, Pilip laid out some of her views. She opposes abortion rights and said she backed the Supreme Court decision that struck down Roe v. Wade, saying abortion laws should be left to the states. She opposes a national ban on abortion but is not in favor of codifying Roe.

"I have faith in the Supreme Court," Pilip said. "They made the right decision to move it to the states."

And she attacked Suozzi over Democratic ads suggesting Pilip would back a national abortion ban.

"I'm just telling you this party, the Democrat party, will do everything to gain power. That's all," she said. "They don't have rules or nothing."

On gun control, Pilip said that she opposes access to automatic weapons, which are already heavily regulated under federal law. But she suggested she doesn't favor reinstating a ban on semi-automatic rifles, like AR-15s.

"Again, the only one I don't support is automatic weapons," she said.

And while she supports making Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas the second Cabinet secretary in history [*to be impeached*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/politics/impeaching-dhs-secretary-mayorkas-committee/index.html), she suggested that she favors an [*inquiry into Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/02/politics/house-impeachment-biden-republicans/index.html) but isn't ready to back impeaching him yet.

"The House has the obligation to investigate everyone because nobody is above the law," she said.

Pilip defends Trump but won't reveal past votes

Yet while Pilip says she'd back Trump if he's the nominee, she refused to say whether she voted for him in 2016 or 2020.

"It happened three years ago," Pilip said. "I wasn't even an elected official."

Suozzi says Pilip's answers on Trump won't fly.

"For most people, it is a personal decision," Suozzi said. "She's running for the United States Congress. Please tell us who you supported in 2016 and 2020."

Pilip said she'll back Trump if he becomes the nominee, but wouldn't say whether she'd still support him if he is convicted of a crime.

"I don't want to answer on that," she said when asked whether she would back Trump if he were to be convicted. "He was a great president, did great things."

Then, she attacked the prosecutions against the former president, going after Manhattan prosecutor [*Alvin Bragg*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/19/politics/alvin-bragg-manhattan-district-attorney-trump/index.html), who led the charge in the hush-money case. She also dismissed Trump's federal charges, including allegations he [*mishandled classified records*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/politics/trump-white-house-records-mar-a-lago-documents-case/index.html) in a federal case and the Georgia case over his [*efforts to overturn the 2020 election results*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/08/politics/trump-fulton-county-georgia-immunity/index.html).

"I know that he didn't commit any crime."

And Pilip wouldn't say whether she holds Trump responsible for the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol.

"This is again the same people who are politically motivated trying to run after (Trump). It's such a dangerous thing for our country. We have to stop it."

Suozzi keeps Biden at arm's length

Suozzi is hardly as effusive about the leader of his party, saying, "I approve of a lot of things he's done, and I disapprove of other things."

On immigration, Suozzi said Biden should have been more aggressive in taking on the problems at the border.

"I would like the president to do a better job regarding immigration," Suozzi said. "Take the issue they're attacking on, make it your own. Propose a comprehensive, bipartisan solution. And if the Republicans go along with it, great, we move forward as a country. If they don't go along with it, you say, 'Hey, are you just playing ***politics***?'"

Now that the Senate is proposing a bipartisan deal, Suozzi said he was going to "flip the script" and argue that Republicans "are just trying to politicize the issue and weaponize it instead of actually solving the problem."

Pilip says she supports the House GOP's border security bill, HR-2, a conservative plan that Democrats in the Senate call a "non-starter." Asked whether she believes the House should vote on any Senate deal that the chamber passes, she said she would wait to see the details first.

"When I go to Congress, I will make sure we're going to have a plan that's going to secure our border," she said.

Ashley Corum contributed to this report.

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