

# [***Takeaways from the New York special election debate***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B93-X671-JBSS-S00H-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Democratic former Rep. Tom Suozzi and Republican Nassau County legislator Mazi Pilip squared off Thursday night in the first and only debate of [*their race to replace*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/02/politics/george-santos-special-election-fundraising/index.html) disgraced former Rep. [*George Santos*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/23/politics/george-santos-court-hearing/index.html) - a heated affair that underscored [*the contest's national stakes*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/05/politics/george-santos-replacement-seat-suozzi/index.html).

Santos himself was largely an afterthought as issues like immigration and abortion - which have roiled New York's 3rd Congressional District along with the rest of the country - dominated the debate.

Though Suozzi made occasional reference to Santos, usually in suggesting that Pilip is similarly "unvetted," the pair - along with News 12 anchor Rich Barrabi and the town hall-style audience - steered clear of the fantastical fiasco that gripped the district for the better part of last year. Immigration, abortion, the economy and Israel - an issue on which the candidates tried to one-up each other in proclaiming their support and bona fides - dominated the conversation as Suozzi and Pilip both sought to downplay ties to their respective parties, neither of which rate highly in the suburban district.

Suozzi, who has held multiple offices in Nassau County (the district also includes a piece of Queens), comes into the contest as the better-known quantity, having only left his House seat in 2022 to run for governor. When that attempt failed, and the Santos saga drew to a close, he was the clear choice for Long Island Democrats.

Pilip is a less familiar face but brings a distinct background - she was born in Ethiopia before emigrating as a child to Israel, where she attended school and served in the Israel Defense Forces. She is also a registered Democrat, though she has pledged to change that after the election.

Suozzi had pushed for more debates, but after some protracted wrangling the rivals settled on a one-night only showdown. With early voting underway in a race leaders from both parties view as a general election bellwether, here are the takeaways

Immigration takes center stage

New York City's migrant housing crisis has been the focal point of the campaign, both because of the tense ***politics*** surrounding it and the fact that Pilip and Republicans have spent most of their time and money hammering Suozzi over his alleged role in creating it - along with, as Pilip repeatedly said, President Joe Biden.

On Thursday, she again accused Suozzi of "opening the border" and demanded that he "own" the issue, pointing to his past criticism of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and support for sanctuary cities.

Suozzi, a moderate Democrat and former member of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus, rejected the charge, accusing Pilip of misleading the public about his record - which included a bipartisan immigration reform attempt with former GOP Rep. Peter King - and deriding her as a big talker with no coherent plan of her own to fix the problem.

His main talking point: Pilip's announcement earlier this week that she would not support a bipartisan Senate bill that would have tightened border security and provided aid to Ukraine and Israel. Like most Republicans in Washington, Pilip publicly turned on the legislation after former President Donald Trump rejected it.

"We finally have a chance to have a solution, but we're not gonna do it because President Trump said it'll help Biden?" Suozzi said, before noting that the since-scuppered deal would have sent desperately needed funding to New York.

Pilip said she would support building more border wall, increasing the number of border agents, "closing the border," and stricter checks on asylum seekers. Suozzi, in turn, argued that almost all of what she wants was in the Senate bill and that Republicans - even if Trump gets back to the White House and they win control of Congress - are never going to get a better deal.

Suozzi touts his brand

Suozzi has held office on Long Island for most of the three decades since he was first elected mayor of Glen Cove, on Long Island's North Shore, in 1993. During the debate, he frequently questioned Pilip's qualifications and ability to make legislation move on Capitol Hill.

"The reality is, I know how government works. I know how to get things done. I know who to talk to, how to stop things and how to make things happen," Suozzi said, adding that Pilip is good at "pointing out the problems" but has offered "no solutions whatsoever."

Suozzi leaned on his well-honed brand to fend off a flurry of attacks from Pilip, who has sought to paint him as a leftist.

"(For) you to suggest that I'm a member of the Squad is about as believable as you being a member of George Santos' volleyball team," Suozzi said to chuckles. "So, it's just not credible."

Pilip at times became frustrated, and at one point, during an exchange over abortion, took a step toward Suozzi's lectern. The Democrat responded with a deep cut New York political reference - joking that she was channeling former Senate candidate Rick Lazio, who infamously infringed on then-candidate Hillary Clinton's turf during a 2000 campaign debate.

"You know the difference between me and you?" Pilip eventually said. "You are a talker, I am the person who will deliver when I promise to deliver."

Questions about abortion

Another fiery exchange between the two candidates came on the issue of abortion - as Pilip accused Suozzi of lying about her stance and Suozzi pushed Pilip to answer whether she'd vote to codify abortion rights protections.

Asked by a voter about her stance on the issue, Pilip said, "When it comes to abortion, every woman should have that choice to make their decision."

"I chose to be a mother of seven children. That was my choice. I'm not going to force my own belief to any woman. Therefore, I'm not going to support (a) national abortion ban," she said.

Turning to face her opponent, Pilip called on Suozzi to apologize to her and to voters for "lying about my position when it comes to women's rights." He did not. Instead, he again pushed her to answer how she can both say that abortion is a choice for women to make while not backing laws that would guarantee it.

"Are you saying you're pro-choice?" Suozzi asked Pilip. "Are you pro-choice?"

"It is a personal decision. It is a personal choice. Every woman should have that choice. I'm not going to tell her what to do," she replied.

Suozzi continued to ask her whether she's "pro-choice" several more times. "Just say you're pro-choice," he said, almost tauntingly, to her after a long back-and-forth.

"I am Mazi Pilip. I am pro-life. This is me," she said, declining to deliver a clear answer.

Pilip did not point to any specific legislation she'd back that would fit with her platform, but again reiterated that she would not back a federal restriction on abortion.

What about George?

Though it was only Suozzi and Pilip on stage, Santos - who was booted from Congress in December - wasn't completely absent.

Pilip, who had initially endorsed Santos and later called for his resignation, acknowledged that the Santos scandal was "frustrating" and said that the former congressman "lied to all of us." She swore to the accuracy of her resume, while Suozzi insisted he's an "open book" and has been "examined over and over again."

Suozzi, however, used the opportunity to criticize Pilip for not participating in more debates as this was their first, arguing that debates provide voters a chance to "fully vet the candidates and understand what they stand for, clear as day."

"I wouldn't have brought George Santos up in this race because everybody's sick of George Santos. They've had it with George Santos. They don't want to hear about George Santos anymore," Suozzi said. "But how can you run for Congress in this post-George Santos world and not be completely transparent? It's shocking to me and I think it's shocking to the voters as well."

By Gregory Krieg and Veronica Stracqualursi, CNN

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