

Inside Elections

with

Nathan L. Gonzales

Nonpartisan Analysis

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New York 3 Special: Nassau County Clash

By Jacob Rubashkin

The antics and alleged crimes of George Santos have put a spotlight on New York's 3rd District for over a year. But the lights are brighter than ever now that Santos has been expelled and the 3rd District is up for grabs in the first competitive House special election of the cycle.

A former Democratic congressman who gave up this seat to run a quixotic bid for governor and a local Republican legislator with a made-for-TV biography but limited political experience are locked in a two-month sprint for control of the 3rd District.

The House GOP's working majority is thin and growing narrower by the day, as members resign and miss significant time for health reasons. A win for Democrats in the 3rd District would make life more difficult for new Speaker Mike Johnson, and easier for Democrats hoping to reclaim territory in New York later this fall.

The Lay of the Land

The 3rd District spans the northern half of Nassau County on Long Island, encompassing all of North Hempstead, Glen Cove, and almost all of Oyster Bay. The district also includes Levittown in the town of Hempstead, and a sliver of Queens in New York City.

A dense suburban district, the 3rd is tied closely to New York City's economy — a 2017 study by the city found that 31 percent of Nassau County workers commuted to New York. Roughly 50 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree (33rd among 435 congressional districts) and the median income is \$119,185, the 14th-highest in the nation.

White residents make up roughly two-thirds of the district's citizen voting-age population; Asian-Americans another 18 percent and Hispanics 10 percent. Just 4 percent of residents are Black.

In 2018, every Democratic statewide nominee won the district by double digits. And in 2020, the 3rd voted for Joe Biden by 8 points, 53-45 percent.

But the 3rd swung hard toward Republicans in the 2022 midterm

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2024 House Ratings

Toss-Up (5D, 7R)

CA 13 (Duarte, R)	NY 3 (Vacant, R)
CA 27 (Garcia, R)	NY 4 (D'Esposito, R)
CO 8 (Caraveo, D)	NY 17 (Lawler, R)
MI 7 (Open; Slotkin, D)	NY 22 (Williams, R)
NM 2 (Vasquez, D)	OR 5 (DeRemer, R)
NC 1 (Davis, D)	WA 3 (Perez, D)

Tilt Democratic (7D)

AK AL (Peltola, D)
CA 47 (Open; Porter, D)
MI 8 (Open; Kildee, D)
OH 13 (Sykes, D)
PA 7 (Wild, D)
PA 8 (Cartwright, D)
VA 7 (Open; Spanberger, D)

Tilt Republican (9R)

AZ 1 (Schweikert, R)	NY 19 (Molinaro, R)
AZ 6 (Ciscomani, R)	VA 2 (Kiggans, R)
CA 22 (Valadao, R)	
CO 3 (Open; Boebert, R)	
IA 3 (Nunn, R)	
MI 10 (James, R)	
NJ 7 (Kean Jr., R)	

Lean Democratic (12D)

CT 5 (Hayes, D)
IL 17 (Sorensen, D)
ME 2 (Golden, D)
MI 3 (Scholten, D)
MN 2 (Craig, DFL)
NV 3 (Lee, D)
NH 1 (Pappas, D)
NY 18 (Ryan, D)
OH 1 (Landsman, D)
OH 9 (Kaptur, D)
OR 6 (Salinas, D)
PA 17 (Deluzio, D)

Lean Republican (8R)

CA 41 (Calvert, R)	PA 10 (Perry, R)
CA 45 (Steel, R)	TX 15 (De La Cruz, R)
IA 1 (Miller-Meeks, R)	
MT 1 (Zinke, R)	
NE 2 (Bacon, R)	
NY 1 (LaLota, R)	

	GOP	DEM
Solid	188	174
Likely/Lean/Tilt	29	32
Total	217	206
Toss-up		12
Needed for majority		218

Likely Democratic (12D, 1R)

AL 2 (Open; Moore, R)	NV 4 (Horsford, D)
CA 49 (Levin, D)	NH 2 (Kuster, D)
FL 9 (Soto, D)	OR 4 (Hoyle, D)
IN 1 (Mrvan, D)	TX 34 (Gonzalez, D)
KS 3 (Davids, D)	VA 10 (Open; Wexton, D)
MD 6 (Open; Trone, D)	WA 8 (Schrier, D)
NV 1 (Titus, D)	

Likely Republican (9R, 3D)

CA 3 (Kiley, R)	NC 14 (Open; Jackson, D)
CA 40 (Kim, R)	PA 1 (Fitzpatrick, R)
FL 13 (Luna, R)	SC 1 (Mace, R)
FL 27 (Salazar, R)	WI 1 (Steil, R)
IA 2 (Hinson, R)	WI 3 (Van Orden, R)
NC 6 (Open; Manning, D)	
NC 13 (Open; Nickel, D)	

*Takeovers in italics. # moved benefiting Democrats. * moved benefiting Republicans*

CALENDAR

Jan. 15	Iowa GOP Presidential Caucus
Jan. 23	New Hampshire GOP Primary
Feb. 11	Super Bowl LVII
Feb. 24	South Carolina GOP Presidential Primary

How to Measure the Partisanship of Every House Seat

By Bradley Wascher

What are the most evenly-divided House districts in the country? It's not as easy as just looking at the past presidential results, considering down ballot races can have their own unique circumstances. That's why *Inside Elections* created a metric to measure partisanship in each district.

Inside Elections' Baseline captures a congressional district's political performance by combining all federal and state election results over the past four election cycles into a single score. This index aims to approximate what the "typical" Democrat or Republican might receive in any given district.

What makes Baseline different from some of the other metrics out there is its depth. Most references to competitiveness focus on the margin in the most recent congressional election or the most recent presidential result in the district.

It's also common for other major statewide results, such as Senate and governor, to be broken down by district, especially when those races are competitive.

But Baseline — by design — requires more. Along with the offices listed above, Baseline includes all statewide elections for executive and constitutional offices, from the common (lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, treasurer, auditor) to the obscure (including mine inspector in Arizona and railroad commissioner in Texas).

Unfortunately, most states don't officially report the results of these races at this level. So in order to gather the necessary data for Baseline, we manually calculated the results of every federal and state election in every state between 2016 and 2022 by congressional district — over 750 races in total, or approximately 7,950 results when broken down across all 435 seats. By including these extra elections, Baseline seeks to cancel out individual candidate traits and race or cycle anomalies: its benchmarks for a "typical" Democrat or Republican are based on an average of practically all previous performances from each party in that district.

Looking at the current House map, including the redrawn lines in Alabama and North Carolina, the typical Democrat has an advantage in 220 districts according to Baseline, while the typical Republican has an advantage in 215 districts.

The most evenly-divided district is Iowa's 3rd, represented by GOP Rep. Zach Nunn. There, the typical Democrat's expected edge is less than one-third of a point: 49 percent Democratic vs. 48.7 percent Republican. Four other seats' Baseline margins are within a point: Nebraska's 2nd (D+0.3), Ohio's 13th (D+0.3), Arizona's 6th (R+0.7), and Wisconsin's 3rd (R+0.7). That's part of the reason why GOP Reps. Don Bacon, Juan Ciscomani and Derrick Van Orden, as well as Democratic Rep. Emilia Sykes, are on the list of competitive races.

Zooming out, 43 districts fall within a 5-point margin, with 25 of those slightly preferring Democrats. And 83 districts are within 10 points, 51 of which favor Democrats.

The most Republican-leaning district is Alabama's 4th, represented by

Rep. Robert Aderholt, where the typical Republican would expect to earn 79.1 percent against the typical Democrat's 20.5 percent — a GOP advantage of nearly 60 points. The most Democratic-leaning district is New York's 13th, represented by Rep. Adriano Espaillat, where the typical Democrat would earn 90.3 percent, 82.2 points ahead of their Republican counterpart.

Unsurprisingly, Baseline averages don't differ much from individual races: a district's 2022 Baseline margin was 97 percent correlated with the results of the 2020 presidential election, and 95 percent correlated with the 2022 House race.

These comparisons show how Baseline can be used to estimate candidate quality. For example, Biden overperformed the Democratic Baseline by an average of nearly 3 points across all districts. While there are caveats to comparing our 2022 Baseline predictions to the actual 2020 results, this lines up with other indicators — at the state level, Biden outpaced the Democratic Baseline by an average of 1.2 points, and nationally, he won the popular vote by 4.5 points — highlighting his relative strength as a candidate on multiple electoral levels.

Baseline also adds context to 2022. Generally, our metric slightly overestimated House Democrats in moderately Democratic districts — dragged down by weak showings in otherwise friendly states. In California, although Republicans won five House seats that Biden had carried two years earlier, Baseline suggests Democrats managed to do just poorly enough overall to lose without totally tanking their margins. That's in stark contrast to New York, where Republicans carried six Biden-won seats and the bottom really did fall out: Empire State Democrats underperformed Baseline expectations by 10 points on average.

Republicans, on the other hand, did not see the same attrition in GOP-favored districts. And while Democrats won the majority of House races nationwide within 5 points and 10 points, Republicans actually performed better relative to Baseline in these battlegrounds — all leading to a narrowly divided election with no definitive national narrative.

With Baseline in the books, it's easier to quantify candidate strength. Identifying which candidates are "strong" and which ones are "weak" is another basic element of political analysis. We unveil Vote Above Replacement (VAR) scores for the 2022 House candidates later in this issue.



Emilia Sykes

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

Most Evenly-Divided Districts, According to Baseline

CD	Member	Party	Democratic Baseline	Republican Baseline	Difference
IA-03	Zach Nunn	R	49	48.7	0.3
OH-13	Emilia Sykes	D	49.4	49.1	0.3
NE-02	Don Bacon	R	49.2	48.9	0.3
AZ-06	Juan Ciscomani	R	49.1	49.8	-0.7
WI-03	Derrick Van Orden	R	48.6	49.3	-0.7
OH-OI	Greg Landsman	D	49.9	48.8	1.1
WI-01	Bryan Steil	R	48.5	49.6	-1.1
CA-45	Michelle Steel	R	50.5	49.3	1.2
CA-13	John Duarte	R	50.4	49.2	1.2
NY-01	Nick LaLota	R	48.3	50	-1.8

Vote Above Replacement: 2022 House Elections

By Bradley Wascher

Judging candidate performance is often a subjective and imprecise game. Sure, you can clearly tell when a diamond is a diamond or a dud is a dud, but outside of these obvious outliers, the labels “strong” and “weak” have different definitions depending on who you ask. Particularly for House races, where public polls are less prevalent and district-level election results are harder to crunch, it’s common to compare a candidate’s performance to the previous congressional result or the most recent presidential race — if anything at all. But we can go deeper with Vote Above Replacement, or VAR.

VAR measures the strength of a political candidate relative to a typical candidate from their party within the same district. That initial benchmark is derived using *Inside Elections’* Baseline, which captures a congressional district’s political performance by combining all federal and state election results over the past four election cycles into a single score. VAR is simply the difference between a candidate’s share of the vote and their party’s Baseline. A higher VAR indicates a strong performance relative to expectations.

Across all House races in 2022 featuring one Democrat against one Republican (therefore excluding the 35 districts that went uncontested by either party), the average member-elect of Congress finished with a 2.2 VAR. Out of those 400, 310 (78 percent) earned a positive VAR — meaning they not only won their district, but outperformed a typical candidate from their party in the process. This tracks closely with our 2022 VAR calculations for the Senate, where 75 percent of members-elect finished in the green.

The fact that so many winners posted a positive VAR isn’t surprising. When comparing results between multiple election cycles, some amount of candidate “overperformance” could be chalked up to a state or district simply becoming more partisan over time. (For example, Baseline was slow to adapt to rapid polarization in states like West Virginia, leading to higher-than-expected VAR scores for many statewide Republicans.) But these effects start to wash away in the aggregate — and even through it all, incumbents continue to win re-election practically nine times out of ten, and Americans have long tended to disapprove of Congress while approving of their congressperson.

For other storylines unique to 2022, look at the VAR breakdown by party. The median Democratic member was elected with a 1.1 VAR. But

2022 Top House Democratic Underperformances, According to Vote Above Replacement

CD	Member	Percent Earned	Baseline	Vote Above Replacement
NY-14	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	70.5	79.0	-8.5
TX-34	Vicente Gonzalez	52.7	59.3	-6.6
NY-08	Hakeem Jeffries	71.6	77.9	-6.3
NY-05	Gregory Meeks	75.1	81.3	-6.2
NY-16	Jamaal Bowman	64.2	69.1	-5.0
RI-02	Seth Magaziner	50.4	55.3	-4.9
PA-12	Summer Lee	56.2	60.9	-4.7
NY-15	Ritchie Torres	82.5	86.9	-4.4
NJ-09	Bill Pascrell	55.0	59.2	-4.2
FL-25	Debbie Wasserman Schultz	55.1	58.9	-3.8

2022 Top House Democratic Overperformances, According to Vote Above Replacement

CD	Member	Percent Earned	Baseline	Vote Above Replacement
AK-AL	Mary Peltola	55.0	37.8	17.1
OH-09	Marcy Kaptur	56.5	47.3	9.2
ME-02	Jared Golden	53.1	45.2	7.9
TX-32	Colin Allred	65.4	58.2	7.2
TX-07	Lizzie Fletcher	63.8	56.9	6.9
NH-01	Chris Pappas	54.0	47.7	6.3
NH-02	Annie Kuster	55.8	49.8	6.0
OR-01	Suzanne Bonamici	67.9	62.1	5.8
HI-01	Ed Case	73.7	68.2	5.5
TX-20	Joaquin Castro	68.4	62.9	5.5

the performance of the median Republican member (VAR: 3.4) was 2.3 points stronger — falling in line with the GOP’s 2.8-point margin in the national popular vote.

The best-performing candidate in 2022 according to VAR was Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola of Alaska’s At-Large District. She received 55 percent after ranked-choice votes were tabulated, which is 17.1 points higher than the Democratic Baseline of 37.8 percent. Her opponent, former GOP Gov. Sarah Palin, ran behind a typical Republican by 5.2 points (45 percent vs. 50.2 percent Baseline).

Members like Peltola will be pivotal to Democrats’ hopes of retaking the House in 2024 — but her success also hints at the party’s structural disadvantages. She is one of only five Democrats representing a seat won by former President Donald Trump in 2020; across those five members, the average Democratic overperformance in 2022 was 7.9 points. By contrast, the 18 Republicans in districts carried by Joe Biden only recorded an average 3.8 VAR. This suggests Republicans have more wiggle room in these competitive races — they’re less reliant on large overperformances — and they might not need to dominate as many for a majority. Case in point: Arizona’s 1st District Rep. David Schweikert underperformed the typical Republican (VAR: -0.5) in a seat that is trending toward Democrats and still won by a point.

Republicans’ biggest overperformer also happens to be their longest tenured member. Kentucky Rep. Hal Rogers outpaced a typical GOP candidate in the 5th District by 10.9 points last cycle, and he has already announced plans to seek a 23rd term. But not everyone with a positive VAR is sticking around. North Carolina Rep. Patrick McHenry, who briefly served as House speaker pro tempore in October, would have outperformed a typical Republican in the 10th District by 4 points last cycle, but is retiring from Congress at the end of his term as chair of the House Financial Services Committee.

McHenry made his decision as the Tar Heel State prepares to use yet another new congressional map in 2024. Following an October decision from the state Supreme Court, the new lines heavily benefit Republicans, meaning many Democratic members are headed for the door. Reps. Wiley Nickel (VAR: 4.6) and Jeff Jackson (VAR: 3.7) have both chosen to not seek another term despite overperforming a typical Democrat in 2022, while

2022 Top House Republican Overperformances, According to Vote Above Replacement


CD	Member	Percent Earned	Baseline	Vote Above Replacement
KY-05	Hal Rogers	82.2	71.3	10.9
FL-26	Mario Diaz-Balart	70.9	60.3	10.6
LA-05	Julia Letlow	75.6	65.8	9.8
NY-02	Andrew Garbarino	60.9	51.4	9.5
FL-28	Carlos Gimenez	63.7	54.2	9.5
WV-01	Carol Miller	66.7	57.3	9.4
KY-06	Andy Barr	62.7	53.6	9.1
NY-11	Nicole Malliotakis	61.7	52.8	8.9
KY-02	Brett Guthrie	71.9	63.3	8.6
IL-12	Mike Bost	75.0	66.5	8.5

6th District Rep. Kathy Manning (VAR: -0.1) is also out. Jackson is instead running for attorney general; meanwhile in the 8th District, GOP Rep. Dan Bishop (VAR: 3.3) is surrendering his seat to seek the same statewide office.

There were also interesting patterns among Congress' more recognizable personalities. Six members of the Squad finished in the red, and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — who is possibly the most well-known person in the entire House — recorded the lowest VAR (-8.5) of any winning congressional candidate in 2022.

Not to be outdone, Republican Reps. Matt Gaetz (VAR: -1.8), Lauren Boebert (VAR: -1.9), and Marjorie Taylor Greene (VAR: -3.7) also fell well short of their party's Baselines. Boebert's underperformance, which put her within 554 votes of losing altogether, likely factored into her decision to hop over to Colorado's 4th District and avoid an expensive rematch with 2022 Democratic nominee Adam Frisch.

But not everyone can skip a repeat. Democratic Rep. Jahana Hayes (VAR: -0.9) and Republican Rep. Ryan Zinke (VAR: -1.3) both fell short of Baseline expectations last cycle despite winning in competitive districts — and they'll likely face familiar foes in 2024. Hayes' 2022 Republican opponent, former state Sen. George Logan (VAR: 2.3), is running again in Connecticut's 5th District. And Zinke's 2022 opponent, attorney Monica Tranel (VAR: 0.1), has thrown her hat in the ring a second time for Montana's 1st.

Of course, these won't be the only House rematches this November. An upcoming article will look in depth at the VAR scores of returning congressional challengers. 

2022 Top House Republican Underperformances, According to Vote Above Replacement

CD	Member	Percent Earned	Baseline	Vote Above Replacement
GA-14	Marjorie Taylor Greene	65.9	69.5	-3.7
UT-04	Burgess Owens	61.1	64.6	-3.6
MD-01	Andy Harris	54.4	56.9	-2.4
WY-AL	Harriet Hageman	68.2	70.5	-2.3
MT-02	Matt Rosendale	56.6	58.5	-1.9
CO-03	Lauren Boebert	50.1	52.0	-1.9
FL-01	Matt Gaetz	67.9	69.7	-1.8
AZ-05	Andy Biggs	56.7	58.1	-1.4
FL-13	Anna Paulina Luna	53.1	54.5	-1.3
MT-01	Ryan Zinke	49.6	50.9	-1.3

2024 House Open Seats

District	Outgoing Member	2022 Result	2020 Presidential Result	Rating
AL-02	Barry Moore (R)	New	Biden 56%	Likely Democratic
AZ-03	Ruben Gallego (D)	77%	Biden 75%	Solid Democratic
AZ-08	Debbie Lesko (R)	96%	Trump 56%	Solid Republican
CA-12	Barbara Lee (D)	91%	Biden 89%	Solid Democratic
CA-16	Anna Eshoo (D)	58%	Biden 75%	Solid Democratic
CA-29	Tony Cardenas (D)	59%	Biden 75%	Solid Democratic
CA-30	Adam Schiff (D)	71%	Biden 72%	Solid Democratic
CA-31	Grace Napolitano (D)	60%	Biden 65%	Solid Democratic
CA-47	Katie Porter (D)	52%	Biden 55%	Tilt Democratic
CO-03	Lauren Boebert (R)	50%	Trump 53%	Tilt Republican
CO-04	Ken Buck (R)	61%	Trump 58%	Solid Republican
CO-05	Doug Lamborn (R)	56%	Trump 53%	Solid Republican
DE-AL	Lisa Blunt Rochester (D)	56%	Biden 59%	Solid Democratic
GA-03	Drew Ferguson (R)	69%	Trump 64%	Solid Republican
IN-03	Jim Banks (R)	65%	Trump 64%	Solid Republican
IN-05	Victoria Spartz (R)	61%	Trump 57%	Solid Republican
IN-06	Greg Pence (R)	68%	Trump 65%	Solid Republican
IN-08	Larry Buschon (R)	66%	Trump 66%	Solid Republican
MD-03	John Sarbanes (D)	60%	Biden 62%	Solid Democratic
MD-06	David Trone (D)	55%	Biden 54%	Likely Democratic
MI-07	Elissa Slotkin (D)	52%	Biden 49.4%	Toss-up
MI-08	Dan Kildee (D)	53%	Biden 50.3%	Tilt Democratic
MN-03	Dean Phillips (DFL)	60%	Biden 60%	Solid Democratic
MO-03	Blaine Luetkemeyer (R)	65%	Trump 62%	Solid Republican
NC-06	Kathy Manning (D)	New	Trump 57%	Likely Republican
NC-08	Dan Bishop (R)	New	Trump 57%	Solid Republican
NC-10	Patrick McHenry (R)	New	Trump 58%	Solid Republican
NC-13	Wiley Nickel (D)	New	Trump 55%	Likely Republican
NC-14	Jeff Jackson (D)	New	Trump 57%	Likely Republican
NJ-03	Andy Kim (D)	56%	Biden 56%	Solid Democratic
OH-02	Brad Wenstrup (R)	75%	Trump 72%	Solid Republican
OR-03	Earl Blumenauer (D)	70%	Biden 73%	Solid Democratic
TX-12	Kay Granger (R)	64%	Trump 58%	Solid Republican
TX-26	Michael Burgess (R)	69%	Trump 59%	Solid Republican
TX-32	Colin Allred (D)	65%	Biden 66%	Solid Democratic
UT-03	John Curtis (R)	64%	Trump 58%	Solid Republican
VA-07	Abigail Spanberger (D)	52%	Biden 53%	Tilt Democratic
VA-10	Jennifer Wexton (D)	53%	Biden 58%	Likely Democratic
WA-06	Derek Kilmer (D)	60%	Biden 57%	Solid Democratic
WV-02	Alex Mooney (R)	66%	Trump 68%	Solid Republican

New = Newly-drawn district

Ohio 6 Special: GOP Fight in formerly Blue Territory

By Jacob Rubashkin

Serving in Congress is so bad that one member would rather be a college president than finish out the remainder of his term.

Republican Bill Johnson will exit Congress on Jan. 21 to take a job as president of Youngstown State University, triggering a special election in the Ohio River Valley seat he has held for over a decade. Johnson's 6th District is one of the most Republican-leaning seats in the nation, so the district will assuredly stay in GOP hands. But Republicans' narrow congressional majority — which stands at just 220-213 — means that every additional GOP vacancy will be felt acutely by the party when trying to pass legislation until the seat is filled.

The Lay of the Land

The 6th District runs along Ohio's eastern border with Pennsylvania and West Virginia, stretching south from Mahoning County (Youngstown) to Washington County. It also includes much of Stark County, but not the county seat of Canton.

The district is predominantly white (87 percent), with a small Black population (7 percent) concentrated in Youngstown. Just 19 percent of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to a national average of 34 percent, ranking 419th among congressional districts in educational attainment, and the median household income is \$52,326, putting it in the bottom 50 districts by income.

Like many other white working class areas around the country, the 6th District was politically competitive in the 2000s but veered sharply rightward in the 2010s. Donald Trump carried the seat by 24 points in 2016, 60-36 percent, and by 29 points in 2020, 64-35 percent.

The district's shift is exemplified by Mahoning County, which accounts for just under one-third of its population. For 10 consecutive presidential elections, from 1976 through 2012, Mahoning voted for the Democratic nominee for president, by an average margin of 27 points. In 2016, Hillary Clinton eked out a 3-point margin in Mahoning, and in 2020, Trump carried the county by 2 points.

The closest any recent statewide Democrat has come to carrying the 6th District was Sen. Sherrod Brown in 2018, who lost the 6th by 2 points, 51-49 percent. Every other statewide Democratic candidate has lost the district by double digits, including Youngstown Rep. Tim Ryan, who lost the 6th by 25 points in his 2022 Senate run.

The Republican Candidates

Three Republicans have filed to run for the regularly scheduled election. The most credible contenders are state Sen. Michael Rulli and state Rep. Reggie Stoltzfus. Chiropractor Joe Tsai is running as well.

While it is possible that other candidates file in the special election, it is unlikely any would gain traction running for a seat they would only hold for a few months.

Rulli, 54, was born and raised in Poland, Ohio (population 2,500), and graduated Emerson College in 1991. His family has run two Youngstown-area supermarkets for a century, and Rulli currently serves as the company's director of operations.

Rulli, who lives in Salem in Columbiana County, just south of Mahoning County, served on the Leetonia School Board for 8 years, from 2009 to 2017.

When Democratic state Sen. Joe Schiavoni left his seat to run for governor in 2018, Rulli ran to replace him. No Republican had ever held

the 33rd Senate District since its creation in 1950, and Rulli faced John Bocceri in the general election (Bocceri, then a state representative, had previously served in Congress and also held the 33rd Senate District in the 2000s). The once-Democratic stronghold was among the most evenly divided districts that year, and Rulli prevailed, 52-48 percent, over Bocceri.

Four years later, Rulli easily turned back longtime Democratic

officeholder Bob Hagan, 66-34 percent, in a district redrawn to be slightly more Republican.

In the state Senate, Rulli has amassed a conservative voting record on most issues, with 100 percent ratings from the NFIB and Chamber of



Reggie Stoltzfus

Commerce in 2022, and lifetime ratings of 87 percent and 92 percent from the American Conservative Union and NRA, respectively. His lifetime score from the Club for Growth is lower, at 47 percent, but still on the higher side for Republicans in the upper chamber.

Rulli has carved out a more moderate stance on gay rights issues, co-sponsoring an anti-LGBT discrimination bill with the state Senate's only openly gay member and speaking out about making the GOP and Ohio more inclusive. In 2022 he received a B+ from Equality Ohio, the highest rating given to any Republican state legislator.

Rulli's campaign team includes general consultant David Spencer of Spencer Federal.

Stoltzfus, 43, has spent his whole life in Stark County and currently represents two-thirds of the county in the state House. He lives in Paris Township and is the president of a floor and roof truss manufacturer, and attended but did not graduate from Malone University in Canton.

Stoltzfus entered politics in 2015 when he was elected one of three trustees for Paris Township. In 2018 he sought an open seat in the state House being vacated by state Rep. Christina Hagan, who was running for Congress. In the GOP primary, Stoltzfus beat Josh Hagan, the incumbent's brother, 60-40 percent; the contest was seen as a proxy fight between then-state House Speaker Ryan Smith, who supported Stoltzfus, and future Speaker Larry Householder, who backed Hagan (and who was later convicted of racketeering).

Stoltzfus easily won general elections in 2018 and 2020 with 64 and 68 percent of the vote, and won unopposed in 2022.

In the state House, he has a lifetime rating of 84 percent from the American Conservative Union and a 71 percent rating from the Club for Growth, the 7th-highest in the chamber. His Club score was boosted by his votes against several spending bills that passed with overwhelming majorities or unanimity in both chambers — bills Rulli voted for.

Stoltzfus's campaign team includes general consultants Kenny Street and Ryan Erwin of RedRock Strategies.

Tsai (pronounced Chai), 59, is a chiropractor from East Palestine. Tsai grew up in Western Pennsylvania and graduated from Palmer College of

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Chiropractic in Sunnyvale, California in 1992.

Tsai rose to prominence following the February 2023 derailment of a Norfolk Southern train carrying hazardous materials in East Palestine. Tsai made national news for his videos filmed in the town's waterways in which he demonstrated the continuing effects of the derailment; he was featured in the *Wall Street Journal* and has appeared on Fox News and NewsNation.

The Republican Primary

Gov. Mike DeWine has set the special election primary to coincide with the state's regularly scheduled March 19 primary, when voters will choose nominees for president, Senate, and other offices. That means voters in Ohio's 6th will vote in two separate elections: one for nomination for the full term, and one for nomination for the June 11th special general election.

While it is possible that voters might choose one candidate in the special election primary and a different candidate in the regular election primary, the likelihood is small, especially if the same candidates file to run in the special election. The instances in which concurrent special and regular primaries have resulted in different nominees typically involve notable differences in the number of candidates on the ballot.

Paid media could be a hurdle for Rulli and Stoltzfus. The 6th District is sprawling and includes four

different media markets: Youngstown; Cleveland; Wheeling, West Virginia/Steubenville, and Parkersburg, West Virginia.

And because the primary coincides with the busy and expensive primary for U.S. Senate, which features two wealthy self-funders, Bernie Moreno and former state Sen. Matt Dolan, as well as state Secretary of State Frank LaRose, the airwaves will be more crowded and pricier, especially in the Cleveland media market.

GOP sources say that both Rulli and Stoltzfus have some personal resources at their disposal that they could put into their campaigns. But neither candidate has filed a personal financial disclosure yet. And given when both candidates filed for office, the first substantive fundraising report they will file will come on March 15, just four days before the primary. (Stoltzfus told the *Marietta Times* that he had raised about \$300,000 through Jan. 4.)

How It Plays Out

Of the three candidates who filed for the regular primary, Rulli begins the contest with a few structural advantages, say GOP insiders.

He already represents significantly more of the district than Stoltzfus. All 357,000 of his state Senate constituents also live in the 6th District, comprising roughly 46 percent of the entire congressional seat. Stoltzfus's state House seat overlaps with the 6th District more narrowly, with about 190,000 of his current constituents also living in the 6th.

Rulli may also derive some benefit from his association with his family's business, at least in the vote-rich areas around Mahoning and Columbiana counties.



Michael Rulli

Courtesy Ohio General Assembly

And unlike Stoltzfus, who ran unopposed in 2022 and has never run broadcast TV ads, Rulli ran an active campaign just a few months ago, spending around \$500,000 and airing broadcast and cable ads in the Youngstown media market. He also has a lively Twitter presence, with more than 110,000 followers — a substantial platform for a state legislator.

Stoltzfus is angling to run to Rulli's right, and his allies are already seizing on comments Rulli has made about most of his friends being Democrats and his past as a "raging liberal" in the 1990s.

Rulli, for his part, cites his higher American Conservative Union score to push back on the notion he's not a conservative. He has called Stoltzfus a "convict," a reference to a fourth-degree misdemeanor domestic violence no-contest plea Stoltzfus entered after a 2000 incident and later had expunged.

Stoltzfus has already signaled he will keep Rulli's support for the anti-LGBT discrimination bill front and center, saying "When it comes to social issues he's a flaming liberal and I'm a conservative." He has pledged to join the House Freedom Caucus if elected.

Local GOP operatives say the attack could have some legs — but only if Stoltzfus is able to put it in paid media and chip away at Rulli's initial advantage. And while Rulli sponsored the anti-discrimination bill, he's taken pains to distance himself from the more topical question of gender-affirming care for transgender minors.

The Ohio GOP is currently in uproar over DeWine's veto of a bill that would have banned hormone replacement, puberty blockers, and surgeries for minors, as well as prohibited transgender minors from playing on sports teams that align with their identity. Rulli voted for the bill and has urged an override of the veto.

Both candidates will also look to claim the mantle of the biggest Trump supporter. Both have endorsed Trump for president and have worked to burnish their MAGA bona fides. Just days after the Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection, Stoltzfus introduced a bill to create a state holiday in honor of Trump. And Rulli regularly tweets defenses of Trump, including one recently that suggested prosecuting Hillary Clinton and Stacey Abrams.

The Bottom Line

Even elections in solidly partisan areas are important. The vacant seat in Ohio's 6th means one less reliably GOP vote on Capitol Hill until the seat is filled later this summer. And the primary is critical because it will effectively choose the next member of Congress. **IE**



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Podcast Episode 13

Nathan, Jacob, and Marianne LeVine of *The Washington Post* discuss the special election in New York's 3rd District and the upcoming GOP Iowa caucus.

The *Inside Elections Podcast* is sponsored by George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management.



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elections. Santos won by 8 points, while the GOP nominee for Senate won by 4 points. Lee Zeldin, the Long Island congressman who was the GOP gubernatorial nominee, was the top-performing Republican in the district, winning it 56-44 percent, even though he lost statewide.

The Democratic Nominee

Tom Suozzi, 61, has been a fixture of Long Island politics for more than three decades. He comes from a political family; his father, uncle, and cousin have all served as local elected officials in Nassau County since the 1950s.

A 1984 graduate of Boston College, Suozzi worked for several years as an accountant before receiving his law degree from Fordham in 1989. In 1991 he made his first bid for office, for mayor of Glen Cove. He lost that race but captured the office in 1993, and won re-election in 1995, 1997, and 1999.

In 2001, he ran for Nassau County executive, first narrowly defeating future New York comptroller Thomas DiNapoli in the primary before putting



Tom Suozzi

Courtesy US House of Representatives

up a resounding 32-point win in the general election, becoming the first Democrat to lead the historically GOP-leaning county in 30 years.

After another double-digit win in 2005, Suozzi launched a longshot bid for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination against state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer. Suozzi ran to Spitzer's right on social issues such as abortion and gay rights, and courted support from the Wall Street titans that Spitzer had aggressively investigated. His campaign never caught on and he lost the primary, 82-18 percent.

In 2009, Suozzi lost his second re-election campaign in an upset to Republican Ed Mangano by 386 votes, 48.2-48.0 percent. Four years later, he sought a rematch but lost by a much wider 59-41 percent margin.

In 2016, Suozzi won a crowded Democratic primary for the 3rd District nomination with 35 percent, and the subsequent general election over state Sen. Jack Martins, 53-47 percent as Hillary Clinton carried the seat 51-45 percent. Suozzi won easy re-elections in 2018 and 2020, the latter against Santos himself.

In 2022, Suozzi passed up a re-election bid to run for governor in the Democratic primary against Gov. Kathy Hochul, who had ascended to her spot following the resignation of Gov. Andrew Cuomo. As he did in 2006, Suozzi ran aggressively and to Hochul's right, attacking her as soft on crime and promising to lower taxes. He won 12 percent of the vote.

In Congress, Suozzi served on the Ways and Means Committee, and was the vice-chairman of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus.

Since leaving Congress, he has worked at global consulting firm Actum (though not lobbying, which former members are prohibited from for two years).

Suozzi's campaign team includes longtime adviser Kim Devlin and pollster Mike Bocian of GBAO.

The Republican Nominee

Mazi Melesa Pilip is as new to politics as Suozzi is entrenched. She is in her first term as a Nassau County legislator, but her primary appeal

to the GOP leaders who picked her is more about her compelling life story.

Born in rural Ethiopia in 1979, Pilip was evacuated to Israel along with 14,000 other Ethiopian Jews as a part of Operation Solomon in 1991. Pilip served in the Israeli Defense Forces for two years as a gunsmith in a paratrooper unit (she herself was not a parachutist), and later received a bachelor's degree in occupational therapy from University of Haifa and a master's degree in diplomacy and security from Tel Aviv University. She met her husband, a Ukrainian-born cardiologist, in college, and moved with him to Long Island in 2005.

In Great Neck, Pilip, who is a mother of seven, managed her husband's cardiology practice and served on a few community boards, but did not enter politics until 2021, when she took on four-term incumbent Democrat Ellen Birnbaum in the Nassau County legislature. Though Pilip is a registered Democrat, she ran on the Republican line and won, 53-47 percent. Two years later she won re-election, 60-40 percent. Nassau County legislators represent roughly 73,000 residents, compared to congressional districts, which include more than 770,000 residents.

In December 2023, following Santos' expulsion from Congress, Nassau County GOP chairman Joe Cairo selected Pilip as the party's nominee for the special election. Unlike several of the other candidates under consideration, including former police officer Mike Sapracione and Air Force veteran Kellen Curry, Pilip was not already a declared candidate for the regularly scheduled primary for the seat.

Her campaign team includes general consultant Tom Dunham of Brabender Cox, which is also handling TV ads and direct mail. John McLaughlin is the pollster and Targeted Victory is doing digital.

The Special General Election

The election is taking place on a compressed timeline, with just 10 weeks between Santos' expulsion and Election Day. Suozzi was announced as the Democratic nominee by Nassau County party chairman Jay Jacobs on December 7, while Republicans selected Pilip a week later.

With the week between Christmas and New Year's a dead zone for campaigns, that leaves roughly two months to run an election from start to finish.

The fast pace is partially dictated by New York law, but it also plays into Democrats' hands and is a major factor in party leaders' selection of Suozzi. The former congressman has near-universal name recognition in the district while Pilip begins virtually unknown. That gives him an initial advantage and makes her path to victory steeper.

Pilip has to accomplish two tasks in just a few weeks: introduce herself to voters, and chip away at their favorable view of Suozzi. And she has to do so in the most expensive media market in the country, where even the candidate rate can reach \$1,000 per gross rating point and the rate for outside groups is currently running at roughly \$1,600 or more per point. In comparison, non-candidate rates are about \$456 per point in Charlotte, North Carolina and \$289 per point in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Pilip was further hampered by the delay in her selection; Suozzi had already been running a campaign for the regular election since October, essentially giving him a nine-week head start. And as a former congressman he already has a national fundraising network that allowed him to begin TV advertising and direct mail drops before Pilip

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was announced.

And in a first for New York, voters will have access to no-excuse mail-in voting, with ballots hitting mailboxes in early February.

“It’s a total name ID play,” said one national Democratic strategist.

“The only thing you’re fighting is time — if this was a six month race, Tom Suozzi doesn’t stand a chance against her,” complained one Pilip ally. “They knew exactly what they were doing when they set it as early as they possibly could.”

“One more month on this campaign and it becomes harder and harder for Tom to maintain his lead,” agreed one longtime Democratic strategist. “He’s working against the district’s fundamentals.”

How It Plays Out

Democrats are hopeful that the contest ultimately hinges on familiarity and trust as much as it does specific policies or political preferences, with voters opting for the option they know rather than the one they’re just learning about.

To that end, Democrats have seized on Pilip’s hesitation to do debates, press interviews or talk specifically about her policy positions, especially on abortion, as well as her lack of voting history and her minimal public comments as a county legislator. Suozzi’s allies will look to capitalize on any post-Santos skepticism voters have of new and unfamiliar candidates.



Mazi Pilip

Courtesy Pilip Campaign

(Santos himself is unlikely to feature in paid media. Although there are photos of him and Pilip together, Democratic strategists say that Santos was so unique that voters don’t associate him with the overall Republican brand.)

Suozzi is leaning into his image as a bipartisan dealmaker, rolling out early endorsements from a group of Republican local mayors, and will look to distance himself and other Democrats such as Hochul and New York Mayor Eric Adams, who are unpopular.

Though Suozzi’s 2022 gubernatorial bid caused Democrats plenty of heartburn at the time, it may be a boost in this race, because it shows he fought against Hochul on New York City crime and the bail reform bill that cost Democrats dearly on Long Island. That he spent millions of dollars in the New York media market pushing those messages doesn’t hurt.

And local Democrats, even those skeptical of the campaign’s prospects or messaging strategy, say Suozzi himself is firing on all cylinders. Whatever initial reservations some Democrats had about Suozzi’s personality — in some of his past runs he’s come across as “arrogant and entitled” — have melted away.

“You’re getting ‘maniacal, nothing will stop this man’ Suozzi,” said one local operative not involved in the race.

Despite Suozzi’s name recognition advantage and early start, the race is still a toss-up. The political environment on Long Island is toxic for Democrats, who, in addition to losing all of Long Island’s congressional seats for the first time in decades in 2022, suffered brutal losses in local

elections last November, losing every town office in North Hempstead and control of the town council.

In addition to the persistent and widespread dissatisfaction with Biden over his handling of the economy and cost of living, Democrats also face headwinds on the ongoing migrant crisis and the high-pitched coverage of crime in New York City — despite Nassau County itself being among the safest in the nation.

As an IDF veteran, Pilip has a compelling background, especially in the midst of the ongoing war in Gaza. GOP strategists are hopeful she can connect with more of the district’s Jewish voters, beyond the Persian Jews in Great Neck with whom she already has a strong relationship. She has highlighted her support from a few local Jewish publications, though the Jewish population in the 3rd District is significantly more liberal than in the 4th District, which is home to the heavily Orthodox Five Towns. And her story as an immigrant who left the Democratic Party — in practice if not in registration — could make her relatable to the district’s Asian American population, which has recently grown more skeptical of the Democratic Party.

And Pilip benefits from the plug-and-chug operation provided by the Nassau County Republican Party, which is acknowledged as one of the most formidable county parties around the country, with a well-oiled direct mail and field organizing machine.

“What Cairo and the Nassau GOP can do is just fundamentals, put their heads down and grind,” said one New York Democratic strategist. “If there’s air cover that matches the Dems one to one the last four weeks, that’s great,” said the strategist, “but if there’s not, they’re still in a position where their floor is 45 or 46 percent.”

The Early Ads

Immigration is emerging as a defining issue in the race. “You’ve seen years of Republicans demagoguing on immigration on Long Island” said one New York Democratic strategist not involved in the race, “and now that’s an issue that has come home tangibly,” with the ongoing migrant crisis.

“It’s looking like immigration is a huge issue here,” said a national GOP strategist, who also said the GOP would strive to tie Suozzi to Adams, who may be the most unpopular politician in the district not named Santos.

To that end, Democrats have worked to inoculate Suozzi against the attacks they know are coming. The first ad from House Majority PAC is a positive commercial, rare for an outside group, that focuses on Suozzi’s work with former Long Island Republican Peter King on immigration (King called the ad “misleading”).

And Suozzi’s own ads stress his commitment to bipartisanship and support for local law enforcement.

Because Pilip is unknown, Democrats are going to work hard to define her before she can define herself. The first ad from the DCCC said little about Pilip specifically, instead tying her to “MAGA Republicans” such as Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert.

The DCCC’s first ad was met with derision from some local Democratic strategists: “pretty lame” and “not compelling,” two told *Inside Elections*. But Democrats are going to get sharper on Pilip, painting her as unprepared for primetime and using her acceptance of the Conservative Party line as a way to fill in the gaps of her policy platform with the right-wing party’s own beliefs, especially on abortion and Trump.

Republicans, meanwhile, are digging back into Suozzi’s long record

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to hit him on tax increases from his time as mayor, and may also swing at his post-Congress work at a lobbying firm. But primarily, Pilip and her allies will try to make Suozzi out to be a typical Democrat.

“This district desperately wants to vote for a Republican,” said one Pilip ally, who cited Suozzi record of voting 100 percent with Biden in the House (per FiveThirtyEight) and noted Suozzi was the first Democratic House member to endorse Biden for president in 2019.

One Democratic consultant concurred, saying the district is “crying out how much they disapprove of the Democratic Party brand.”

The Pilip campaign’s opening salvo went as far as to lump Suozzi in with the “Squad” of progressive lawmakers. While Republicans aren’t likely to convince voters who’ve known Suozzi for decades that he’s a socialist, “the point is to get people to remember why they’re disenchanted with the Democratic Party,” said the Democratic consultant.

Conservative House Republicans, of course, could complicate their own party’s path in this district by forcing a government shutdown — or worse, attempting to oust new Speaker Mike Johnson — and remind voters why they’re also disenchanted with the *Republican* Party.

Outside Engagement

The biggest outstanding question in the race is the level of engagement from outside Republican groups. As of mid-January, Democrats have outspent Republicans in the 3rd District by a factor of six. The DCCC kicked things off with a \$2.2 million TV buy over the first two weeks of January, and Suozzi’s allies at House Majority PAC have been more forward about their future intentions in the district, reserving \$3.7 million in TV advertising that will run beginning on Jan. 23, and committing an additional \$2.2 million in digital and mail.

The NRCC independent expenditure arm has booked \$847,000 over two weeks beginning in mid-January. And Congressional Leadership Fund, the main GOP Super PAC for House races, has dipped its toe in the race with a \$46,000 direct mail buy, but has otherwise kept its cards close to the chest, unnerving Democratic operatives. “CLF coming in and dropping \$20 million in the last three weeks of the election keeps me up at night,” said one senior Democratic strategist.

CLF will ultimately spend more here, but the scope of their involvement is still up in the air.

Redistricting also looms over the race. New York Democrats successfully sued to restart the state’s map-drawing process, and the Democrat-dominated state legislature may ultimately have the ability to redraw Long Island to be less favorable toward Republicans, although this race will be held under the current lines.

But the narrowness of the current House majority — Republicans hold just 220 seats, soon to be 219 after the resignation of an Ohio congressman, to Democrats 213 — means that a flip of even one seat could reshape the balance of power in Washington for the remainder of the year, giving the result of this race outsized importance.

The high price of TV in the district likely limits the ability of less-resourced outside groups to step in. But it’s possible that an amalgamation of labor unions — around a dozen have endorsed Suozzi — put together the money to make a late play.

And the Republican National Committee and Winning for Women PAC have each pledged “six-figure investments” to support Pilip, though in what form those take remains to be seen.

The Bottom Line

Democrats need a net gain of just five seats to reclaim the majority. A win in this special election will get them one seat closer ahead of this fall and will allow them to defend a tough seat with a seasoned incumbent, potentially freeing up resources for other races.

Ultimately, both Suozzi and Pilip are racing against the clock. With just over a month to go before Election Day, and less than that before ballots hit mailboxes, Suozzi has to maintain a frenzied pace of campaigning to preserve his lead, motivate Democratic base voters to show up on a random Tuesday in February, and repel a coming barrage of negative advertising, which he hasn’t faced from a Republican in over a decade.

Pilip, meanwhile, has to raise a significant amount of money, introduce herself to voters, disqualify Suozzi, and do all that while avoiding making any of the political missteps that can plague first-time congressional candidates, not only those running in nationally prominent high-stakes special elections.

“Is there enough time to get it all done?” asks a senior Republican working on the race. “I guess we’ll find out.”



2024 Presidential Ratings (Electoral Votes)

Toss-Up (56)

Arizona (11) Georgia (16) Pennsylvania (19) Wisconsin (10)

Tilt Democratic (21)

Michigan (15)
Nevada (6)

Tilt Republican (16)

North Carolina (16)

Lean Democratic (15)

Minnesota (10) Nebraska 2nd (1)
New Hampshire (4)

Lean Republican (31)

Florida (30)
Maine 2nd (1)

Likely Democratic (15)

Maine Statewide (2)
Virginia (13)

Likely Republican (63)

Iowa (6) Texas (40)
Ohio (17)

Solid Democratic (196)

California (54) New York (28)
Colorado (10) Oregon (8)
Connecticut (7) Rhode Island (4)
Delaware (3) Vermont (3)
District of Columbia (3) Washington (12)
Hawaii (4)
Illinois (19)
Maine 1st (1)
Maryland (10)
Massachusetts (11)
New Jersey (14)
New Mexico (5)

Solid Republican (125)

Alabama (9) Nebraska 1st (1)
Alaska (3) Nebraska 3rd (1)
Arkansas (6) North Dakota (3)
Idaho (4) Oklahoma (7)
Indiana (11) South Carolina (9)
Kansas (6) South Dakota (3)
Kentucky (8) Tennessee (11)
Louisiana (8) Utah (6)
Mississippi (6) West Virginia (4)
Missouri (10) Wyoming (3)
Montana (4)
Nebraska Statewide (2)

	GOP	DEM
2020 Results	232	306
2024 Ratings	235	247
Toss-up	56	
Needed to Win	270	