

Winning NYS Democratic Congressional Seats: Takeaways from Our Canvassing

By Wendy Diller

This fall, Three Parks Independent Democrats, along with Broadway Democrats and supported by the New York State Coordinated Campaign, did great work helping to secure Congressional House victories. We led canvassing trips to New York Congressional Districts CD-4, CD-17, and CD-18, and we held multiple phone banks for CD-17 and CD-19. We sent out thousands of postcards supporting House candidates in these districts. Scores of our volunteers participated in these activities.

Although Republicans will continue to maintain a majority in the House of Representatives, New York State played a key role in ensuring that the margin will be extremely tight—and it is realistic to expect that the House can serve as a bulwark against the most extreme Trump administration policies.

Democrats flipped three Congressional seats in New York State in 2024, bringing the total

number of House seats the party holds in New York to 19 out of a total of 26.

Almost all the House candidates that Three Parks Democrats actively supported won their districts.

While it is early, post-election analysis based on interviews with grassroots groups and field organizers has yielded a number of takeaways, which may be useful going forward.

Nassau County Takeaways

(from Empire State Voices, which worked in CD-4, CD19 & CD22 in collaboration with the NYS Coordinated Campaign)

1. **Surprisingly tight margins:** Democrats Tom Suozzi (incumbent, CD-3) and Laura Gillen (challenger to Republican incumbent, CD-4) won House seats by roughly 3% and 2% respectively. These were surprisingly small margins given the voting history of Nassau County, which strongly supported presidents Joe Biden (10% in 2020) and Barack Obama. This year, however, President-elect Donald J. Trump won Nassau County by 5 points.
2. **Culture wars:** Culture wars hurt Dems on Long Island more so than in the Hudson Valley, where the economy was the chief motivator. It's complex, though: Proposition 1, the NYS Equal Rights Amendment, passed in Nassau County by 11 points,

with strong activism by Planned Parenthood and others.

3. **Economy:** Macro economic arguments (Biden administration's record on employment, declining inflation, and robust economy) did not register sufficiently in an era when voters are confronting day-to-day micro pressures (inflation, affordability). Volunteers who canvassed or phonebanked and talked to voters were likely not surprised by these discrepancies. Gillen and Suozzi acknowledged voters' anxieties on these points, agreeing that a lot of work remained to be done.
4. **Immigration:** Both House Dems who won in Nassau County spoke tough on immigration and did not let it become a Republican talking point.
5. **Early start:** Grassroots groups in Nassau County (Long Island Accountability, union-supported BattleGround New York, Planned Parenthood and NYCLU regarding Prop 1) began negative campaigning against CD-4 incumbent Anthony D'Esposito two years ago, even before he announced his bid for a second term and it was clear that Gillen would be the opposition Democrat. Dylan Wheeler of Empire State Voices pointed out that Gillen is a well-known local politician who has previously won elections—notably becoming the Town Supervisor for Hempstead, which has close to 1 million residents.

Hudson Valley Takeaways

In the Hudson Valley, the economy and voter distrust of politicians to solve local issues were priorities for many voters, according to Anthony Jorge, the field organizer for the New York Democratic Committee in the mid-Hudson Valley region.

Field work is challenging in urban areas like Newburgh, however, where voters lack disposable income and transportation. In these places in particular, there is a need for consistent community engagement between elections, but that need is often under realized.

1. Democratic candidate Pat Ryan's ability to gain the trust of voters by "meeting people where they are and not inundating them with policy initiatives, but with empathy in their communities" worked in his favor, Jorge says. He ran as a 'different kind of Democrat,' who is addressing the affordability crisis, concerns about law enforcement and public safety, and local issues like lead in the water of Newburgh.
2. Ryan, who won by 13.6 points, avoided labels and ran on his local track record—he had previously been the Ulster County Executive and therefore was known to voters in parts of CD-18 but not in the lower Hudson Valley and Orange County. To overcome this discrepancy, Pat did a lot

of work in areas where he was less well known.

What's next for NYS Dems?

1. New York State Democrats, for the first time, organized a coordinated campaign, funded by Governor Hochul, with a paid field staff to support the House candidates and local down-ballot candidates. It's not clear to date whether some or any of that organization will continue to exist now that this election cycle has ended. Other states with strong Democratic organizations do have a larger staff of full-time, paid professionals.
2. Upcoming elections: CD-17, where Democrat Mondaire Jones lost to incumbent Congress member Mike Lawler, could be up for grabs in 2026 given Lawler's ambition to run for NYS governor. Congress member Elise Stefanik's upstate district will be up for grabs in a special election in 2025 if she is confirmed as the Trump administration's Ambassador to the UN, but that district will be tough for a Democrat to win.
3. These are my own observations from leading canvassing efforts and speaking with field staff:
 - New York State's electoral environment, like many parts of the USA, is complex and it takes every kind of effort to turn out voters. No single method works

best, and grassroots efforts are key, especially in reaching disenfranchised voters who do not turn out for elections. Knocking doors, phone banking, postcards-it all matters in an era where people do not trust politicians and believe they are not working in people's interests.

- Continual and direct communications between elections will be important.
- Empathize with people, don't ram policy down their throats.
- NYS needs a funded, permanent, professionally run Democratic organization, which this state has not previously had. The NYS Coordinated Campaign hired dozens of well-educated, energetic young campaign staffers in key House districts to turn out voters. Our work supported them, but they definitely helped to make our efforts more efficient.