

AMERICA'S VOICE

Analysis of the Immigration Politics in the NY-03 Special Election

The failed nativist strategy the GOP cannot quit

Democrat Tom Suozzi beat Republican Mazi Pilip by 8 points in a special election Tuesday night to flip the seat most recently held by ousted Republican George Santos. Immigration was at the center of this campaign, and America's Voice closely tracked how the issue played. Below are our key takeaways from this race with background specific to the immigration issue in the race.

Key takeaways:

The GOP's nativist electoral strategy failed spectacularly...again. It's unlikely that the GOP will find better conditions for their nativist electoral strategy than in the special election for NY-03. This district was a GOP-held battleground district that Santos had won by 7.5 points in 2022. There have been significant issues dealing with the increase of migrants arriving in New York City exacerbated in part by Republicans like Texas Governor Greg Abbott sending buses to the city. The Murdoch media empire, led by the *New York Post*, has bolstered this effort, building a drumbeat of fearmongering narratives about migrants for the last two years. Meanwhile, Democratic Mayor Eric Adams validated the GOP talking

points. Republicans made immigration their top issue, spending \$9.5 million on anti-immigrant ads, according to data compiled from AdImpact. Republicans [spent four times as much](#) on the issue than any other issue. They believed it was what would drive their voters to the polls. They still lost. If they can't win there, where do they expect to win with this strategy? Despite this loss, the GOP will drive full steam ahead with the nativist strategy straight through November because Donald Trump is still leading the GOP, and while this strategy [has not delivered for them for the last 7 years](#), they only keep doubling down.

Tom Suozzi embraced the "both/and" approach: The Suozzi campaign focused on both border security *and* the need for legalization and legal immigration. This strategy is the right approach for Democrats to take in this election, but it's critical not to adopt a Republican-lite version that leaves off the need for legal pathways to entry and status for our long-settled undocumented neighbors. You can only achieve one with the other. While there were positive lessons to take from Suozzi's approach, there are also pitfalls others should avoid, particularly avoid leaning into GOP disinformation. Democrats need to include the

legalization aspect, which has strong support, while not reaffirming GOP [disinformation](#) about “open borders.” Practically, as the GOP attacks have proven to be ineffective, Democrats should not be scared into falling into the GOP trap but affirmatively define the conditions of the debate. For example, Democrats should feel comfortable talking about the [tremendous benefits of immigration to local and national economies](#) and make this part of their jobs and the economy messaging, especially in sectors like elder care, health care, hospitality and agriculture and Dems should differentiate themselves from GOP opposition to immigration in all its forms.

Tom Suozzi called out GOP obstruction and lack of solutions on immigration but missed an opportunity to call out their dangerous white nationalist extremism and mass deportation agenda. Critically, Suozzi did not cover from the issue of immigration, allowing the GOP solely to define it as many Democrats have done. He rightly called out Pilip and Republicans for their lack of credibility on the issue. However, the Suozzi campaign missed an opportunity to define the extremism of Republicans on the issue. Other Democrats should continue to name and elevate that extremism to help draw a sharper contrast. GOP leaders, including Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) and Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY), have adopted the rhetoric of the white nationalist and antisemitic replacement theory, which has inspired mass murderers. In addition, Donald Trump has made it unequivocally clear that he will set up a mass deportation force led by Stephen Miller. [According to The Atlantic, Miller](#) “has publicly declared that they would pursue such an enormous effort partly by creating a private red-state army under the president’s command. Miller says a re-elected Trump

intends to requisition National Guard troops from sympathetic Republican-controlled states and then deploy them into Democratic-run states whose governors refuse to cooperate with their deportation drive.” This too must be part of every conversation about immigration.

Background:

On Tuesday, February 13, 2024, voters in New York’s 3rd Congressional District voted in a special election to replace expelled Republican George Santos, who won the seat in 2022 [by over 20,000 votes - a 53.7%-46.2% margin](#). In this Long Island battleground district, Democrat Tom Suozzi ran against Republican Mazi Pilip. This race garnered attention from national political media over the next few days. It will undoubtedly contribute to narratives about 2024 House races, GOP leadership, and, importantly from our perspective, the politics of immigration.

The candidates

Mazi Pilip

Pilip, an immigrant from Israel of Ethiopian descent, leaned in heavily on the immigration issue. Nativist attacks were the centerpiece of the GOP ad spending on her behalf. All together, Pilip’s campaign, plus the House GOP caucus’ political committee and superPAC, spent over \$9.5 million on ads advancing anti-immigrant attacks, agitating and racializing anxieties about crime and safety. (see the anti-immigrant attack ads [HERE](#), [HERE](#), [HERE](#), [HERE](#), [HERE](#), [HERE](#), [HERE](#), [HERE](#) and [HERE](#))

She engaged in the GOP’s use of dangerous and bigoted replacement theory. Discussing the proposed Senate border deal that Donald Trump ordered killed, Pilip [said](#) it “is an absolute nonstarter for me because it simply

puts into law the invasion currently happening at our southern border,” in a statement. Pilip also ran that “invasion” statement in Facebook [ads](#). And, Pilip [said](#), “They are trying to secure the future election. The way to do it? Let’s open our borders,” in another coded (but not subtle) reference to the [white nationalist replacement theory](#). In a joint \$350,000 [ad](#) buy from the Pilip campaign and the leading outfit to elect House Republicans, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) began by echoing the racist conspiracy, “Biden a record invasion at our border.” The ad was viewed some 49.8M times according to data pulled from AdImpact.

Besides the GOP ad spending, Pilip had strong support from GOP House leaders who also engage in white nationalist rhetoric. [Speaker Mike Johnson, whose superPAC oversees the Congressional Leadership Fund that spent millions for Pilip](#), traveled to the 3rd CD to campaign and fundraise with Pilip in early February (though the event was not publicized to the media.) Rep. Elise Stefanik, chair of the House GOP Conference and one of the most vocal adherents of the great replacement theory, was a big supporter. Stefanik, [who made a “MAJOR ENDORSEMENT ALERT” to announce she was “proud to endorse”](#) Pilip also set up a joint fundraising committee with Pilip called [“STEFANIK-MAZI NY VICTORY.”](#) Stefanik was in the 3rd CD campaigning with Pilip on Election eve.

On Election day, Rep. Mike Lawler appeared on FOX Business to lay out the GOP anti-immigrant messaging, which [he shared on Twitter with the message](#), “New York voters are fed up and in [#NY03](#) they have the chance to send Joe Biden a message by sending [@maziforcongress](#).”

Even before any votes were counted, political reporters and pundits deemed that the race would turn on the immigration issue. This was not without merit as it was the main issue emanating from Pilip’s campaign, the National Republican Congressional Committee, and the Congressional Leadership Fund, although every race is also local and different.

Tom Suozzi

For their part, the Suozzi campaign and the Democrats focused on the issue of abortion, making it largely the focus of their [ad spending](#), with immigration-related ad spending ranking fifth. Faced with the deluge of anti-immigrant GOP advertising, Tom Suozzi fought back against the GOP messaging, offering both support for legalization while leaning in heavily on border security. [His campaign website calls](#) for “comprehensive immigration reform that secures our border and treats immigrants like human beings.” [Suozzi ran an ad](#) that called for border security and a “path to citizenship” stating he’ll “work across the aisle” to get this done.

The Suozzi camp also punched back on do-nothing obstruction of the GOP and lack of solutions. Suozzi, who was often critical of President Biden’s handling of the border, told [CNN a week before the election of his plans to engage on the Senate’s compromise bill](#), “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.’”

[According to Spectrum News](#), “Suozzi has repeatedly called on Biden and his party to go on offense on immigration. And in two recent developments, Democrats see opportunity:

House Speaker Mike Johnson has dismissed a yet-to-be-revealed border security deal from the Senate as essentially dead-on-arrival in his chamber, while former President Donald Trump has urged GOP lawmakers to kill it. ‘People want this issue resolved. And if you're refusing to even negotiate, what's the purpose of you being in Congress?’ Suozzi told Spectrum News.”

In the final week of the campaign, Donald Trump instructed Republicans to abandon and defeat that bipartisan border security compromise - and they did. Mazi Pilip agreed with Trump. As Suozzi repeatedly pointed out after that, Republicans are not credible messengers on the issue and offered no solutions.

Ad Spending and Polling

The [AdImpact](#) wrote in a report on the night before the election:

Messaging in the NY-03 special election highlights differing strategies from the two parties. Republican ads discuss immigration four times more frequently than any other issue. Top Republican advertiser, CLF, has mentioned immigration in all of their ads, and they have 1047 more total airings than the next closest Republican advertiser, NRCC/Pilip. Their top airing ad [attacks Suozzi for “kicking ICE out of Nassau County”](#). NRCC/Pilip’s highest airing ad [aligns Suozzi to President Biden, specifically on their border policies](#).

On the Democratic side, advertisers have focused on three key issues: abortion, social security, and law enforcement. The top airing ad comes from House Majority PAC, which [attacks Pilip for her stance on abortion](#). The next highest airing ad comes from DCCC, which states [that Pilip is handpicked by MAGA](#)

[Republicans and will bring cuts to law enforcement and social security](#). Lastly, the top airing ad from Suozzi’s campaign mentions [his stance on immigration and contrasts it with Republican attack ads](#). Democratic advertisers hold a strong advantage in broadcast ad airings.

On February 12, [CNN’s David Wright tweeted](#), “Immigration is dominating the NY-03 special election to replace George Santos -- 11 out of 13 campaign ads in rotation over the last week have referenced immigration, according to [@AdImpact_Pol](#), accounting for about 80% of TV ad spending over that stretch”

In the lead-up to the election, Amy Walter, the Editor of the Cook Report and one of the leading purveyors of political conventional wisdom, [tweeted](#), “If Suozzi wins NY03 next week not only gives Ds another ‘no’, but, means that GOP attempts to make House Ds/Biden culpable for border crisis didn’t work and Suozzi message of compromise did. Sends major red flag to other swing seat Rs.” [Dave Weigel of Semafor tweeted](#), “#NY03 special (in six days!) becoming a dramatic test of two straightforward messages: ‘your party can't govern’ versus ‘enough already with the migrants.’”

Immigration was the top issue for 1 in 4 voters in the district, but those heavily broke for Pilip, according to an [Emerson Poll from Jan. 18](#):

Immigration was the most important issue to 26% of voters in the district, followed by the economy (22%), crime (15%), housing affordability (12%), “threats to democracy” (9%), education (5%), healthcare (4%), and abortion access (4%). Voters who find immigration to be their top issue break for Pilip 68% to 17%, while voters who say the economy break for Suozzi 50% to 42%.

Showing that the anti-immigrant attacks are what the GOP base is looking for; however, it's not a wedge issue that is moving non-GOP base voters or driving the level of turnout in battleground races for the GOP to win. That's consistent with other polling.

For example, in the [NH GOP primary exit polls](#), 44% of the voters in the GOP primary identified as independent or something else while 6% identified as Democrats. Nikki Haley won 58% of independents, and 88% of Democrats. GOP primary voters were asked if undocumented immigrants currently in the United States should be either deported to countries they came from, or offered a chance for legal status.

The top line number was that 42% should be offered a chance at legal status, while 55% said they should be deported. That's worth noting, given the onslaught of ugly ads and [relentless, anti-immigrant rhetoric](#) from Republican candidates for president, similar to what we saw in the NY-03 race. The breakdown is illuminating: 28% of Trump voters, the very hard core of the GOP base, said undocumented immigrants should be offered legal status, while 76% said they should be deported. So almost a quarter of Trump's base disagrees with him on his core issue. We should remember that Trump is campaigning on "the largest deportation effort this country has ever seen." Haley's voters, given the party identifications noted above, are more representative of the general population. That breakdown is 68% of Haley voters said undocumented immigrants should be offered legal status, while 23% said they should be deported. (Of note, 93% of NH GOP primary voters identified as white, so this was not an electorate that reflects the diversity of the U.S.)

Conclusion

The GOP has made demagoguing migrants the cornerstone of their campaigns up and down the ballot. But, as special NY-03 results demonstrate, it doesn't always work. Running hard on nativism is not the electoral silver bullet Republicans pretend it is - continuing the pattern we've noted the last several election cycles (e.g.: [2018](#), [2020](#), and [2022](#) and off-cycle races, like the 2017 Virginia Governor's race) when immigration was touted as the GOP's secret sauce that would supposedly unite the American electorate behind their candidates. If there were a race where this nativist strategy should have worked, it was this one. It didn't.

One thing is clear: Democrats can't ignore the immigration issue. But Democrats should not fall into the GOP traps and reinforce their pernicious disinformation about immigrants and the border. Voters also want solutions while supporting legalization. That was evident in the exit polling from the New Hampshire GOP primary.

Despite this loss and the past several election cycles that have shown the nativist attack strategy to have little efficacy, Republicans won't change their tune despite their losing track record. According to data from AdImpact, Republican-aligned outfits have spent \$41M running 329 unique ads pushing their anti-immigrant agenda so far this year. They intend to make this their top issue in 2024 because it inflames their base. That happened in NY-03, but even in that district, with all the money and media, they couldn't win.

The overarching question of whether Republicans would finally win on their top issue - immigration - or whether the GOP would lose

on it - again - despite their massive investment was answered.

There are lessons for Democrats: Suozzi took both/and approach to the immigration issue. He called for legalization while calling out GOP obstruction. He talked about border security. He wasn't the best messenger, but he didn't back down and didn't ignore the issue. At the same time, Suozzi and national Democrats focused on Pilip's strong opposition to abortion rights.

Suozzi left the clear charge of GOP extremism on immigration on the table; while the

campaign was happy to call out Pilip's extremism on other issues, the campaign did not take it on immigration, despite the embrace of deadly white nationalist conspiracies. And, over the past few weeks, Donald Trump has made it unequivocally clear that he will set up a mass deportation force led by Stephen Miller. That must be part of every conversation about immigration. In the first term, they made dents, but next time, [if Trump wins, they're not messing around.](#)

Other campaigns would do well to add the charges of extremism and mass deportation alongside that of obstruction.